English Composition (ENGL 1101) Course Redesign at eCore

Cortney McLeod

Jen Sands

After piloting an adaptive learning platform integration for ENGL 1101, we hypothesize that the following strategies better promote student success in terms of self-awareness, motivation, structure, engagement, and concept transfer: condensing interactive, multimodal content via the Learning Management Systems (LMS) platform for the purpose of mastery; encouraging student reflection through informal journal writing, metacognitive prompts, and revision; promoting learner agency via an adaptive quiz structure; and setting clear expectations through individualized rubrics and transparent instructions.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

A redesign of ENGL 1101 using a particular adaptive platform was suggested by University System of Georgia (USG) Leadership in an effort to explore ways to make the course more scalable. eCore had used another adaptive platform in Math courses with much success, but after the bulk of a year's work, the adaptation of ENGL to fit the platform's specifications and limitations did not produce good results in the pilot: the user experience was confusing and clunky for students and frustrating for instructors, who had no control over the content and were accustomed to the more user-friendly grading process of their LMS (Desire to Learn, referred to herein as D2L). Undaunted, we set out to sidestep the technical barriers and utilize the questions that we developed specifically for the platform as formative assessment quizzes in a D2L-only version of the course as well—ostensibly for better comparison, but ultimately to assuage the feeling that, otherwise, all of our work would be for naught. After the adaptive courseware summer pilot, and attending the G2C meeting in October of 2019 and an ENGL 1101 presentation there, as well as speaking with multiple vendors, coordinators, and professors at different companies and institutions, we took additional steps to reduce the amount of content covered in the now "D2L-only adaptive" version of the course, choosing to focus on the mastery of fundamentals instead of finishing a Researched Argumentative Essay. We also added some reflective, informal writing at the beginning of the course, to reduce student anxiety, and after each major assignment, to help them absorb their instructors' feedback and plan accordingly for improvement.

METHODS

At the launch of the project we were told that most of the work would be on the courseware side of the project team, relocating the content into their platform for the purposes of data-driven diagnostics. Our roles as Instructional Designer (ID) and Subject Matter Expert (SME) consisted of clarifying "nodes" in the course and providing an accompanying test bank of questions for each node that would offer students more opportunities to practice their knowledge of course content. As the project progressed and became increasingly demanding, however, it seemed clear to us that it was, if anything, going to be more difficult to wring clarity of purpose and skill out of the curriculum through the many limitations the courseware presented. By February of 2019, we had started a concurrent revision sans adaptive courseware, utilizing the questions we had created for the adaptive platform in D2L quizzes. These

formative assessment quizzes followed readings, preceded heavier assessments, and could be taken as many times as the student chose, with the average of all of their attempts recorded in the gradebook. Additionally, we revised final assessment instructions for transparency using the "TILT" format, created individualized holistic and analytical rubrics that directly reflected the TILTed assessments' grading criteria, and separated parts of the course into smaller sections so that individual learning components were explicitly discussed, practiced, and evaluated. Much of this work was planned and accomplished during several all-day meetings between SME and ID in the Spring 2019.

OUTCOMES

Results of the summer pilot of the adaptive platform version of the course were more disastrous than we had feared. While touted as easily accessible, personalized, and data-rich, the adaptive platform's interface was not intuitive. Students also seemed confused by having to navigate multiple platforms. After the first few weeks, a specially designated Student Success team member had to be assigned to the course to follow-up and coach students on an individual basis, most of whom were falling behind. Quite a few students ended up taking Incompletes to finish their coursework. Our initial attempt at launching a "D2L-only adaptive" course coincided with the pilot launch, and, while students in the courseware pilot did demonstrably worse, we also determined that there was now simply too much content and too much work in the D2L-only course overall; it was near impossible for students to find time to re-take the quizzes when the next deadline loomed up so quickly.

After the chaos of the summer pilot, we continued to work on the D2L-only version of the course, trimming content and adding informal writing as low-stakes tasks to encourage student reflection on their role in the learning process, as well as promote objective self-evaluation of submitted work. We deleted the most advanced unit in the course and added a "Getting Started" unit, to which we redirected the Grammar review work (previously apportioned into each of the 4 units of the course), consolidating the grammar quizzes into one test that students could, again, take as many times as they liked to improve their grade. We also designed four approachable readings and corresponding Journal entries for the first unit: informal writing that drew on the students' own experiences, prepared them for writing in a more low-stakes environment, and gave the instructor an opportunity to both respond positively to the students' work, and to note any particular challenges they were having, so as to provide appropriate resources more readily.

We have also continually added feedback for all quiz question answers, so that students are not just left hanging with a wrong guess but provided with a timely explanation that can clarify nuances or correct misunderstandings. These explanations increase student confidence and performance, in that they are more willing to both take the quiz again and implement the skill in their writing, now that they understand the material better. In summer of 2020, we added some concrete suggestions as steps for students to take in the instructions for the Post-Assignment Feedback and Reflection Plans.

The process has been jangled and intense at best. However, despite the complicating effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, the 2020 data collected so far has shown marked improvement over 2019. The ABC rate went up anywhere from 1.3 percentage points (Spring SS1) to 10.3 (Spring full term), and the Course Completion rate went up anywhere from 1.3 (Spring SS1) to 7.9 percentage points (Summer). While we at first attributed this largely to midterm exams not being proctored, a closer look revealed that the average midterm exam grades stayed about the same between the two years.

PLANS FOR CONTINUATION AND EXPANSION

We concluded that the lure of "shiny things" in terms of adaptive courseware and additional integrations should henceforth be judiciously weighed against the risk of creating additional barriers for students. Adaptive courseware, as it is currently built, seems better suited to math homework practice than in a course such as English Composition I, where students are literally learning how to learn and how to use writing — not only to communicate and persuade, but to think, both critically and creatively.

LESSONS LEARNED

Additional platforms, if necessary, need to be consistent, reliable, and seamless for all involved, but particularly for first-semester college students, many of whom may have never taken an online course. Otherwise they will frustrate students and inhibit their progress, as well as divert faculty's (primary) focus on instruction. Furthermore, faculty need to have the ability to modify their course content and alter deadlines as needed, and trust that their feedback is easily found and understood by their students. The continued availability of formative assessments helps motivate students to improve their understanding of concepts, as well as feel more empowered in the grading process. Detailed rubrics for individual assignments help students understand what to shoot for and how to improve and assist faculty in evaluating performance. Reflective student writings that evaluate their ideas about learning and their progress can be very helpful. Students learn to evaluate their efforts as well as their concrete achievements; additionally, they learn by doing so how the process of writing itself can assist their thinking and learning. These reflective assignments promote a sense of empowerment and responsibility, and act as metacognitive checkpoints that broaden students' awareness of their study habits and strategies. Lastly, less is sometimes more. First-semester college students need enough time with both the course content and their instructor to learn foundational course knowledge. This may require (particularly in abbreviated, 8-week terms) a reduction in the number of assignments so that students can master the most critical components of the course.