



The Introductory Psychology “Mini-Course”: A New Strategy For Organizing Discussion Sections

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Background

This study compares two different discussion section formats associated with "PSYC 100: Introduction to Psychology"

The standard format utilized the traditional notion of "discussion section", where a graduate student TA would review and expand on material that had already been presented in the main lecture session, using lesson plans or activities provided by the course instructor.

The mini-course format was the same as the control section for the first 5 weeks (i.e., review and expand), but in the last 8 weeks of the semester, graduate student TAs taught special "mini-courses" of their own design.

Mini-Course Aims

The overall aim was to create more excitement about the field of Psychology among students taking Introduction to Psychology.

Additionally, we aimed to:

- (1) Create a more substantive teaching experience for graduate student TAs;
- (2) Expose PSYC 100 students to interesting or controversial issues within the field of Psychology
- (3) Expose PSYC 100 students to original research, and familiarize them with the process of reading and analyzing original research papers.

Participants and Methods

256 students participated by anonymously completing online surveys at the end of the semester.

143 students had taken the mini-course version of PSYC 100, in the Fall 2009 semester.

113 students had taken the standard version of PSYC 100, in the Spring 2010 semester.

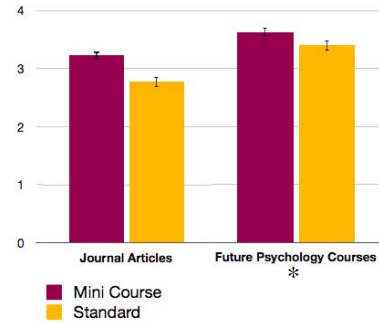
The course was taught by the same instructor each semester, but included different sets of TAs.

Mini-Course Content

Three graduate student teaching assistants each taught their own mini-course:

- (1) Television and the Developing Child (JGG)
- (2) Decision-Making in Adolescence (RLB)
- (3) Vision and the Brain (OA)

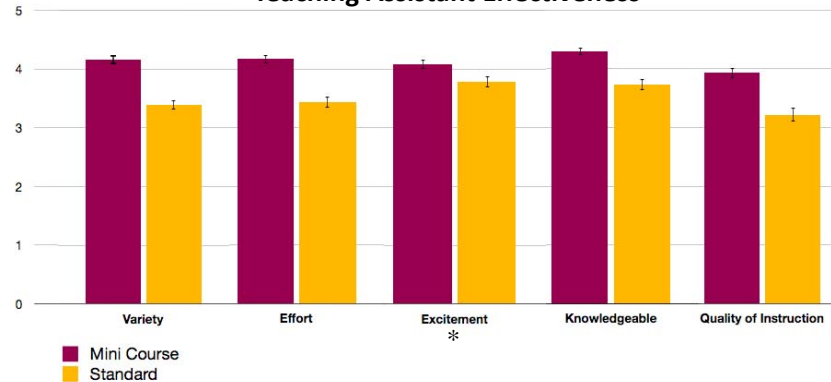
Preparedness to Study Psychology



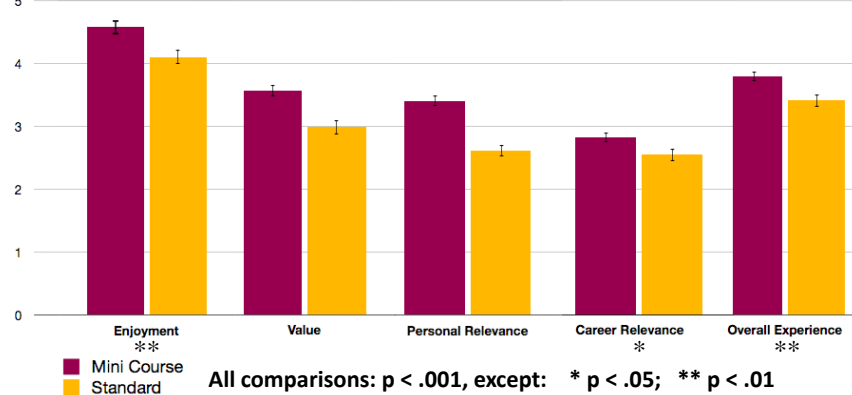
Five-point Likert scale

- 5 = Clearly describes my feelings
- 4 = Mostly describes my feelings
- 3 = Somewhat describes my feelings
- 2 = Mostly does not describe my feelings
- 1 = Clearly does not describe my feelings

Teaching Assistant Effectiveness



Discussion Section Evaluation



All comparisons: $p < .001$, except: * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$

	Mini-Course		Standard		F	p
	Mean	SE	Mean	SE		
Prepared to Analyze Journal Articles	3.23	.076	2.78	.091	14.553	< .001
Future Psychology Courses	3.63	.072	3.40	.091	4.151	.043
Variety	4.17	.087	3.40	.082	40.677	< .001
Effort	4.17	.073	3.44	.098	36.887	< .001
Excitement	4.08	.084	3.79	.095	5.180	.024
Knowledgeable	4.30	.070	3.73	.099	23.301	< .001
Quality of Instruction	3.93	.091	3.22	.121	22.706	< .001
Enjoyment	4.58	.108	4.11	.119	8.815	.003
Value	3.57	.088	2.99	.112	17.164	< .001
Personal Relevance	3.41	.087	2.62	.095	37.495	< .001
Career Relevance	2.83	.085	2.55	.099	4.608	.033
Overall Experience	3.80	.830	3.41	.105	9.165	.003

Representative Course Comments

"Mini-course was a really good idea. Glad that I took this mini-course. I enjoyed this class 100 times more because of it."

"Enjoyed the mini-course, found it applicable and practical to life."

"...We get to step back from the somewhat dry course material and focus on a [specific] topic."

Results and Interpretation

Compared to students enrolled in a standard discussion section, students enrolled in a section with the mini-course:

- (1) rated themselves as significantly more prepared for future success in psychology coursework,
- (2) rated the section significantly more positively, and
- (3) considered the teaching assistant to be significantly more effective.

Despite having the same course instructor, the structure of the discussion section dramatically influenced the students' and the teaching assistants' experience in PSYC 100: Introduction to Psychology.

Limitations

The mini-course TAs were self-selected and could have been more skilled instructors in the first place or more generally motivated.

Alternatively, TA motivation might vary as a consequence of teaching a mini-course. This is both an aim as well as a confounding variable.