

Predicting Performance in PSYC3122 in Semester 1 2009:
Previous grades matter, and so do intrinsic motives re interest in subject matter, and attendance.

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Summary

This brief report summarises the results of analyses on students' final mark in PSYC3122, *Attitudes and Social Cognition*. The factors which were associated with better outcomes in psyc3122 were stronger 2nd year social and cognition background; intrinsic motives re interest in the subject matter; and regular attendance at classes and tutes.

Details

I distributed in-class questionnaires at 4 points during the semester to monitor attendance in the course and collect feedback from students. I also collect data about factors that I think might be related to performance to explore & improve my own pedagogy.

In the *first week*, I looked at students' degrees, aspiration for honours, and area of interest. At the end of the year, Arts students had lower final marks in PSYC3122 ($n=34$, $M=62$, $SD=12$) than students enrolled in other degrees ($n=50$, $M=70$ ish, $SD=12$ ish). I'm not sure why. I speculated that there are stronger pressures to achieve on the B.Psyc.Sci students, but it is also true that the Arts (and B.Sc.) students are under more pressure in 3rd year, because of the higher entry grade to get into honours at UQ if you're not in the B.Psyc.Sci. program. People who did and did not hope to do honours did equally well, which also surprised me. And grades also didn't differ depending on what area of psychology people were most interested in.

I also asked students what their hopes and expectations of the course were. Mentioning a specific mark or goal of improving understanding was not associated with outcomes, but people who mentioned that they were interested in the material or hoped to learn interesting things achieved higher marks ($n=24$, $M=71$, $SD=9$) than people who didn't talk about intrinsic motivations re interest ($n=44$, $M=64$, $SD=13$).

I also asked about previous background in 2nd year social psych and cognition. What I did was score people zero if they hadn't taken 2nd year social (or cognition) and then grades could range from 1 to 7 based on what they reported their grades to be. Focusing in on students who completed all assessment in the course, both 2nd year social grades ($r=.23$, $p=.037$) and cognition ($r=.30$, $p=.006$) were correlated with PSYC3122 final mark, though the amount of variance accounted for was quite small in each case. Both the difference in outcomes across degrees and the benefits of being interested in the material held when I covaried out 2nd year grades, however.

In *week 4*, I looked at attendance data (see below) as well as checking out perceived difficulty of the course so far, time slots signed up for and tutor, anxiety, evaluation of assessment, social contacts in class, and row seating. For these factors, I always looked at 2nd year grades as well and if necessarily controlled for them. None of these variables was a predictor of final year outcomes. Perceived difficulty of the course in Week 4 had no relation to final mark, and neither did Week 4 anxiety or feeling stressed about the first assignment. Tutor and tute timeslot were also unimportant (e.g., the Friday tutes are always smaller – would keeners be more likely to sign up for those? Would students in those tutes benefit uniquely? Apparently not.). Contrary to stereotypes (and some previous research), row # had no relation to final marks: students in the front rows scored no higher than the

guys up the back. ☺ Number of other students known by name was also unrelated to final mark (although interestingly it was associated with lower anxiety and perceived difficulty; I'd like to follow that up in future).

In *week 9*, in the third questionnaire, I looked at attendance as well as self-reported hours worked on the course, for paid employment, and in care-giving. There was no relation of any of these variables with final marks. When you consider that this means that people working full time hours or raising children were *not* dragged down in their marks by their other commitments, relative to students who were just devoting themselves to uni life, the finding seems like a tribute to the motivation and study skills of the former. It is disturbing that there is no direct relationship between working on 3122 for more hours and achieving higher grades, but that is consistent with past research as well. Following up what the characteristics are of those people whose study does translate into better marks is also a goal of mine in future years.

Finally, in the *last week* of class I focused in on anxiety and perceived preparation for the exam. Anxiety at this point was linked to lower final grades after the exam. I checked out if it was the case that people who scored low on the assignments were more anxious, and this was associated with low exam marks, but no: final week anxiety was linked to lower exam marks even controlling for Assignment marks. I find this anxiety effect disturbing, as a prof. Although it may have something to do with a guilty consciousness of not having done the readings, I think it also reflects detrimental effects of exam stress in good students.

In terms of the attendance data, both attending lectures ($r=.33$, $p=.006$) and attending tutes ($r=.23$, $p=.046$) were associated with higher marks. This is gratifying. However it turned out that attendance in tutes and lectures were correlated with higher 2nd year grades as well, and when all 4 variables were jointly entered in a regression equation there were no unique effects of attendance on final marks in PSYC3122 this year. I feel good about this null effect in some ways. In earlier years and in other courses, I found unique attendance effects and no correlation of attendance with 2nd year grades - which implied to me that some bright students were under-valuing regular attendance, and without Lectopia (the lecture podcasting which was introduced for the first time this Semester) they couldn't catch up. Now it appears that better students are making it a priority to attend regularly, which is consistent with the messages I've been delivering. I will continue to monitor the value of attendance in future years, and perhaps also ask questions directly about whether students who have missed class are using Lectopia successfully to compensate.

And that's it! Your comments and questions are welcome, to Winnifred Louis at 3346 9515 or by e-mail at w.louis@psy.uq.edu.au .