

Introduction

General Psychology is a rewarding and challenging course to teach. It is a pleasure to be the first to introduce students to the people, ideas, and research that make psychology a fascinating field of study. With the rich history and broad scope of psychology, however, comes the necessity of picking a limited subset of topics to present in class. For both coverage and pedagogical reasons, I have included an interactive digital writing component since I started teaching the course as a graduate student. This poster presents an overview of my transition from using discussion forums hosted on my institution's learning management system (Moodle) to student-run blogs hosted on Wordpress.com, using both quantitative and qualitative student evaluation data.

Method

Participants

- **Moodle version:**
 - 2 semesters, 3 sections: 84 students, 67% female, 54% European American
- **WordPress version:**
 - 2 semesters, 2 sections: 46 students, 52% female, 52% European American

Assignment Descriptions

- **Moodle version:**
 - Students were responsible for determining the weekly discussion prompt in groups of 2-3. Prompts had to be tied to course content for the week. Students met with me to pitch ideas and refine their prompt.
 - All students were required to post a response to the prompt (≥ 200 words) as well as a comment on at least two other students' responses (≥ 100 words).
- **WordPress version:**
 - I prepared two writing prompts each week which were tied to course content for the week. Students could choose to write about either topic, but would only receive credit for one post.
 - Students were required to make eight posts over the course of the semester (≥ 250 words) and make eight comments on other students' blogs (≥ 150 words).

Measures

- Two items from an unofficial midterm course evaluation conducted in the 6th week of the semester: "The online discussions/course blogs are useful" and "The online discussions/course blogs are interesting," both of which were rated on a 4-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree, 4 = Strongly Agree).
- Four items from the official student evaluation of teaching [rated on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree, 7 = Strongly Agree)] conducted in the final week of the semester: "The professor encouraged questions and critical thinking"; "How much did you learn in this class compared to your other courses?"; "How effective was this professor compared to your other professors?"; and "Would you recommend this professor to another student?"
- Two open-ended questions from an unofficial midterm course evaluation conducted in the 6th week of the semester: "What is the best aspect of this course?" and "What is the worst aspect of this course?"
- Students' unprompted responses to an open-ended general request for feedback regarding the course as part of the official student evaluation of teaching conducted during the final week of the semester.

Results

Quantitative

On the unofficial midterm evaluations (see Table 1), students' ratings did not differ significantly in terms of the usefulness and interestingness of the digital writing assignments ($p = .82$ and $.25$, respectively).

Table 1. Student Ratings of Online Writing Assignments for Semesters Using Discussion Forums in Moodle vs. Blogs hosted on Wordpress.com

Question	Moodle ^a		WordPress ^b		t^c	p	d
	M	SD	M	SD			
The online discussions/blogs are interesting	2.52	0.96	2.57	1.12	0.23	.82	0.05
The online discussions/blogs are useful	2.13	0.95	1.91	0.85	-1.15	.25	-0.23

Note. All items rated on 4-point Likert Scale; ^a $n = 67$; ^b $n = 35$; ^c $df = 100$

On the official course evaluations (see Table 2), there was no significant difference between components in terms of encouragement of critical thinking or quantity learned ($p = .17$ and $.67$, respectively). Students' ratings of relative teaching effectiveness and willingness to recommend the professor, however, were significantly higher ($p = .002$ and $.01$, respectively) in the blogging semesters.

Table 2. Official Student Evaluations of Teaching Ratings for Semesters Using Discussion Forums in Moodle vs. Blogs hosted on Wordpress.com

Question	Moodle ^a		WordPress ^b		t^c	p	d
	M	SD	M	SD			
Professor Encouraged Questions & Critical Thinking	5.84	1.39	6.19	0.83	1.38	.17	0.28
Relative Quantity Learned	5.25	1.51	5.40	1.06	0.42	.67	0.09
Relative Teaching Effectiveness	4.88	1.44	5.68	0.91	3.14	.002	0.63
Recommendation of Professor	5.16	1.46	5.87	1.12	2.60	.01	0.53

Note. All items rated on 7-point Likert Scale; ^a $n = 72$; ^b $n = 38$; ^c $df = 108$

Qualitative

During the semesters I used Moodle, 26 of my 63 responding students (41%) listed the digital writing assignment as the worst aspect of the course on the midterm evaluation, compared with only 2 (3%) listing it as the best aspect. Examples of students' negative comments include:

- "I LOATHE the quizzes. But even more so, I cannot stand having to write a discussion and then reply to someone else's."
- "I very much dislike the online discussions. At times they just feel monotonous, time consuming, and a waste of time."

During the blogging semesters, the relative frequency of the assignment as the worst aspect of the course stayed the same (14 of 35; 40%), but the language was less vitriolic. For example:

- "I don't like the blogging assignments very much. They are interesting, but I don't like the idea of the blog."
- "I'm not as big a fan of the blogging assignments."

The relative frequency of listing the assignment as the best part of the course also increased (3 of 35; 9%) during these semesters.

Results (cont.)

On the 71 official student evaluations of teaching during the Moodle semesters, I received 17 comments related to the digital writing assignment. Of these comments, 2 were positive, 4 were mixed, and 11 were negative. An example of a mixed comment was "Discussions and quizzes were helpful to understand content but not for test preparation." The negative comments were similar to those on the midterm feedback, such as:

- "The only thing I absolutely hated were the discussions. The discussions just seemed like busy work every week."
- "What I really did not like were the discussions. In no way do I think they are enjoyable and they are hardly useful. I think topics are clear enough and do not need discussions."

On the 38 official student evaluations of teaching during the Moodle semesters, I received 10 comments related to the digital writing assignment. Of these comments, 3 were positive, 4 were mixed, and 3 were negative. In the mixed category, the positive component used stronger language than the Moodle semester (e.g., "The blogs seemed to stress interactivity more so than exploration/learning. Many of them were fascinating, but did not tie into class that well."). The negative comments, however, were similar to those provided in the Moodle semester, for example:

- "Blogs and blog comments were just busy work and I didn't get a lot out of them."
- "Blogs and comments are useless, they are a waste of time, I did not learn very much from them."

Conclusions

Summary

While shifting from Moodle to WordPress did not eliminate negative feedback regarding digital writing assignments, it did appear to lessen the intensity of the feedback on midterm evaluations, reduce the frequency of negative comments on official evaluations, and may be connected to higher ratings of teaching effectiveness and willingness to recommend the professor. Further investigation is needed before solid conclusions can be drawn, but this is a promising early result.

Implementation Recommendations

- I created a series of screencast tutorial videos (available [here](#)) to introduce students to specific components of WordPress we would use. Very few students required additional assistance from me to get their sites up and running.
- Create your own course blog to distribute writing prompts, highlight student responses, or syndicate student writing. See my course blog [here](#) for an example.

Limitations

- No causal arguments can be made from these data, as student enrollment is not random, the required frequency of writing differed across the two assignments, additional minor changes in the course were implemented each semester, and instructor practice effects cannot be ruled out.
- The results may not generalize to other courses, professors, or institutions.
- The semesters using blogs had lower initial enrollments and higher drop rates than the semesters using Moodle. It is unknown to what extent this was related to the digital writing component of the course.

