Critical Reading and Writing (CRW) in First-year Psychology: Mass Screening and Targeted Assistance

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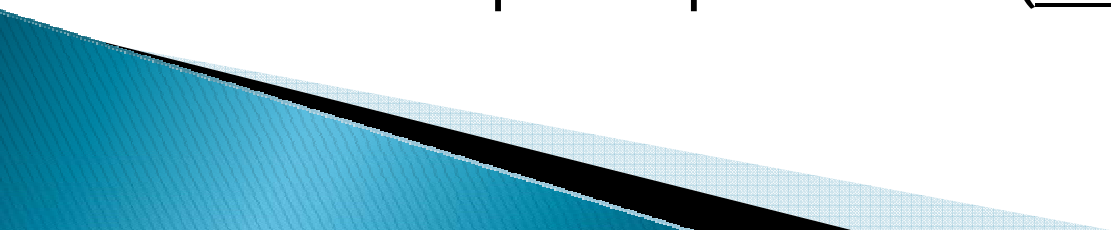School of Psychology and the Learning Centre, UNSW

Background

➢ Many beginning students struggle with university study because their high-school experience did not yield the basic or enabling skills essential to tertiary learning activities

➢ A diagnostic program (CRW test) in Psychology 1A was designed to:
- identify students at risk, and then assist them in developing psychology-specific academic literacy skills

Method

- In an early lecture period, all students were required to make a written response to a text passage (CRW test)

  ◦ Required students to take and argue and position
  ◦ Trained assessors marked responses according to specific criteria (eg logic, grammar)
  ◦ bottom-scoring 59 students were then contacted and offered special tutorials to assist them with writing their laboratory report

Method cont.

- A second CRW test (post) was offered to this assisted group of students (a second chance to make up percentage points) as well as to 18 <u>Control</u> students (for experimental participation credit)
- In the meantime, most at-risk students (n=28) participated in a 6-week program of one-hour tutorials (<u>Tutorial</u> Group): Learning Center + Psych
- focus on developing writing skills, specifically around the half-research report
- 12 could not make the face-to-face tutorials, and were instead offered minimal email support (<u>On-line</u> group)
- 19 did not participate at all (<u>No-support</u>)
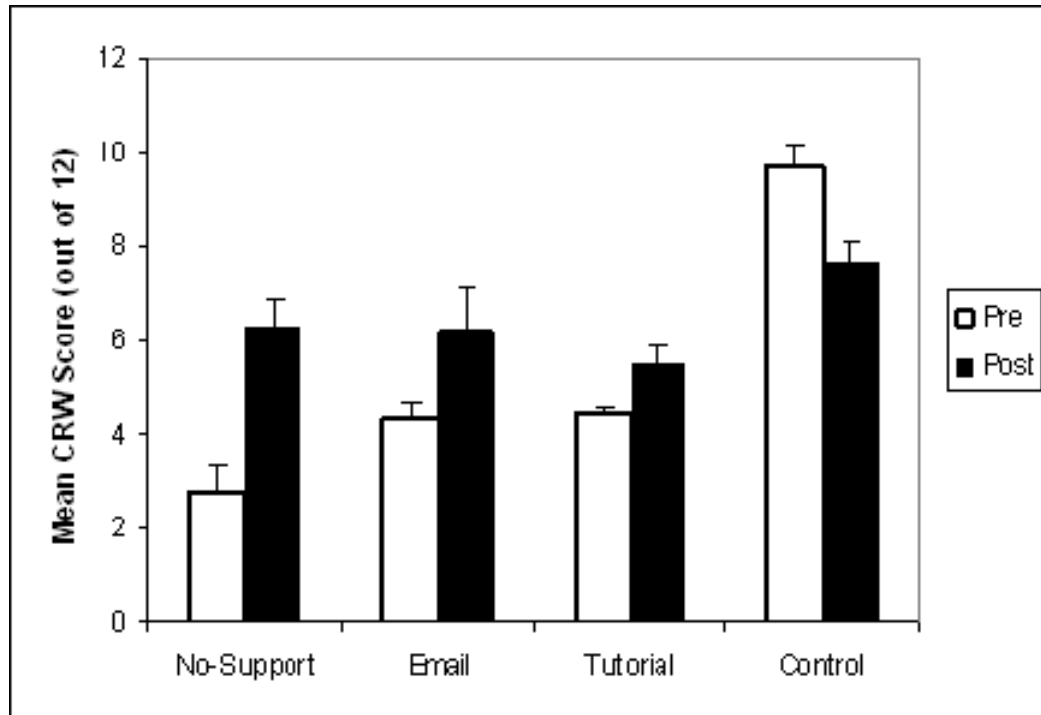
Results – CRW Tests

Figure 1. Pre and Post CRW scores for each group.

Significant increases/decrease. No differences amongst at-risk groups at post.

Conclude: Program had no impact on the CRW skills of at-risk students?

Weighting of post-CRW test…
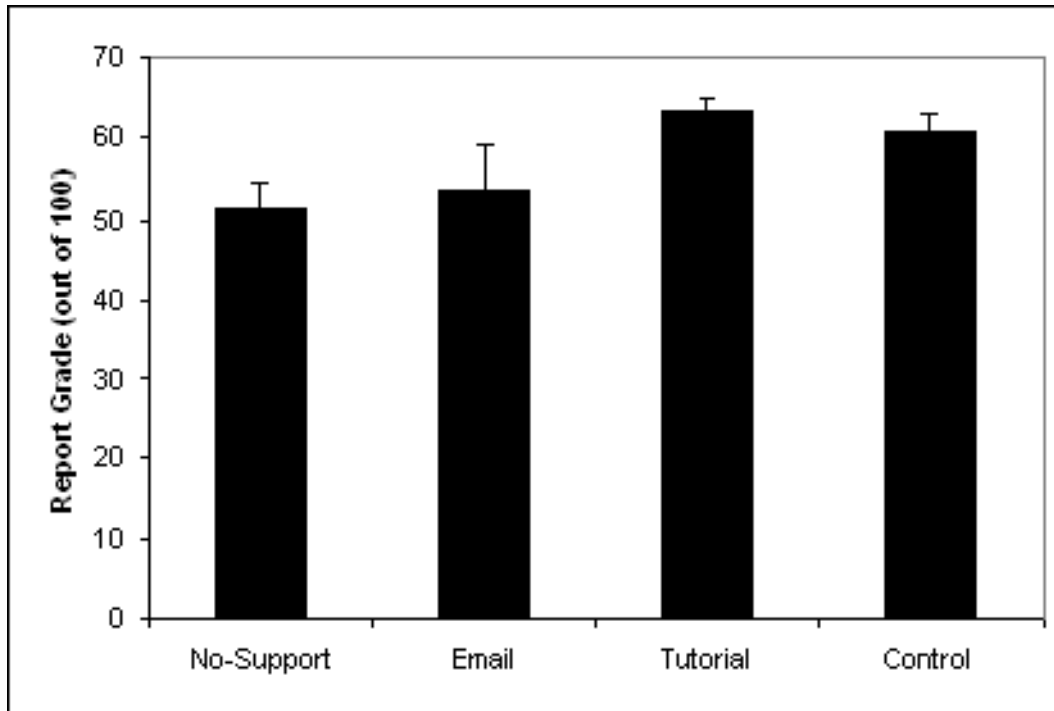
Results – Research Reports

Figure 2. Mean report grade for each group. Error bars represent the standard errors.

Tutorial group better than No-support but not better than Email.

Conclude:
Some kind of targeted assistance helpful… but may only need email support.
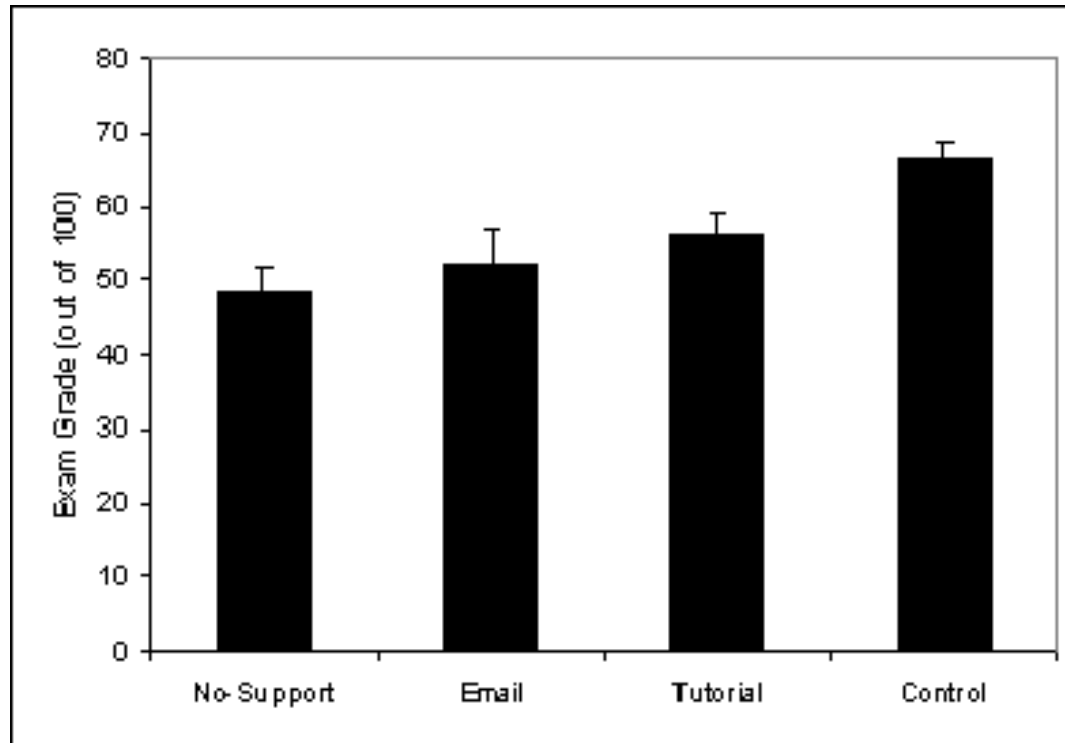
Results – Final Exam

Figure 3. Mean exam grade for each group.

No-support and Email groups performed worse than control group

Tutorial group did not perform worse than control group

Suggests face-to-face support improved academic skills that generalized to exam—or had a motivating effect on studying
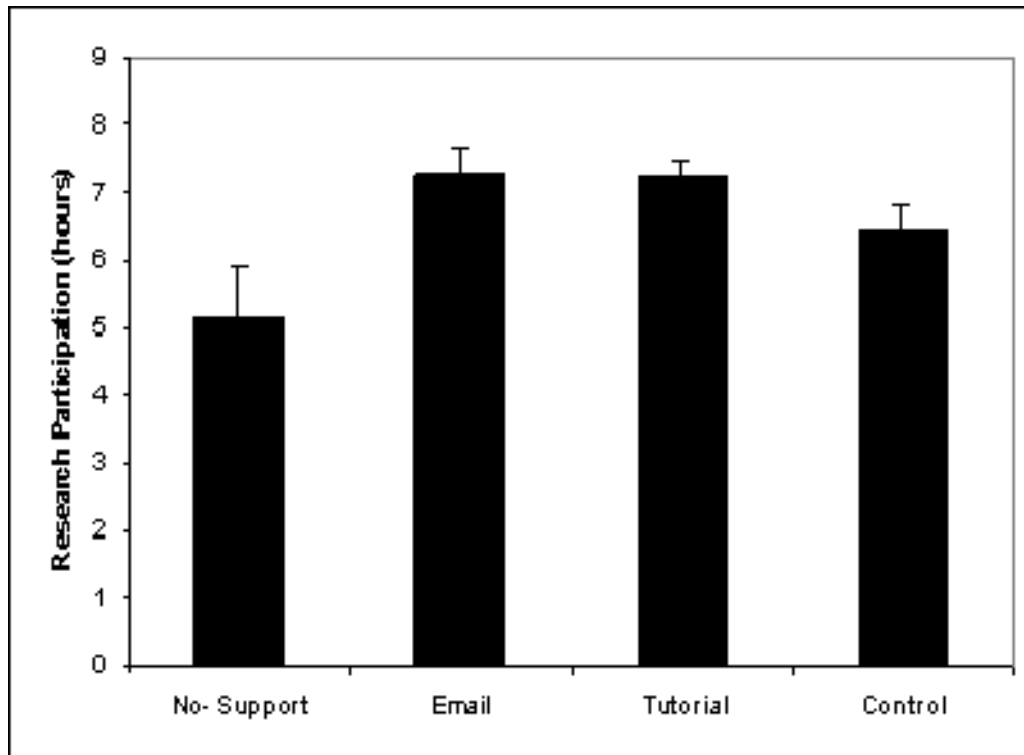
Results – Other indicators

Figure 4. Mean number of research participation hours for each group.

Both Email and Tutorial Groups undertook more hours than No-support group.

Suggests a motivational factor… and/or life circumstances
ALSO:

(1) Tutorial students were more likely to give "very useful" rating of the program.
(2) % students going on to do Psychology 1A: 21% No-Support
                                                                    42% Email
                                                                    43% Tutorial
                                                                    61% Control

Conclusions

Outcomes:

Increased awareness of and demand for courses offered by Learning Centre by different students = normalisation

Identified better ways of teaching report writing that were then integrated in mainstream

Cost-benefit analysis: Email may be just as effective, although not with "exam" index and…

Mechanisms eg psychology-contextualised English language learning?

Limitations: Quasi-experimental design…

…Funding for diagnostic test marking