

43rd APS Annual Conference



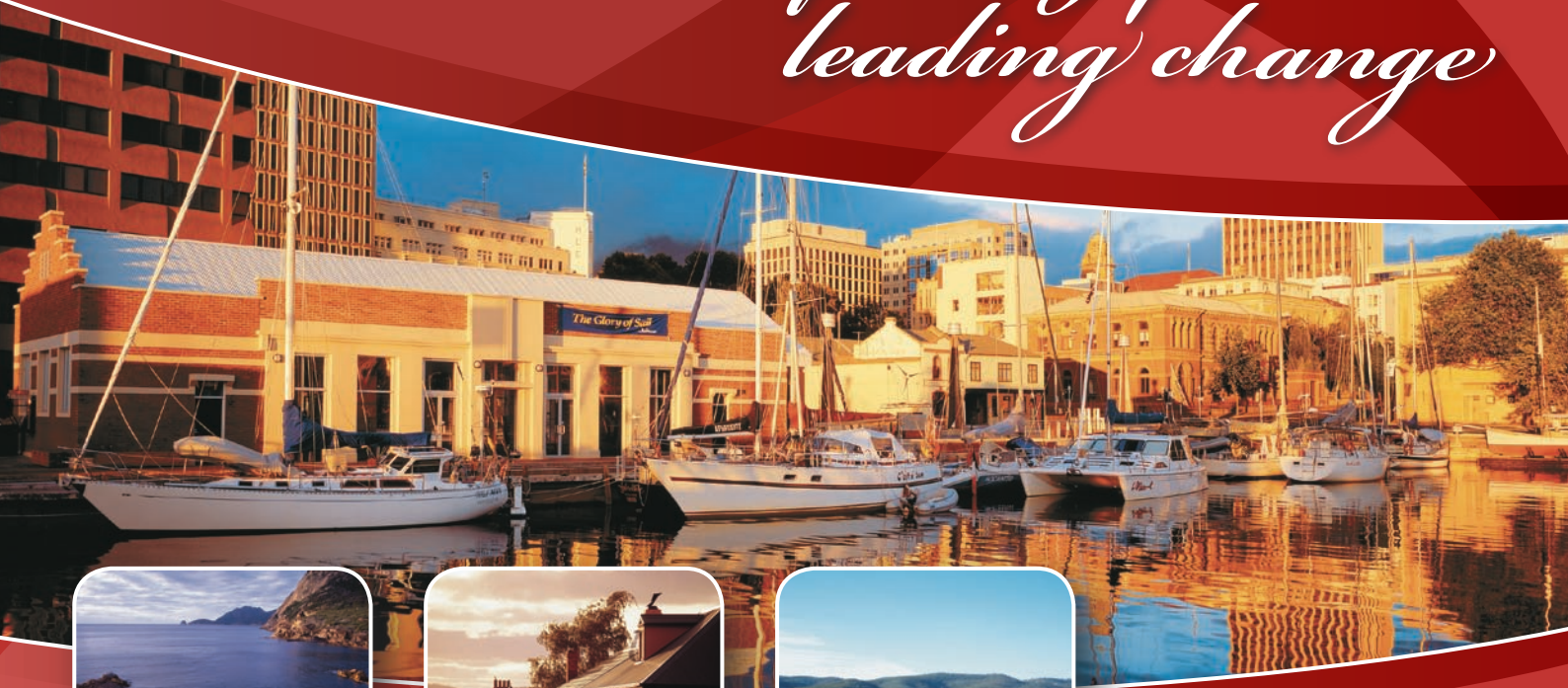
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Editors' Note and Acknowledgements

We are delighted to present the Proceedings of the 43rd Australian Psychological Society's (APS) Annual Conference, 23 - 27 September, 2008, and thank all contributors for the high caliber papers which were submitted. The contributions cover a very wide range of topics in psychology and it is pleasing to note the diversity of Australian psychological research which is reflected in this publication.

We would also like to take this opportunity to thank the many members who agreed to act as reviewers for the Proceedings submissions. All papers were subject to an independent, peer review process by two reviewers and, where necessary, by a third reviewer. We truly appreciate the heavy load that many reviewers shouldered to get the reviews completed in a rigorous and timely fashion and for this we offer our sincere thanks.

These Proceedings are published in 2008 and are available for purchase at the 43rd APS Annual Conference in Hobart and from the National Office in Melbourne.

A special thank you needs to be recorded here to Laura Warren and Joanne Howard who assisted with the administration, production and editing of this publication.

Nicholas Voudouris PhD MAPS & Vicky Mrowinski BBSoc (Hons)

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Table of Contents

Co-action in Human and Autonomous Platform Teams: A Dynamical Field Approach Eugene V. Aidman, Vladimir Ivancevic & Leong Yen	1
Word-length Effects in Backward Serial Recall and the Remember/Know Task Rosemary Baker & Gerry Tehan	6
The Plural Human Self Under Study: Development and Early Results from the Contextual Selves Inventory Godfrey T. Barrett-Lennard	11
Evaluation of the Better Outcomes in Mental Health Care Program Bridget Bassilios, Justine R. Fletcher, Jane E. Pirkis, Fay Kohn, Grant A. Blashki & Philip M. Burgess	16
Intercultural Communication Barriers, Contact Dimensions and Attitudes Towards International Students Jeanita M. Battye & Anita S. Mak	21
Individualism, Collectivism, and Voting Behaviour: A Pilot Study into the 2007 Australian Federal Election Gavin J. Beccaria, Michael Baczynski & Peter McIlveen	26
Oxytocin as a Mediator of the Unique Interoceptive Effects of 3,4-Methylenedioxymethamphetamine (MDMA, "Ecstasy") in the Rat Katherine Beringer & Jillian H. Broadbear	31
The Effect of You Can Do It! Education on the Emotional Resilience of Elementary School Students with Social, Emotional, Behavioural and Achievement Challenges Michael E. Bernard	36
The Social and Emotional Well-Being of Australian Children and Adolescents: The Discovery of "Levels" Michael E. Bernard	41
Psychologists' Cognitive and Emotional Responses to Working with Borderline Personality Disorder Clients Marianne E. Bourke & Brin F.S. Grenyer	46
The Impact of Belief Systems on Approval towards Heterosexual and Lesbian Couples Accessing Assisted Reproductive Technology (ART) Patricia M. Brown, Jo Coaldrake, Raechel Fowler & Cindy Steele	51
Ecstasy (methylenedioxymethamphetamine) Addiction: Dependence, but not as we know it? Raimondo Bruno, Allison Matthews, Louisa Degenhardt & Rapson Gomez	56

Circadian Rest/activity Rhythms as Predictors of Mood in a Small Sample of Outpatients with Bipolar Disorder	
Ben Bullock, Greg Murray, Eus J.W. Van Someren & Fiona Judd	61
What Makes a Happy Cop? Longitudinal Predictors of Police Officer Well-being	
Karena J. Burke, Douglas Paton & Jane Shakespeare-Finch	66
The Relationships between Learning Approaches, Personality, and Academic Success: School Leavers versus Nonschool Leavers	
Lorelle J. Burton & Liria Ropolo	71
Wellbeing in Long-term Primary Carers: Biopsychosocial Outcomes	
Jane Buschkens, Deborah Graham & David Cottrell	76
Objective Tests of Movement Imagery Predict Movement Skill Performance	
John Callanan & Peter H. Wilson	81
Social Comparison Processes, Prototypes and Exercise	
Marie L. Caltabiano & Nassim Ghafari	86
Interhemispheric Asymmetries in the Processing of Biological Motion Cues	
Alira Capararo, Anna Brooks, Glenn Davey & Ricky van der Zwan	91
Learning to Use a Computer Spreadsheet Application: The Effectiveness of Error Management and Counterfactual Thinking Training Strategies	
Peter Caputi, Amy Y.C. Chan, Frances De Blasio, Kathryn Baudinette & Keren Wolstencroft	96
Pain Sensitivity Following Induced Stress in Headache Sufferers	
Stuart Cathcart	101
Preschool Children's Counterfactual Inferences: The Casual Length Effect Revisited	
Amy Y.C. Chan & Jessica C. Scott	105
The Effect of Counterfactual Priming on Women's Decisions Regarding Mammography Screening	
Amy Y.C. Chan, Jing Wang & Peter Caputi	110
From Distress to Success: Teaching Coping Skills to Secondary Students with Few Resources	
Nicholas Clark, Chelsea Eacott & Erica Frydenberg	115
The Relationship between Bullying, School Climate, and Tolerance to Human Diversity	
Thomas Clifopoulos & Rivka T. Witenberg	120
Future Directions in Alcohol Use Disorder Treatment Research	
Jason Connor	125
Modelling the Experience of Trauma in a White-Australian Sample	
Alicia Copping	130
Australian Baby Boom Career Women Reject 'Retirement' and Embrace 'Re-evolvement'	
Lyn Courtney, Nerina Caltabiano & Marie Caltabiano	135

The Impact of Spinal Cord Injury on Psychological Status Ashley Craig, Yvonne Tran & James Middleton	140
Critical Readings and Writing (CRW) in First -year Psychology: Mass Screening and Targeted Assistance Jacquelyn Cranney, Gwyn Jones, Sue Morris, Sue Starfield, Kristy Martire, Ben Newell & Kwan Wong	145
Cognitive Errors and Perfectionism in Children: Construct Validity of the Adaptive/Maladaptive Perfectionism Scale Melissa C. Davis & Nicole L. Wosinski	149
Y's, X's, & Boomers: Do they Differ with Respect to Critical Organisational Variables Barry J. Fallon & Catherine Caballero	154
Improving the Validity of Self-Ratings of Abilities: The Impact of Rating Format and Order Ying Fong, Joanne Earl & Peter H. Langford	159
Is There a Basis for the Notion of Athletic Identity? Lisa Fraser, Gerard Fogarty & Majella Albion	164
Binge Drinking in Young Australians: The Underlying Beliefs, Prediction of and Cluster Analysis Tanya L. Gilmartin & Rivka T. Witenberg	169
Does Deployment to a Remote Cape York Community Affect Police? Delphine J. Hannigan & Jeff Patrick	174
The Horizontal and Vertical Components of Apparent Length: Distal Spatial Perception and the Müller-Lyer Illusion Kavi Jayasinghe & Ross H. Day	179
Motives and Health: Self-Directedness as a Moderator of the Relationship between Incongruence of Implicit and Self-Attributed Achievement Motives and Depression Janice Langan-Fox, James M. Canty & Michael Sankey	184
Development of a Survey that Supports Two, Three and Five Meta-Categories of Leadership Behaviour Peter H. Langford & Ying Fong	189
Emerging Adulthood in Australia: The Role of Psychosocial Factors Monica S. Lederman & Roslyn Galligan	194
Sociocultural Competency Training for Migrants in a Job Placement Program Anita S. Mak & Michelle C. Barker	199
Engagement with the Learning Process in First-Year Psychology Classes Frances Martin & Andrea Adam	204
How Does the Parent-Child Relationship Account for Gender Differences in Children's Anxiety? Mandy Matthewson, Rosanne Burton Smith & Iain Montgomery	209

I quit! Leadership and Satisfaction with the Volunteer Firefighter Role: Resignations and Organisational Responses	214
Jim McLennan, Adrian Birch, Sean Cowlshaw & Peter Hayes	
“I did not ‘Choke’!”: Introducing a Preliminary Self-Presentation Model of “Choking” in Sport	219
Christopher Mesagno	
Relationships Between Age, Executive Function and Driving Behaviour	224
Lara J. Morris & Steve J. Dawson	
An Interpretative Phenomenological Investigation of Adjustment and Posttraumatic Growth after a Diagnosis of Haematological Malignancy	229
Bronwyn A. Morris, Jane Shakespeare-Finch & Jennifer L. Scott	
Strategies that Enhance Student Engagement during the Teaching of Statistics in Psychology Programs	234
David L. Neumann, Michelle Hood & Michelle M. Neumann	
The Long Cold Night: Comparing Expeditioner and Partner Experiences During Antarctic Absences	239
Kimberly Norris, Douglas Paton & Jeff Ayton	
Life Regrets and Subjective Well-being in Older Adults	244
Ann E. O'Brien & Anthony P. Thompson	
The Idealisation of Thin Figures and Appearance Concerns in Middle School Children	249
Sally Patrick-Hobbins & Vivienne Lewis	
Gay and Heterosexual Men who act as Known Sperm Donors: Expectations and Implications	254
Damien W. Riggs	
Attitudes of Lesbians and Gay Men Toward Lesbian and Gay Parents	259
Damien W. Riggs, Suzanne McLaren & Alys Mayes	
Emotional and Behavioural Problems of Children Referred to a Child Development Unit	264
Rachel M. Roberts & Anna Boynton	
Development and Initial Validation of the Brazil Mood Scale	269
Izabel C.P. de M. Rohlf, Izabel Miranda, Peter C. Terry, Tatiana Marcela Rotta, Caroline Di B. Luft, Alexandro Andrade, Ruy J. Krebs, Tales de Carvalho & Cristina A. Iizuka	
Quality of Life Among Cancer Survivors who Provide Peer Support	274
Caroline Schwerkolt & Kathleen A. Moore	
Interference in Visual Memory for Abstract Stimuli and Everyday Objects	279
Rhonda Shaw & Jody Turner	
Humour Effects upon Stress and Well-being	283
Nicole M. Smith & John B. Gross	

Family History of Breast Cancer, Health Beliefs and Knowledge in the Practice of Breast Self-examination Jennifer Stephan & Richard Hicks	288
Mood and Anxiety Scores Predict Winning and Losing Performances in Tennis Peter C. Terry & Angus Munro	293
Psychometric Re-evaluation of the Revised Version of the Competitive State Anxiety Inventory-2 Peter C. Terry & Angus Munro	298
Knowledge, Beliefs and Attitudes about Stroke and Stroke Prevention Among the Greek and Vietnamese Older People Trang Thomas	303
Neurophysiological Changes Associated with Spinal Cord Injury: A Study of Brain Activity and Cognitive Function Nirupama Wijesuriya, Yvonne Tran & Ashley Craig	308
Identifying the Attitudinal, Normative, and Control Beliefs Underlying Psychologists' Willingness to Integrate Complementary and Alternative Therapies into Psychological Practice Lee-Ann M. Wilson & Katherine M. White	313
Predicting Participation in a Volunteering Event Amongst Church Members: Ingroup Identification and the Theory of Planned Behaviour Lucy Zinkiewicz & Lisa Derham	318

Critical Reading and Writing (CRW) in First-year Psychology: Mass Screening and Targeted Assistance

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Abstract

Many beginning students struggle with their university study because their high-school experience did not yield the basic or academic literacy skills essential to tertiary learning activities. A diagnostic program was designed to identify and assist students in developing psychology-specific academic literacy skills in the large Introductory Psychology 1A course at UNSW. In an early lecture period, all students were required to make a written response to a text passage (CRW test). This test required them to take and argue a position. Trained assessors marked their responses according to a number of criteria that ranged from spelling and grammar to the logic of their argument (the position taken was irrelevant). The bottom-scoring 59 students were then contacted and offered special tutorials to assist them with writing their laboratory report. Following these, a second CRW test was offered to the assisted group of students as well as to a control group of students (a second chance to make up percentage points). Students who participated in the tutorials showed improvement on some, but not all, assessment criteria. The implications of these findings are discussed in terms of discipline vs. non-discipline-

specific assessment criteria, and in terms of a cost-benefit analysis of the exercise.

Introduction

The most vital challenges for students in their first year of study are to grasp the expectations of university, and to experience a sense of belonging (McInnis, James, & McNaught, 1995). Effective transition also requires students to develop the skills that they will need to engage successfully in university study. The usual large first-year class context does not easily lend itself to develop such skills, and the immense diversity of the student population increases the complexity of teaching.

In attempting to assist first-year students in their transition, we targeted the development of essential academic literacy skills that are “assumed knowledge” in all beginning students, but which are sometimes lacking given the heterogeneous academic and personal backgrounds of students in large introductory classes (Starfield, Trahn, & Scoufis, 2004). In particular, a significant minority of students fails the initial written assessment in the first-year psychology course. These

students fail to demonstrate the minimum entry-level requirements in the skill areas of critical reading and writing, and are at risk of failing any course that requires such skills (Wade, 1995).

The objectives of this enabling program were to identify the students who are at risk of failing writing assignments through a Measuring the Academic Skills of University Students (MASUS) approach (Bonanno & Jones, 1997). This approach provides an opportunity to identify areas needing improvement, especially in critical reading and writing skills in discipline specific programs. Thus, the aim was to bolster academic literacy skills, and to evaluate the effectiveness of the program. It was expected that the enabling program participants would show a significant gain in their critical reading and writing capacity.

Method

The performance of 77 students (mean age 20.40, $SD = 3.74$; 36 male and 41 females, with approximately equal gender composition in each group) from the 2006 Psychology 1A cohort were examined in this study. We devised an assessment exercise and a marking scheme that involved critical reading and writing on a relevant topic in psychology. Essentially, students were asked to respond to a particular passage (ie contrasting nature-nurture interpretations of teenagers' antisocial behaviour). The responses were marked by a trained group of assessors according to specific criteria (eg use of source material, structure and development of answer, control of academic writing, grammar, and presentation). The application of this exercise (pre-program) in a lecture session during the third week of semester led to the identification of 59 at-risk students out of 816 students. We encouraged those students, through assessment consequences, to participate in a specially designed 5-week tutorial program in report writing integrating critical reading and writing skills in psychology. This focus was based on the next individual writing activity in the course. The at-risk students were also required to undertake a second CRW test (post-program, using a similar question format with different content).

Of the 59 at-risk students, 28 participated in one of two available one-hour tutorial classes (**Tutorial Group**) from Week 6 to 10, where they received a highly structured and active learning program. This program first interrogated their initial CRW test responses, and then supported their writing of the major written assignment in the course. This assignment was a partial-research report (title, abstract, introduction, method and references). Twelve students could not attend at the set tutorial times due to timetable clashes. These students were emailed the materials created for the Tutorial Group, and were asked to undertake some related exercises (**Email Group**). Thus, these students were not as comprehensively supported as those in the

Tutorial Group. Nineteen at-risk students did not respond to the request (**No-Support Group**). Eighteen students who had not failed the test volunteered to undertake the CRW re-test in exchange for course credit (**Control Group**). Missing data precludes precision, but the indication was that, on average, 75% of the at risk students were non-English speaking students, in comparison to 27% of the Control group, and 35% of the entire Psychology 1A course (preliminary analyses indicated significant differences.)

In a quasi-experimental design, the different groups constituted the pre-existing grouping variable. The dependent variable of improved critical reading and writing was indexed by (a) relative gains across the CRW test and re-test, (b) half-research report mark, and (c) final exam performance. We also report additional evaluative and motivational data as indices of the students' satisfaction with the program.

Results and Discussion

CRW Tests As can be seen in Figure 1, the pre-program mean CRW test score of the Control Group was above the pass level (6), but below the pass level for the at-risk groups (by definition). There appeared to be less group differentiation for the post-program CRW test scores, with all at-risk groups appearing to improve, while the Control Group appears to show a decrease in performance. This overall pattern was supported by a main effect for group, $F(3,73) = 29.82, p < .01$, and a significant Group x CRW Test interaction, $F(3,73) = 10.25, p < .01$. Pair-wise, Pre vs Post CRW comparisons revealed that all at-risk groups improved (No-support: $t(1) = 3.52$; Email: $t(1) = 2.26$; Tutorial: $t(1) = 2.13$; all $p < .05$), while the Control Group showed a decrease in performance ($t(1) = 3.51, p < .05$). There was a significant group effect for post-program CRW performance, with Tukey tests revealing that, contrary to expectation, there were no differences amongst the at-risk groups in the post-program scores, indicating that the Tutorial Group did not perform better than the Email Group, and the Email Group did not perform better than the No-Support Group. On the basis of these data alone, one would have to conclude that the program had no impact on the critical reading and writing ability of the at-risk students. It should be noted that the CRW re-test was worth 2.5% of the final grade for at-risk students, and the control students gained 0.8% for research participation credit: these differences in assessment weighting may have translated into differences in motivation to do well on this re-test.

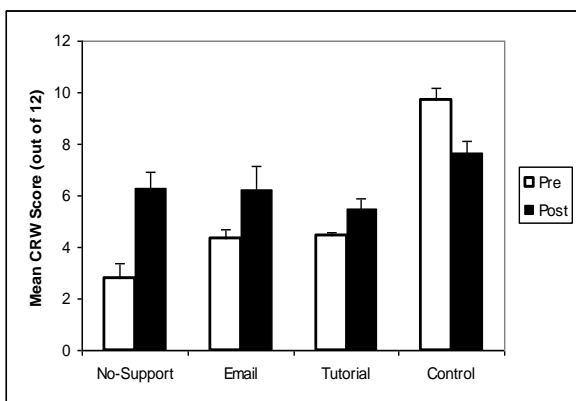


Figure 1. Pre and Post CRW scores for each group. Error bars represent the standard errors.

Research Reports Figure 2 indicates the expected differences amongst the at-risk groups. The group effect was significant, $F(3,73) = 4.27, p < .05$, and Tukey tests revealed that those students who participated in the tutorials (Tutorial Group) performed significantly better than those at-risk students who did not receive any assistance (No-Support), but not significantly better than those who received just the email support (Email). Thus, it could be argued that some kind of targeted assistance appears to be having an impact on at-risk students' grades on a major piece of assessment (worth 20% of final course grade).

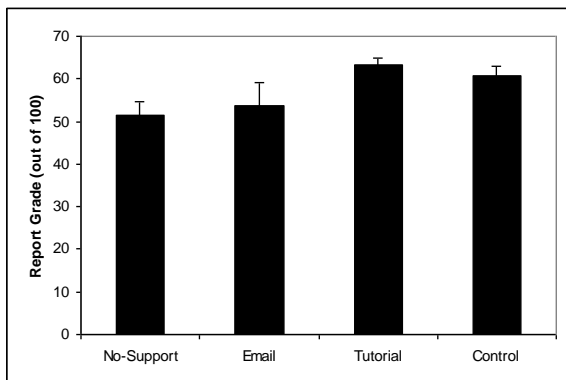


Figure 2. Mean report grade for each group. Error bars represent the standard errors.

Final Examination Figure 3 indicates the expected pattern of findings for the at-risk students—that is, it was expected that receiving some academic support during session would have a positive effect on the performance of at-risk students for the final exam. There was a significant group main effect, $F(3, 73) = 4.28, p < .01$, and Tukey tests revealed that both No-support and Email groups performed significantly worse than the Control Group; however, the Tutorial Group performance was not significantly different from

that of the Control Group. This pattern of findings suggests that the face-to-face class contact received during the tutorials improved academic skills which generalized to the exam, and/or had a motivating effect on these at-risk students.

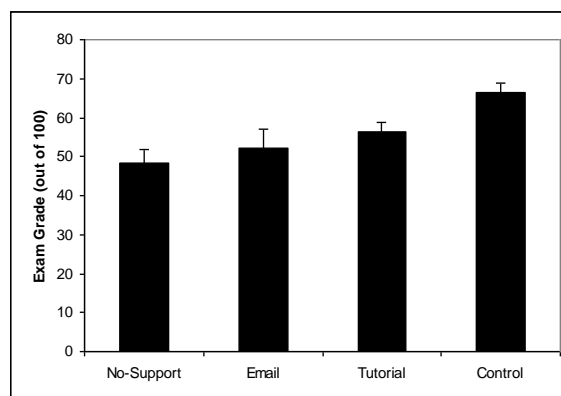


Figure 3. Mean exam grade for each group. Error bars represent the standard errors.

Other Indicators The possibility that the final exam grade was influenced by increased motivation in the Tutorial Group was investigated by examination of the number of hours of research participation engaged in by the students (5 hours are compulsory, 5 hours optional for extra course credit, for a total of 8% of the final course grade). There was a significant group main effect, $F(3,73) = 3.36, p < .01$, and Tukey tests revealed that both Email and Tutorial groups performed significantly better than the No-Support Group.

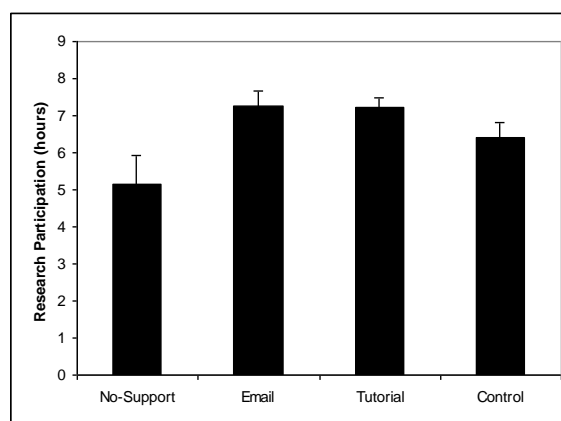


Figure 4. Mean number of research participation hours for each group. Error bars represent the standard errors.

All six (of 28) of the Tutorial students who completed the final evaluation thought the tutorial program was “very useful” (vs useful, of limited use, of no use). In comparison, of the six (of 12) Email students, one indicated “very useful”, 3 indicated “useful”, and 2 indicated “of no use”. That is, the evaluating Tutorial

students gave very high ratings of the program. Finally, it should be noted that the percentage of Tutorial students enrolling in the follow-on course, Psychology 1B, in the second session of the year, was 21% for No-Support, 42% for Email, 43% for Tutorial, and 61% for Control Groups, and a Chi-square analysis, $\chi^2=6.37$, $p<.05$, indicated that the difference lay in the lower enrolment level of the No-Support Group.

Conclusions

One overwhelming outcome of the program has been the increased awareness of, demand for, and involvement in courses offered by the Learning Centre not only by the identified students, but also by those whose reading and writing skills met the basic level of competency. A further consequence of this program was that better ways of teaching report writing were identified during the special tutorials that were then integrated into the following year's mainstream teaching in first-year psychology.

It should be noted that the Learning Centre staff observed a significant improvement in the structure, development of argument and clarity of written expression with the Tutorial students' written assignment, despite the lack of strong differences between the Tutorial and other at-risk groups on some of the indicators. The fact that the Email group appeared to significantly benefit by the lesser form of support suggests that the design of future support programs should take this into account as a less costly form of support, although there may be less generalisation of academic achievement to other assessment forms, such as the final examination (see Krause, 2005). This study, like all quasi-experimental studies, suffered from the potential for confounding variables and consequent alternative explanations (eg the poor performance of the No-Support students may have been associated more directly with other factors such as high levels of personal life stress). Moreover, the underlying mechanisms for the differential improvement of the Tutorial Group need investigation. For example, given the high percentage of non-native English students in the at-risk groups, improvement in psychology-contextualized English language may have mediated that effect. In addition, there were small numbers in some comparison groups. Nevertheless, these findings are promising, and support the potential worth of further MASUS testing with improved follow-up support programs for at-risk students.

Acknowledgments

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