

Title: Psychology 102: Creating an online course to prepare students for the major and for careers in psychology after undergraduate coursework

Author: Paul Atchley

Summary:

A professor of psychology creates and evaluates an online course designed to help undergraduate psychology majors understand and plan their coursework to maximize both their experience in the major and to prepare for their careers post bachelors degree.

Background:

Level 1:

The large number of psychology majors and diversity of opportunities in the field create a need to prepare undergraduate majors to succeed both in the major and in developing plans for postgraduate professional development. This portfolio describes the design and evaluation of an online course aimed at addressing that need.

Level 2:

Throughout the field of psychology, preparing undergraduate majors to succeed in the major and develop plans for postgraduate professional development is important given the large numbers of majors and their high rate of application to graduate school programs. "Career Planning and Development" for undergraduates has been designated as one of top goals for our field, yet the majority of psychology departments do not explicitly include this goal in curriculum design. Because of this, students are often unaware of requirements within the major, employment and post-graduate educational opportunities in psychology, and expectations about what experiences they should have before applying for graduate programs and jobs in psychology.

A common problem for students who are not familiar with the field or the major is waiting too long to plan for either application to graduate programs or for placement in internships and research opportunities, thus decreasing the likelihood of acceptance into graduate programs or employment in desired areas. In order to address this problem within our department, I designed and implemented an online course to expose students to information about the major and about the field at large and to help them identify and plan for their desired career path in psychology. I also wanted to evaluate the effects of the course on student knowledge and academic career planning. This portfolio describes the design and evaluation of the online orientation to psychology course I created.

Implementation:

Level 1:

The course, required for all psychology majors, is delivered online via Blackboard and contains four sections: Introduction, Know the Basics, Opportunities, and Planning. Students complete interactive activities and take quizzes as they work through the course. At the beginning and end of the course students take a multiple-choice quiz and answer short essay questions.

Level 2:

Course development

The decision was made to develop the course and offer it in an online format. The rationale was that the 1) online format could reach a broad number of majors, 2) it could be made to be highly interactive without necessarily requiring a large amount of faculty-student interaction or departmental resources, 3) it provided a convenient way to archive student work and 4) web-based instruction provided a seamless transition to the many web-based resources that a student would need in such a course. An online course also eased the management of the course for me since the course is taught as an overload with no GTA support. The course was developed over a period of one year, in conjunction with a group of undergraduate students that volunteered to help based on their desire to see such a course for future majors, conversations and discussions with faculty hosted by the university's Center for Teaching Excellence and professionals at the university's Continuing Education program where the course would be hosted.

Course structure

The course (PSYC 102: Orientation Seminar in Psychology) is a one credit hour, credit/no-credit course. It is required before applying to become a psychology major. The course is delivered to approximately 350 students per year. The primary goal of the course is to assist students in planning for their professional development after their undergraduate studies. Several goals were identified as important to achieving that general outcome.

One set of goals involve knowledge about the major. Those goals include:

1. Know the classes (required courses and those which the student would find interesting or relevant to their interests)
2. Know other KU/PSYCH opportunities (practicum, research, etc.)
3. Know external opportunities (internships, volunteer opportunities, etc.)

The other goals involve knowledge about careers in psychology. Those goals include:

1. Know thyself (identify personal interests and career goals)
2. Know the field (jobs, graduate programs, internships, etc.)

3. Know the requirements (what the student needs to do to get accepted to the graduate program or get hired at the job they desire)

The course is self-paced and takes about 15 to 20 hours to complete. It is divided into four sections: “Introduction”, “Know the Basics”, “Opportunities” and “Planning”. All content is offered exclusively via online delivery in the university’s Blackboard system. This page contains descriptions of the information covered in each of the four sections. Students are exposed to the course goals on the website.

In each section, students are encouraged to engage with the material in two ways. First, each subsection has an associated quiz that covers the basic information in that section. Students must achieve 90% on each quiz to pass the course. Second, students do six tasks to encourage them to work through the most important concepts, and two capstone exercises to help them bring all of their work together to promote learning how to plan for the future. Students build portfolios of their work at the end of the course. The instructor examines student work across the quizzes and tasks, but the level of individual student feedback is minimal.

Assessment of course effectiveness

The course has two mechanisms to gauge effectiveness. The first is an online multiple-choice quiz delivered pre- and post-course that asks fifteen questions about the major and career options, selected randomly from a thirty-five item pool. The second is a set of essays that students complete before and after the course. In the first set of two essays, students are asked to write 250-400 words answering “Why do I want to be a psychology major?” and “Describe all of the things you think people with psychology degrees do for a living?” In the exit essays, they answer “Please write a brief essay on what you think psychologists do for a living.” and “Please write a brief essay on why you still want to be a psychology major. If your mind has changed, explain why. In your essay, please elaborate on your understanding of any aspects of psychology that have changed while taking PSYC 102.”

The scoring rubric evaluates four aspects of the students’ performance on the essays: knowledge of the major, knowledge about future goals and plans, knowledge of career diversity, and self-assessment of fit for the major and careers. The rubric has three levels of performance (Novice, Intermediate, and Advanced) with a six-point scale included so that within a level of performance the rater could capture minimum and maximum performance for that level.

Student work:

Level 1:

Student performance on pre and post-course quizzes and essays was analyzed to determine the effectiveness of the course. Students improved their performance on both the quizzes and the essay from the beginning of the course to the end of the course.

Level 2:

Pre-Post Quiz Performance

Students performed significantly better on the knowledge-based quiz at the end of the course than at the beginning. Students answered 61% of the questions accurately on the pre-test and 71% of the questions accurately on the post-test.

Performance on Essays

Students also performed better on the essay questions at the end of the course. Across all four categories on the rubric, students scored higher on the end of course essays. The biggest improvement was found in the “Knowledge of Major” category, with students moving, on average, from “low-novice” levels of performance to “near-advanced” levels of performance. This table presents the improvements across all four categories on the rubric.

Following the course, students were much more aware of major requirements, goals, and courses that are optional but very important, such as honors opportunities and working in research laboratories conducting research with faculty members. There were also equally large gains in student planning skills. Students were able to name qualification criteria for postgraduate options and careers, as well as opportunities they need to take advantage of to foster their own success, such as volunteer activities and scholarships. These effects were so large for these categories that almost every single student sampled showed improvement. There was a significant increase in career awareness and self assessment of fit for the major, though these gains were smaller, due in part to moderately high performance of students on these prior to the course, and possibly due to course design in terms of career emphasis and the fact that the students may already have an accurate assessment of their own fit for the major.

Reflections:

Level 1:

Overall the course was effective, and several lessons were learned. Those lessons included: don't expect that students know anything about the major or the field, structure the course to ensure timely completion, and plan for an increase in student interactions about advising with the instructor of the course.

Level 2:

The course was the process of years of planning and implementation. There have been many changes as a result of lessons learned. A few of these are worth sharing. The first lesson is that we should not expect our new college students to know what they don't know. Faculty appointments are typically the result of a lifetime of good decisions, but

many of us will admit that there was a lot of luck involved. Perhaps we took the right class, or an advisor saw potential and pointed us in the right direction. It is unreasonable to expect that method to work for hundreds of students in our departments each year. To that end, courses like the orientation seminar must be both 1) required and 2) timely. Our department has an admissions process for majors. Pre-majors have to take a set of classes, including the orientation seminar, before they can apply to be a major and take the favored advanced classes. These requirements help to make sure that a young adult does not put off what might be a career changing event.

Another lesson is that the course should probably be structured in the same way other courses are in terms of time to completion and expectations. One early version allowed students to complete the course at their own pace, but the course quickly filled with sophomores turned seniors that put it off until the last semester they could. Students now have one semester to complete it like any other course, and this has served the students well.

Finally, the one downside of the course is that the instructor will probably become a point-person for undergraduate advising drop-in hours. This is not necessarily problematic if they are ready to re-direct and be selective in their assistance and it can certainly be extremely personally and professionally rewarding, but in a large department that places other demands on faculty time, it is worth being deliberate about how to handle this at the outset.