Developing Practical Skills through Applied Learning in a Graduate Psychology Course

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COURSE BACKGROUND

PSYC 855, Assessment II: Integrative Psychological Assessment, is a required psychology graduate course taken in the first or second year of the program. Assessment II emphasizes diagnosis and assessment of psychopathology and personality. The course goals are to help students learn:

- How to *choose* which test will be most effective for any given context/client.
- How to *use* or implement tests to arrive at a diagnosis.
- How to *interpret* and *communicate* test findings.

The course included readings, videos, and exercises to help students gain:

1) Hands-on **clinical and diagnostic interviewing skills**
2) Knowledge of **psychometrics and scale construction**
3) The ability to formulate **clinically useful recommendations and treatment plans**
4) Ability to **work in a team and receive feedback**
5) Knowledge to pass the **EPPP licensure examination**

MOTIVATION TO REDESIGN

- Student work in previous iterations of this class demonstrated that students had difficulty interpreting clients' data and were not able to create effective treatment plans and recommendations.
- End-of-the-semester evaluations indicated students wanted more hands-on practical application of the course content.
- As a participant in the 2015 Best Practices Institute, I asked myself, *"What did my students not learn that I thought they should know?"* Using this question as a guide, I designed a flipped course for the fall 2015 iteration of the class. This design **started with the basic skills students will need in their future careers and sought multiple ways to engage students through applied learning.**

FLIPPED DESIGN

- Materials and lectures were online before class, including videos of myself demonstrating the skills they were learning (e.g., clinical intake interview, full diagnostic assessment, and closing an interview).
- Students watched and read assigned materials and took an online quiz before coming to class. The quiz allowed me to assess before class what parts of the material students were struggling with most.
- Class time was typically devoted to small group work of 2-3 people. My TA and I circulated through the room, answering questions and providing guidance when needed. For example, during one class period, students were invited to evaluate the model used to gather data in a specific study, looking for potential problems. Students were then asked to use their reading from the textbook to develop their own method of measurement.
- Students had the opportunity to re-take the quiz after class and received the average of the two quiz scores. This also allowed me to gauge post-class learning.

Mutual Feedback

The fall 2015 semester provided opportunities for giving and receiving immediate feedback on student learning and areas of struggle.

- **Mini-Conferences:** In addition to written feedback, I had one-on-one conversations with students about their work. After watching the video recordings of students demonstrating their assessment skills during simulated sessions with a practice client, we met for mini-conferences. This allowed me to touch base with them individually, identify their confusions, hear their concerns, and validate their strengths.
- **Reflection:** We spent the last five minutes of each class in written reflection. I prompted these sessions with questions like, "When were you most/least engaged today?"
- **Review:** I provided time for a review activity at the beginning of every class. These activities took a variety of forms (e.g., concept mapping, impromptu poster sessions, board games).

STUDENT EVALUATIONS
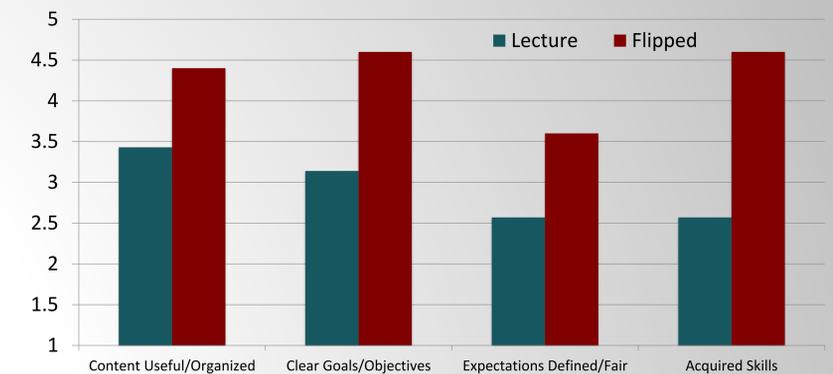
STUDENT GRADES
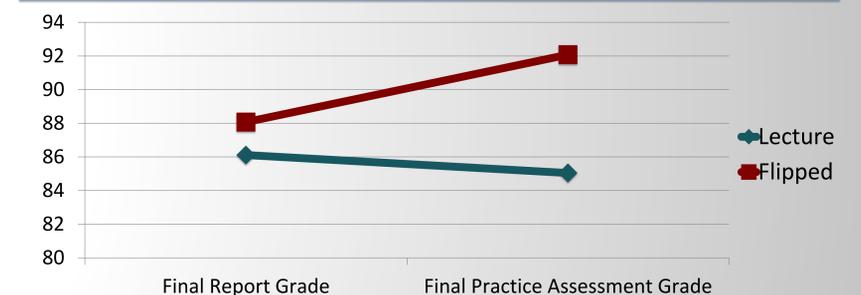
REFLECTIONS

- I saw **tremendous improvement in student learning.** Only 29% of students in the lecture course scored a B+ or better on the final practice testing session with a mock-client, whereas 100% in the "flipped" course scored a +B or better.
- The novel learning format made some students feel insecure or worried about having the "wrong" answer. To address student anxieties, it will be important to emphasize in the front-end of the course that, while this kind of learning can be uncomfortable, it will equip them with the skills they need to work with patients with mental illness.
- Additional in-class report writing will be added to help bolster students' report-writing skills.
- Student **evaluations indicated this class became about something more lasting than grades**; students suggested they learned material that would help them in their **careers**.