


# A Teaching Innovation Project on Writing Critical Essays in a *History of Psychology* Course

Teaching of Psychology  
2021, Vol. 0(0) 1–7  
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DOI: 10.1177/00986283211030909  
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## Abstract

**Background:** Since its integration into the European Higher Education Area, the Spanish educational system has evolved, introducing innovations into university teaching methodologies. This new approach entails the development of capacities, competencies, and skills that enable students to develop their critical thinking.

**Objective:** This work aims to present an innovation project conducted in a *History of Psychology* course, part of the Degree in Psychology in the Spanish university system.

**Method:** The current study was launched to evaluate the effectiveness of the Teaching Innovation Project, which itself arose from the need for students to improve their critical essay writing skills, incorporating such evidence-based methodologies as explicit instructions, online platforms, collaborative peer work, and rubrics.

**Results:** A comparison of outcomes among three cohorts showed a marked improvement in student performance on critical essays and final exam scores after implementing new methodologies.

**Conclusion:** It is possible to improve students' critical essay writing skills in the context of the *History of Psychology* through the intentional implementation of evidence-based practices, changing the pedagogical focus from teacher-centered to student-centered.

**Teaching implications:** Psychology instructors who teach courses with writing skill development as a course goal could consider incorporating elements of the Teaching Innovation Project program.

## Keywords

innovation, writing to learn, critical essay, psychology, higher education

The Spanish university system has been evolving since its integration into the European Higher Education Area in 1999, bringing innovative processes into the methodologies of university teaching. This new approach goes beyond learning knowledge and skills to learning competencies. Among these, critical thinking is one of the most important because it is linked to an active process of reflection and is the basis of other skills, both academic and interpersonal (Correa et al., 2003). To develop critical thinking, it seems essential to develop effective reading and writing skills (Britt et al., 2014). Essay writing is of particular interest to higher education stakeholders because it has been considered a tool with the potential to transform learning (Tynjälä et al., 2001). Likewise, the act of writing in collaboration facilitates the development of thought, the relating of information with prior knowledge, and a deeper understanding of the content (Nykopp et al., 2014).

We present here an evaluation of a Teaching Innovation Project (TIP) carried out in a *History of Psychology* (HP) course, one of the first subjects that students take when entering our university. It serves as an introductory course for the Degree in Psychology, intended to provide students with a historical perspective of the field. This subject also aims to develop the students' critical thinking about psychology, helping them to

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know the past to critique the present. The goal of the project was to improve how we teach students to write critical essays.

## Writing as a Learning Tool

Knowledge acquisition is commonly supported through writing assignments. Indeed, the “writing to learn” movement makes explicit the idea that writing can be conceived as a way of learning, activating psychological processes through interaction with different content areas and contexts, and ultimately improving students’ knowledge (e.g., Klein & Boscolo, 2016). However, the success of using writing as a learning tool depends on the instructor’s purpose behind the writing task, along with how students understand and carry out the instructions (Langer & Applebee, 1987; Newell, 1984; Tynjälä, 2001). In this regard, the purpose of such assignments should be to make explicit the student’s thinking and to establish relationships with other ideas or perspectives (Klein, 1999), which would lead to the transformation of knowledge (Bereiter & Scardamalia, 1987).

Although writing is generally considered an individual activity, students often write collaboratively in academic contexts. Work in groups is commonplace in higher education when students co-create presentations, research projects, and other such assignments (Prichard et al., 2006; Wigglesworth & Storch, 2012). Collaborative writing tasks offer students the opportunity to reflect collectively (Mauri et al., 2011), put thoughts into words, express points of view, contrast them with those of others, give and receive feedback, and generate new ideas (Johnson & Johnson, 2009; Storch, 2005). If the task is carried out in a manner that takes advantage of collaborative input, students benefit from the contributions of others in their learning and in task success.

## Source-Based Critical Essay as Teaching Methodology

One of the objectives of the HP course is to give students an understanding of highly theoretical psychological texts by the renowned authors in the HP. Historical thought requires an awareness of temporality that relates the past to the present and looks to the future. Only when students write from this perspective will it be possible to interpret historical sources and the information they contain (Monfort et al., 2011). Among the various writing activities that are potential learning tools, the critical essay was selected for this purpose.

Commenting on historical texts implies reading primary theoretical sources by authors whose intentions and historical context are not always clear to contemporary readers; this process requires acting as a historian in certain ways. The task of writing a critical essay based on the reading of historical works may, without explicit instruction, result in mere reproduction or paraphrasing of the same ideas, involving little or no elaboration of thought and a poor historical understanding of the text. This task involves a certain degree of problem-solving

since it requires extracting relevant data while disregarding the irrelevant. In this way, writing from original sources requires the capacity for critical thinking and to adopt a position regarding the text (Molina et al., 2011). The cognitive and metacognitive processes involved in writing a source-based essay generate higher-order thought processes. These processes refer to reading, writing, and learning that enable reasoning, questioning, and hypothesizing about sources (Tynjälä, 2001). Teaching students to engage critically with a historical text, and finding its relevance to contemporary times, is an excellent opportunity to develop knowledge and understanding.

However, despite the potential benefits to learning, critical essay writing is not a habitual practice in Spanish universities (Solé et al., 2005) and, when assigned, can pose a significant challenge to university students (Castelló et al., 2012). The most frequently reported difficulties have been in understanding the writing task, identifying the arguments within academic texts, integrating arguments from various sources, or the process of composing argumentative texts (Bañales & Vega, 2016; Mateos et al., 2018; Segev-Miller, 2004).

## The Teaching Innovation Project

This project was designed in response to the demands of teachers of the HP course during the academic year 2016/2017, during which teachers observed that students experienced difficulties in writing critical essays as part of the practical coursework that contributed to the final course grade. In addition, the final exam, in addition to multiple-choice questions, included a critical essay writing task based on a historical text. Across these assessments, and consistent with prior research (e.g., Segev Miller, 2007), the most frequent difficulties were related to the comprehension of academic texts and writing a coherent critical essay that interpreted and exposed the opinions of the authors of the texts assigned for the course.

This led to the design of a specific program to teach students to write critical essays, changing the pedagogical focus from teacher-centered to student-centered (Benito & Cruz, 2005), within the framework of an institution-based TIP. This project was carried out as a final project for the Master’s degree in Teaching Innovation by an HP teacher, also an author of this article. In the current work, we describe the results of the changes in teaching methodology designed to improve student learning outcomes.

The aims of the TIP were to (a) teach students to read and understand historical texts; (b) write collaborative critical essays, integrating the author’s ideas with their own personal reflections; and (c) evaluate the differences in student performance on critical essays and the final exam after introducing the new teaching methodologies. To determine if the changes introduced made a difference in student outcomes, we carried out a retrospective study of three academic year cohorts. Students in the first cohort (academic year 2016/2017) wrote critical essays using the traditional methodology (pre-TIP). The subsequent two cohorts (2017/2018 and 2018/2019)

experienced the new TIP-based methodologies aimed at improving student learning outcomes.

## Method

### Participants

The project was conducted with first-year students enrolled in the HP course at the Autonomous University of Madrid. We randomly selected a sample from each of three academic years, with the final sample consisting of 202 first-year psychology students who completed the HP course. Specifically, 65 students (85.3% women and 14.7% men) participated in 2016/2017, 66 (86.7% women and 13.3% men) in 2017/2018, and 71 students (80.3% women and 19.7% men) in 2018/2019. The three cohorts were comparable, given that the conditions for access to psychology studies at the university are stable.

### Materials and Procedure

At the end of the 2016/2017 academic year, once the difficulties were identified, the teachers decided to introduce specific changes in instructional methodologies to develop students' skills in writing critical essays, giving rise to the TIP. Before the TIP, critical essay teaching was provided in a single traditional teaching session. The teacher explained how to write a critical essay on a historical text, aimed at (1) understanding the text and the most important theoretical concepts; (2) identifying the structure of main ideas of the text; (3) relating them to the socio-cultural context of the author's time; (4) producing a critical opinion on the impact of the main ideas of the text on later psychology; and, finally, (5) offering an opinion on the merit of these ideas and what they mean for them. Students were then asked to write three critical essays in the next three class sessions as practice.

Because this traditional way of teaching was not effective for effective critical writing, as part of the TIP, the teaching team incorporated evidence-based methodologies to support students in reaching these five goals, and to gradually give students control over their own learning, shifting the pedagogical focus from teacher-centered to student-centered. The TIP methodologies included in this project were the following:

1. *Analysis of students' initial competence for effective scaffolding:* The first critical essay was written without any instructions, and though not scored, the results were used to adapt the subsequent instruction to explicitly address the students' needs.
2. *Explicit instruction on the steps to prepare a critical essay:* During three face-to-face sessions, the teacher explained the steps based on the model by Rosa et al. (1998), supported by a PowerPoint presentation. This model proposes that students approach the text through the eyes of a historian. According to Hayden White (1987), there are three approaches to history: description, explanation, and interpretation. Using this model,

students were asked to provide an initial *descriptive* analysis of the text, its lexicon, and argumentative structure. For this, they had to locate the text historically and identify the voices of the authors. Students were then asked to *explain* the principal ideas and theoretical discourse, framing them within the personal, social, and historical context in which the work was written. Finally, students were asked to *interpret* the text and the author's ideas, to give an evaluation and critical analysis, placing it within the present context. In these sessions, the aim was not only to produce a critical essay with the structure and content indicated but also to identify and analyze the most common difficulties. Students were also taught techniques to work effectively in pairs.

3. *Practice in pairs:* After explicit instruction, students were asked to write three critical essays in pairs in three different sessions as homework. The purpose was to take advantage of the benefits of peer collaboration.
4. *Learning Management System to coordinate assignments and provide feedback:* We used Moodle, an online platform that provides a free and open-source learning management system for educators. This software allows students to keep track of their learning materials and progress. As each critical essay was assigned as homework, Moodle was used to facilitate evaluation, and correction, with individualized feedback used to both identify areas for improvement and positive aspects of each essay. Additionally, instructors produced a *written guide* based on Rosa et al.'s (1998) model for each historical text, available for students to read on Moodle after each critical essay was submitted. Guides provided feedback on the essential aspects that each critical essay should contain.
5. *Rubric for clear grading criteria:* Because it is a best practice for students to be aware of the assessment process, a *rubric* based on Rosa et al. (1998) was created to facilitate scoring and provide students with evaluation criteria. It is composed of five levels (identification, description, explanation, interpretation, and drafting and coherence of the text), which are each scored on a three-grade scale (0: not achieved; 0.05: partially achieved; and 0.1: fully achieved). Elements of the rubric were established and agreed upon by all the teachers of the HP course. All critical essays included in this study were evaluated by the same teacher using the same rubric. The materials used for this project (i.e., texts, PowerPoint presentation, writing guide, and rubric) are available online in Open Science Format (Granado-Peinado & Huertas, 2021).

The project was carried out over seven sessions, including face-to-face class meetings and remote, asynchronous work sessions. Table 1 provides a detailed summary of the HP course sessions, before and during implementation of the TIP methodology.

AQ1

AQ2

**Table 1.** Class Session Activities Before and During the TIP.

	Pre-TIP	TIP
Session 0	Not applicable	Write an individual critical essay as homework, without any instructions (pre-essay, not scored)
Session 1	Traditional class on writing a critical essay	Explicit instruction in steps for writing a critical essay, adapted to the students' needs, and presentation and explanation of the rubric
Session 2	Practice in pairs as homework (essay 1)	Practice in pairs as homework (essay 1) and individualized feedback via Moodle
Session 3	Practice in pairs as homework (essay 2)	Explicit instruction in strategies for effective collaboration
Session 4	Practice in pairs as homework (essay 3)	Practice in pairs as homework (essay 2) and individualized feedback via Moodle
Session 5	Not applicable	Explicit instruction including general feedback on the writing process, identification of recurring difficulties, and resolution of students' questions
Session 6	Not applicable	Practice in pairs as homework (essay 3) and individualized feedback via Moodle

TIP = Teaching Innovation Project.

## Results

To measure the effectiveness of the TIP methodology, critical essays 1, 2, and 3 were assessed after each session according to the rubric. We also included final exam scores as an outcome measure.

Table 2 shows the means and standard deviations of the rubric scores obtained by the students in their critical essays, according to their academic year. The table also includes the final exam scores for the HP course, transformed to scores ranging from 0 to 10.

To determine if there were statistically significant differences between average critical essay scores in each cohort, a one-way ANOVA was performed. The results revealed a statistically significant effect of academic year  $F(2,199) = 331.76$ ,  $MSe = 7.91$ ;  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta^2 = .77$ . A Bonferroni test showed that 2016/2017 (pre-TIP) students produced poorer critical essays than those of the following (post-TIP) academic years: 2017/2018,  $t(113.8) = 30.11$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $d = -5.25$ ; and 2018/2019,  $t(97.99) = 21.77$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $d = -3.63$ . There was no difference between the 2017/2018 and 2018/2019 cohorts,  $p = .744$ .

To further investigate the results, a mixed-factor ANOVA was conducted with academic year as the between-subjects factor and essay (the three practice essays) as the within-subjects factor. We found a main effect of essay,  $F(2,199) = 253.14$ ,  $MSe = 134.59$ ;  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta^2 = .56$ , of academic year  $F(2,199) = 331.76$ ,  $MSe = 263.80$ ;  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta^2 = .77$ , and also a significant interaction,  $F(2,199) = 52.76$ ,  $MSe = 28.05$ ;  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta^2 = .35$ . Bonferroni contrasts showed no significant differences between the three critical essay practices in the 2016/2017 academic year,  $p = .221$ , but statistically significant differences in the 2017/2018,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta^2 = .59$ , and 2018/2019,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta^2 = .24$ . In other words, in the first academic year, before the TIP methodology was implemented, there was no improvement in the quality of critical essays throughout the sessions. In subsequent years, the quality of essays did improve after receiving the training.

Additionally, an ANOVA was performed to examine the differences in final exam scores among cohorts. A main effect for the academic year factor was found,  $F(2,199) = 84.023$ ,

**Table 2.** Means (Standard Deviations) of the Three Essays and Final Exam Score by Academic Year.

	Pre-TIP	TIP	TIP
	2016/2017	2017/2018	2018/2019
Essay 1	6.60 (.42)	7.55 (.73)	7.90 (1.33)
Essay 2	6.70 (.59)	9.08 (.85)	8.83 (.88)
Essay 3	6.75 (.72)	9.53 (.53)	9.23 (.63)
Mean essay	6.68 (.65)	8.72 (.69)	8.65 (.93)
Final exam	5.08 (1.64)	8.08 (1.33)	7.96 (1.54)

Note. Scores are presented on a scale ranging from 0 to 10. TIP = Teaching Innovation Project.

$MSe = 190.964$ ;  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta^2 = .46$ . Comparisons with the Bonferroni test showed differences between the first year (2016/2017) and 2017/2018,  $t(120.52) = -12.78$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $d = -2.24$ , and also 2018/2019,  $t(134) = -11.85$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $d = -2.03$ . No differences were found between the two post-TIP academic years ( $p = 1.00$ ). In conclusion, the students who received these new methodologies obtained higher scores in the final exam than those who received traditional teaching.

Finally, we performed a Pearson correlation coefficient analysis to determine if there was a relationship between the total critical essay score and the final exam score. A statistically significant positive correlation was found in all students,  $r(200) = .579$ ,  $p < .001$ , yet when we ran the analysis specifically by cohort, it became clear that there were positive correlations for the 2017/2018 students,  $r(64) = .28$ ,  $p = .024$ , and for the 2018/2019 students,  $r(69) = .39$ ,  $p = .001$ , but not for the 2016/2017 cohort  $r(63) = .10$ ;  $p = .386$ . These results show that higher scores in writing critical essays are linked to higher scores in the final exam, but only for the students receiving the TIP methodologies.

## Discussion

Universities have the responsibility to provide students with skills and competencies for critical thinking, enabling them to understand and reflect on the changing society in which they

live (Correa et al., 2003). The capacity for critical thinking is improved by developing argumentative skills and having a historical perspective in understanding how and why science evolves and changes. Though critical thinking skills can be acquired through reading, they are also improved through the practice of writing essays, by weighing arguments and integrating them into an original text (Britt et al., 2014; Granado-Peinado et al., 2019; Mateos et al., 2018).

The ability to express oneself effectively in writing is an essential skill that must be further developed at the university level, but we cannot assume that students know how to do it (Thomas, 2014). Written communication is a transversal competence in all university education and should be a central focus of academic interest and leads to innovative teaching methodologies designed to improve this skill.

Our work has shown how teaching students to write critical essays, following an evidence-based method, can improve students' understanding of historical texts and, consequently, their learning in the HP course. Essay writing involves three constructive activities: reading, writing, and learning. When students write a critical essay, the focus is not on memorizing but on reasoning, that is, questioning, hypothesizing, meta-commenting, and using schemata and citing evidence, among other active critical thinking processes (Tynjälä, 2001).

The TIP methodology begins with identifying student needs by a thorough evaluation of initial writing skills. This is followed by a scaffolded intervention program that gradually gives students control over their own learning sustained by collaborative work. Explicit instructions are accompanied by feedback on the quality of the students' work through Moodle, helping to orient their activities and writing process, always guided by a rubric. This methodology helps transfer the focus of learning critical essay writing, initially centered on the teacher, onto the student, making them the protagonist of their own learning (Benito & Cruz, 2005).

Our results suggest that the use of these methodologies was associated with improvements not only in critical essay writing itself but also knowledge of historical texts and their relevance to the present. Before the TIP methodology was implemented, students produced poorer critical essays and final exam scores than the two subsequent cohorts who received the TIP. Notably, the relationship between essay grades and final exam scores was only significant in the TIP cohorts. Based on this outcome, we endorse the incorporation of teaching methodologies that are adapted to the level of the students, including feedback after each session, and use guidelines for working collaboratively along with clear rubrics. Shifting responsibility for learning onto the student appears to benefit their learning outcomes.

### *Limitations and Future Directions*

This study was carried out in a naturalistic educational setting. As such, the cohort analysis did not permit a true control group. This work can be taken as a starting point for the design of future

studies using a control group to compare the incorporation of evidence-based methodologies which can enhance students' capacity for reflection and skills in writing critical essays.

In addition, this project has made us reflect on how to continue improving the HP course. Some of our ideas include (1) identifying students' initial competency level (noting strengths and weaknesses) to intentionally make heterogeneous pairs to collaborate and ideally benefit from each other; (2) assigning critical essays comparing more than one text or opposing source texts with different points of view on the same psychological phenomenon (for example, Thorndike vs. Kohler; Skinner vs. Chomsky); and (3) explicitly teaching not only critical writing but also how to critically read highly abstract scientific texts. In short, we are striving to help students develop competencies that they will need throughout their university career and beyond into their professional lives. Our work offers teachers of the HP course the opportunity to make use of new and demonstrably effective tools to improve student learning in the domain of critical essay writing.

## **Conclusion**

This project has allowed us to reflect on how writing can be used to deeply learn the history of the field of psychology, and specifically to dialogue with fundamental theoretical texts. Writing activates psychological processes that allow the transformation of knowledge by requiring the translation of thought into words and contrasting one's ideas with other perspectives. This process, which supports critical thinking, has been difficult to acquire in the university context. Given the potential benefits of epistemic writing, it is essential to propose and assess evidence-based methodologies that achieve this purpose, changing the approach from teacher-centered to student-centered. Our results suggest that it is necessary to focus on the student's needs, and then teach through practice, feedback, shared evaluation, and ongoing support from the teacher and peers. These methodologies could go beyond the HP course to inform any course subject based on the critical analysis of texts and with a learning goal to improve student writing outcomes.

## **Declaration of Conflicting Interests**

The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

## **Funding**

The authors received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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