



INNOVATION ABSTRACTS

Meeting of the Minds: Using Linked Courses to Increase Retention and Completion

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In light of the continued educational challenges brought on by the pandemic, new ways of keeping students engaged in their educational journeys are in the forefront of faculty's minds. At Harford Community College, two introductory courses, English Composition (ENG 101) and Introduction to Psychology (PSY 101), were linked to see if building a learning community and decreasing writing assignments would maintain students' motivation to complete coursework. To our delight, we found this to be true.

What is a "linked course?" Formally, a linked course consists of classes, usually two, from different disciplines that share content and course organization. Students enroll in the classes during the same semester (Cargill and Kalikoff, 2007). Informally, linked courses offer an opportunity for students to take two courses at the same time in hopes that doing so will create a strong sense of community across the student population and increase their academic achievement. Linked courses present students with the opportunity to have a more niche experience with course topics and communicate more with their fellow classmates and instructors.

In a study very similar to our approach, an English professor and a psychology professor collaborated with a linked course design to enhance their students' experiences. The students were dually enrolled in a writing course and an abnormal psychology course. The instructors found that the students who were enrolled in the linked course had higher exam and essay scores than those who were not in the linked course (Cargill and Kalikoff, 2007). The students in the linked course also reported a higher level of satisfaction with their comprehension of the course material.

Format

This faculty-driven initiative began as a simple conversation between colleagues during a networking session at a conference. "Wouldn't it be great to link our courses since most students take ENG 101 and PSY 101 in the first semester?" After seeking approval from our deans, we contacted our Records and Registration office to make sure that the courses appeared as linked in the course schedule and on the website. Then we collaborated with the advising department to ensure the

linked course was marketed as such by advisors so only students who wanted both classes would register for it.

In ENG 101, students must write five academic essays, including a summary response and a research paper. The citation format taught in most English courses is Modern Language Association (MLA); however, the social sciences use American Psychological Association (APA). Ultimately, we decided that students would write their essays based on the topics and readings covered in the PSY 101 class, thereby reinforcing the concepts covered in PSY 101 and the importance of reading the textbook. Because the student learning outcomes for ENG 101 did not specify MLA as the required citation format, we decided students would use APA format for both classes since that format would be modeled in most of the research students read.

The assignments for the classes were streamlined. For example, because students had to write summary response essays for both classes, we decided that PSY 101 would focus on grading the accuracy of the content while ENG 101 would focus on grading the conventions of academic writing and integration of sources. Students would submit one assignment for both classes, which decreased students' stress to produce two separate assignments. Similarly, the final research paper for ENG 101 was based on a final group project in PSY 101, so students could use the research from the group project to complete the paper.

Before the pandemic, our plan was for students to have our classes back-to-back on the same days to create the kind of learning community that research supports as an effective strategy for increasing retention and completion. Once the pandemic forced all courses into an online format, another challenge emerged. The ENG 101 class was asynchronous, while the PSY 101 class was synchronous, meeting twice a week in person over Teams. We used discussion boards, virtual office hours, the chat function in Teams, email, and out-of-class communication to simulate the learning community experience in a virtual setting. In an ideal world, if linked classes are taught online, they should be back-to-back and synchronous to better emulate the in-person experience.

Data

Student Population

There were a total of 19 students enrolled in this linked course at the start of the term. Two students

withdrew due to attendance issues. In ENG 101, 16 students passed the class. In PSY 101, all 17 students passed the class.

Survey Results

Students were asked to complete a survey via Google Drive midway through the semester. The survey consisted of 13 questions; some were via a Likert scale and some were short-answer. The Likert scale dimensions ranged from one to five, with one being low and five being high. Questions explored students' perceptions of the linked course. Unfortunately, only three of the 19 students completed the survey. We suspect this may be due to additional stressors students were under due to the pandemic and remote learning.

Overall, students said they liked the sense of community that the linked course created and enjoyed having knowledge of psychology and English when completing assignments. Students remarked that because the class rubrics were not the same, some assignments were more challenging to receive full points.

As instructors, we noticed the following benefits, challenges, and future implications.

Benefits of Linked Courses

- Collaboration between divisions. By working together, we got a better sense of the amount of work required for each other's courses and how that affects students' ability to manage the workload.
- Reduction in the number of assignments for students. Because we worked together, we were able to create connections between assignments and reduce the number of tasks without compromising on content or integrity in either class.
- Learning community for students. Using the discussion boards, virtual office hours, chat function in Teams, email, and out-of-class communication, students could reach out to each other for support in both classes.
- Monitoring student success. We were able to talk about struggling students and use a collaborative approach for getting a struggling student back on track.
- Student retention. We began the semester with 19 students and only two stopped attending.
- Increased interest from other faculty. Additional humanities faculty have shown an interest in linking ENG 101 to other social science courses.
- New perspectives. As a career faculty member who has taught ENG 101 many times, it was refreshing to approach the course from a new perspective.

Challenges

- Timing due dates. We had to shuffle due dates a few times during the semester despite our careful planning.
- Communication with all involved parties. We had to touch base with advising and registration department members several times to ensure that our rosters matched and students understood that the classes were linked. It was also challenging to find time to talk to each other about how the linked approach was going.
- Format of classes. One class being synchronous and the other class being asynchronous was not ideal for a linked course.

Future Implications

- Format of course offerings. Ideally, we would like to offer the linked classes back-to-back in a face-to-face environment. As we continue in the online environment, we need to explore how best to provide a linked course.
- Continuity of linked offerings. We hope to teach our linked course over several consecutive semesters in the future to get a better idea of how it benefits students. We will teach the linked course again in fall 2021.
- Student fatigue. Anecdotally, a few students commented that they were getting tired of writing about psychology.

While there is no foolproof solution to maintaining student motivation, linked courses seem to be one approach that is effective for students and faculty. Consider offering linked courses to your students to increase success and retention!

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References

Cargill, K. and Kalikoff, B. (2007). Linked courses at the twenty-first century metropolitan university. *Teaching English in the Two Year College*, 35(2), 181-190.