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

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Thanks to: School of Psychology, Faculty of Science, and PVC Adrian Lee
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.
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 (e.g., 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 Control students (for experimental participation credit).
- In the meantime, most at-risk students (n=28) participated in a 6-week program of one-hour tutorials (Tutorial 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 (On-line group).
- 19 did not participate at all (No-support).
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