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Abstract

Cognitive psychology is a lesser-enjoyed course in the undergraduate psychology curriculum, often attributed to students' difficulty in practically applying course concepts. Students in cognitive psychology classes struggle to find practical applications for the content. Standard assessments (e.g. written research papers) fail to capture the real-world applications of cognitive phenomena. Using an applied framework can motivate interest in cognition. I provide instructions for the use of an Unessay project in undergraduate cognitive psychology courses, which requires students to present a key construct in any format except an essay. Unessay projects originated in the humanities, and are an excellent fit for psychology. The Unessay is a useful vehicle for identifying and presenting application of a cognitive construct in the real world. Students are required to convey that information in a creative, non-essay format. Instructions, rubric and examples are provided. The Unessay is a novel approach to a course project in cognitive psychology that can motivate student interest while aligning with several APA outcomes for psychology majors.

Disciplines

Psychology

**Just As Long As It's Not An Essay: The Unessay as a Tool for Engagement In A Cognitive
Psychology Course**

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We have no conflict of interest to disclose.

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Abstract

Cognitive psychology is a lesser-enjoyed course in the undergraduate psychology curriculum, often attributed to students' difficulty in practically applying course concepts. Students in cognitive psychology classes struggle to find practical applications for the content. Standard assessments (e.g. written research papers) fail to capture the real-world applications of cognitive phenomena. Using an applied framework can motivate interest in cognition. I provide instructions for the use of an Unessay project in undergraduate cognitive psychology courses, which requires students to present a key construct in any format except an essay. Unessay projects originated in the humanities, and are an excellent fit for psychology. The Unessay is a useful vehicle for identifying and presenting application of a cognitive construct in the real world. Students are required to convey that information in a creative, non-essay format. Instructions, rubric and examples are provided. The Unessay is a novel approach to a course project in cognitive psychology that can motivate student interest while aligning with several APA outcomes for psychology majors.

Just As Long As It's Not An Essay: The Unessay as a Tool for Engagement In A Cognitive Psychology Course

Cognitive psychology can be a highly technical and decontextualized undergraduate course. Often an unliked discipline by undergraduate students (Stalder & Stec, 2007), cognitive psychology is challenging for students due to its seemingly abstract framework. Historic experimental findings that are the bedrock of the course and that are often cited in textbooks (e.g. dichotic listening tasks, partial-report paradigm) take place in highly constrained and artificial laboratory settings, making it difficult to appreciate the usefulness of these kinds of findings in real-world contexts. Encompassing fundamental human behaviors such as learning, memory, language, and problem solving, the content that is covered in cognitive psychology courses is, without doubt, inherently valuable to student populations and the world at large. The benefits of learning about cognition can't be realized if students are unwilling to engage (or even enroll!) in the course to begin with.

There are a variety of strategies to consider when working toward developing student interest in cognitive psychology. As so many psychology majors enter the discipline with the goal of improving the human condition, enthusiasm surrounding cognitive psychology can be successfully generated using an applied lens, with direct linkage to the helping professions (Sternberg & Dennis, 1997). Special projects or assessments that emphasize the application of key cognitive principles in novel contexts are also effective tools for increasing accessibility to course content. Some examples include the creation of Public Service Announcements that rely on an understanding of heuristics, biases, and framing (Hager, 2011), the production of television commercials promoting a product or service that illustrated at least one cognitive principle (Gronlund & Lewandowsky, 1992), and written evaluations of the connections between popular

films (e.g. *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*, Chapman & Gillam, 1974) and empirical articles on related cognitive constructs (e.g. syllogistic reasoning; Conner, 1996). In each of these cases, students are encouraged to appreciate cognition for its usefulness, applicability, and inherent value in everyday experiences. These approaches are significant departures from the typical term papers and literature summaries that often appear as summative course projects.

Unessays as Unconventional Assessments

Drawing on these examples and frameworks for inspiration, instructors can consider the implementation of a broad, applied project that encourages students to focus on the usefulness of cognitive principles. One unified way to do this is through the use of an Unessay-style project. Unessay tasks, originally introduced in an undergraduate English course and most commonly seen in the humanities (O'Donnell, 2012), provide a flexible assignment modality for students. Students are free to choose the final form of their project under one condition: absolutely no essays. The Unessay is intended to be a creative endeavor in which students communicate key information in a compelling and effective way. The broad expectations and parameters are established by the instructor, but all decisions about content, context, and modality of presentation are left up to the student.

To encourage an appreciation for the applicability of cognitive psychology in the real world, this assignment requires that students select a cognitive phenomenon or topic area and identify an applied outlet for it. For example, a student may focus on the many strategies for effective learning (e.g. spaced practice, retrieval practice) that are covered in the segment on learning and memory. They may then choose to create an infographic for other college students outlining the benefits of various learning strategies, including both the cognitive principles that underlie their effectiveness and some clear instructions for implementation. At a minimum,

students are evaluated on the degree to which their submission is compelling (e.g. informative, interesting, clear, complete) and effective (e.g. well-constructed, appropriate for the target audience, functional; O'Donnell, 2012).

Pleasant Surprises: Student Creativity on Display

The Unessay not only allows students to find a modality that they are comfortable with, but also allows them to leverage their individual talents, skills, and values to produce useful and interesting output. The submissions are varied, compelling, and unique. For example, one student rewrote the lyrics to the Plain White T's early-2000's love song *Hey There, Delilah* (Higgenson, 2006) to summarize how memory biases can facilitate the recovery from heartbreak. The student submitted a recording of their performance of the piece. Another exemplary example came in the form of a podcast script; this student drafted a detailed script for a podcast episode on attention, distraction, and the costs of multitasking in classroom settings. Yet another interesting approach was the creation of a detailed brochure geared toward high school students who are preparing to attend college. The brochure outlined several biases and fallacies that may affect decisions about which colleges to apply to and which one to attend. The final product was a succinct lesson in the principles of decision making, and a practical, helpful guide for high school students. The list of possibilities for output is endless, and students have embraced this boundlessness as a source of innovation, leveraging the outputs mentioned previously as well as TikTok, online storybook platforms, and student teaching webpages to shape their contributions. The Unessay encourages students to think deeply about the application of a construct in a particular context, then take a creative approach to communication, especially in consideration of a non-academic audience.

Implementation: A How-To Guide

Successfully implementing an Unessay requires diligence in both transparency and clarity because the task is novel and unconstrained. With clear instructions and grading criteria, students can ensure that they are meeting the expectations and objectives for the assignment while maintaining the freedom to explore interesting modalities and creative outlets for their ideas. Instructors should decide on the scope of the project for their own purposes. The example provided in the Supplemental Materials section is an open-ended topical project; students complete one submission for the entire term and can select from any topic covered in the course. Instructors may instead opt to assign several Unessays throughout a course, in which each Unessay is focused on one particular content area. Regardless of the scope, detailed instructions and communication of clear expectations are critical.

Instructions for Students. Students should be introduced to the idea of an Unessay early on in the term. Instructors should clearly encourage students to consider their creative strengths and interests as they approach the project. The goal of the assignment (e.g. to communicate to a non-academic audience about how cognitive psychology can be useful) should be clearly stated. Students should also be informed of the most important attributes of the project: compelling output and effective communication. Instructors may consider providing a list of ideas or starting points for students as well. Instructors may also decide whether students will be required to present their final product to the class. An example of the assignment instructions are provided in the Supplemental Materials section.

Grading, Evaluation and Rubrics. The open-ended nature of the Unessay presents a challenge in terms of assessment and grading. Instructors have no way of knowing what kinds of final products students will submit, so developing a flexible but clear grading schema is both challenging and necessary. Instructors should decide on the important dimensions or attributes

of the project; as O'Donnell (2012) outlines in the original Unessay summary, compelling output and effective communication are two critical parameters. In addition, accuracy of the content is important to account for in a content-heavy cognition course. An Unessay rubric can be designed to meet the flexibility needs of the assignment and still reflect the markers of a high-quality rubric: identification of each of the evaluation criteria, descriptions of the varying levels of quality for each criterion, and clear statement of associated point values (Reddy & Andrade, 2010). An example of a simple rubric that assesses Unessays for accurate content, compelling output, and effective presentation is provided in the Supplemental Materials section.

Instructors may find that assessment along additional dimensions is useful; however, instructors should think carefully about the inflection point at which detailed expectations become limiting parameters. By requiring additional components or attributes, instructors may inadvertently limit the scope of the project. Instead, distilling the grading criteria down to a few central attributes (e.g. accurate content, compelling output, effective presentation) can preserve the flexibility of the assignment while allowing for fair and straightforward assessment of each submission.

As mentioned, the major challenge of the Unessay is that it is boundless. To help students focus their efforts and strategically select a topic and an output modality, instructors are encouraged to provide a copy of the rubric for students at the outset. Students report that access to a grading rubric beforehand allows them to better focus their efforts for an assignment on the critical components and allows them to reduce feelings of uncertainty about the assignment (Reddy & Andrade, 2010). By providing students with the assessment criteria up front, instructors can ensure that students are engaging in the project in a way that aligns with the pedagogical intent and instructor expectations. Students with access to rubrics at the start of an

assignment have been shown to perform significantly better on the assignment (Petkov & Petkova, 2006) and also report finding the rubric more useful and informative than if it had been provided after the assignment was graded (Green & Bowser, 2006; Reddy & Andrade, 2010).

Providing Examples. Because this is a novel and atypical task, providing some Unessay submission examples for students can alleviate some of the tentativeness and concerns about the appropriateness of the medium or scope. Instructors may consider keeping a digital folder full of exemplary submissions (with permission from the student authors) to share with each subsequent class. Instructors may also choose to provide a brief explanation for each example about why the submission was exceptional, compelling, or otherwise noteworthy.

Aligning the Unessay with APA Learning Goals

In addition to breaking up the monotony of end-of-term essays, papers, and literature summaries, the Unessay is valuable in its ability to cut across many of the American Psychological Association's learning goals and outcomes for undergraduate psychology majors (APA, 2013). Goals addressed by the Unessay project include development of a Knowledge Base in Psychology (Goal 1), Scientific Inquiry and Critical Thinking (Goal 2), Communication (Goal 4) and Professional Development (Goal 5). Although one assignment alone is certainly not sufficient to demonstrate achievement in each of these outcomes, the Unessay does allow students to continue to develop these skills and demonstrate some proficiency through one summative output. See Table 1 for specific details regarding each of these goals and the affiliated Unessay attributes that align with each of them.

Conclusion

The Unessay is a powerful and innovative tool for capturing student learning in cognitive psychology. More importantly, the Unessay opens the floodgates of student enthusiasm for

cognition, and encourages students to approach their studies with an applied lens. When considering the varied career paths of undergraduate psychology majors, it is important to provide flexible assignment opportunities that allow students to create connections to other domains and applications in other contexts. As educators, we want students to be able to use what they learn in our classrooms in ways that are personally, professionally, and broadly beneficial. This assignment encourages students to see beyond theoretical frameworks and appreciate cognition in daily life.

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Table 1*APA Psychology Major Goals and Outcomes with Affiliated Unessay Attributes*

APA Goal & Outcomes	Unessay Attribute
1. Knowledge Base	
1.3. Describe applications of psychology	Real-world application of a cognitive phenomenon as the primary goal
2. Scientific Inquiry & Critical Thinking	
2.1 Use scientific reasoning to interpret psychological phenomena	Interpret personal or observed phenomena in terms of psychological concepts
2.2. Demonstrate psychology information literacy	Summarize and report on psychological findings from primary research and secondary text sources
2.3. Engage in innovative and integrative thinking and problem solving	Apply cognitive concepts to real-world problems to generate a practical solution
4. Communication	
4.2. Exhibit effective presentation skills for different purposes	Create effective presentations using audiovisual or other methods to communicate with broad audiences
4.3. Interact effectively with others	Consider audience attributes, including knowledge base and background, when selecting modality and preparing presentation
5. Professional Development	
5.1. Apply psychological content and skills to career goals	Possible generation of final product that may be practically useful in future career (e.g. learning strategies webpage for future teacher's website)
5.3. Refine project management skills	Leverage resources, individual strengths, and creativity to generate novel content that meets stated expectations for effective, accurate, and compelling presentation