

School Name Des Moines Area Community College, Ankeny IA

Course Name Introduction to Sociology

Course Format Face-to-face/flipped; online

Key Results Students who completed all Writing Space essay assignments scored 13 points higher on exams than students who skipped one or more Writing Space essay assignments.

Submitted by

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Course materials

Sociology: The Basics by Macionis; MySocLab

Setting

Des Moines Area Community College, Iowa's largest two-year college, enrolls over 75,000 credit and non-credit students across six campuses. Its student population is the most culturally diverse in the Iowa higher education system. The majority of students (60 percent) attend part time. The demographic makeup of students taking the Introduction to Sociology course is similar to the overall college demographics. This course introduces students to the discipline of sociology through a wide range of topics, including: culture, socialization, organizations and institutions, deviance, inequality, gender, health, family, social change, theories, and research methods.

Challenges and Goals

In the past, I've assigned writing homework as a way to help students master course content. Through the process of creating an essay in response to assigned writing prompts, students move beyond just basic memorizing to higher levels of learning related to analyzing and applying concepts. The challenge was finding the time to grade student essays and providing meaningful feedback in a timely manner. I decided to implement Writing Space's auto-feedback writing assignments as a solution.

Implementation

Giving students more opportunities to practice writing can only help to improve their writing—a skill that transfers across all disciplines, as well as to future careers. With Writing Space, I've been able to increase the number of essay assignments required throughout the course from four to ten—almost one per chapter.

I take a flipped classroom approach that holds students accountable for completing their writing and other assignments before coming to class. I tell them that the content of the course builds on itself throughout the semester; therefore, it is imperative that they have a solid understanding of the early concepts. I advise them to see me during office hours for additional clarification on a particular concept or assignment. I conduct frequent assessments throughout the semester as both a measurement of how well students are learning, and as a tool for critical feedback, an essential part of the learning process.

In the first semester implementing Writing Space (spring 2014), I decided to start slowly and only required two writing assignments—"Race and Ethnicity" and "Sociological Imagination". The quality of the writing prompts has a lot to do with the level of thinking required to complete the assignments. For example, the "Race and Ethnicity" prompt asks students to take a stance, argue their point, and then support their stance with evidence from the textbook. This type of assignment requires more than a simple definitional response. I now assign 10 auto-feedback writing assignments throughout the course through Writing Space. These assignments are worth a total of 200 points, the same as their midterm and final exams. Making these writing assignments a significant part of their grade holds students accountable and communicates the value I place on these types of assignments.

Assessments

25 percent	Chapter Quizzes
20 percent	MySocLab (10 Writing Space assignments)
20 percent	Midterm Exam
20 percent	Final Exam
15 percent	Participation

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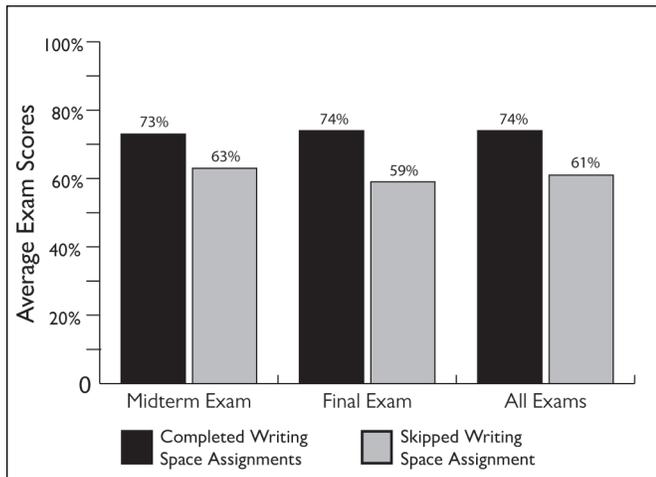


Figure 1. Average Exam Scores for Students Who Completed All Writing Space Assignments ($n=39$) vs. Students Who Skipped at Least One Writing Space Assignment ($n=38$), Fall 2014

Benefits observed

- By assigning chapter quizzes and writing assignments in advance, students come to class more prepared to participate in engaging class discussions.
- In addition to providing students with feedback, Writing Space’s auto-grader eliminates any “halo effect” and grades students objectively and more consistently.
- Writing Space’s auto-feedback assignments evaluate student essays based on content as well as the mechanical aspects of writing.
- Auto-grading saves time and provides students with personalized and immediate feedback to help improve their writing and critical thinking skills. Increased practice benefits students with both strong and weak skills.

Results and Data

To evaluate Writing Space’s impact on learning, student performance was evaluated based on participation in Writing Space essay assignments during the fall 2014 semester. The results of a t-Test show that there was a significant difference

in the average exam scores for students who completed all ten essays assignments ($M=74\%$, $SD=11\%$, $n=39$) and those students who missed one or more assignments ($M=61\%$, $SD=19\%$, $n=38$) conditions; $t(75)=3.58$, $p<.01$. For the purposes of this study, a skipped assignment was considered one with a score of 0.

I believe this data confirms that, in keeping with Bloom’s taxonomy (Krathwohl 2002), Writing Space’s essay assignments force the student into the higher-order thinking of analyzing and creating, resulting in longer retention as measured by performance on midterm and final exams.

The Student Experience

The majority of students found Writing Space’s auto-feedback assignments helpful. In addition, almost all of the students who responded to an end of semester survey indicated that they would recommend MySocLab with Writing Space to students taking this course in the future. My students also appreciated the flipped classroom model indicating that it helped them learn chapter content before we talked about it together in class.

Conclusion

It is clear that Writing Space helps students learn and retain information over time while they simultaneously develop important writing and critical thinking skills. Students who completed all work in Writing Space out-performed other students on the exams. I plan to share this information with my students at the start of next semester in an effort to increase performance for all students.

References

Krathwohl, David R. 2002. A Revision of Bloom’s Taxonomy: An Overview. *Theory Into Practice* 41(4): 212-218.

<https://go.dmac.edu/about/Documents/FactSheet.pdf>