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Aplia™ Combines Essential Practice and Feedback for Integrated Reading and Writing Course

Kina Lara has been teaching for nine years at San Jacinto College in Houston, Texas. Kina’s areas of expertise — reading and writing — are skills that are critical to everyone. Recently, Texas mandated the integration of reading and writing courses, creating the need for a new genre of teaching materials. *Fusion*, the first available textbook for the integrated course, together with the Aplia™ online homework tool, have helped Kina teach her course and give students the vital skills practice that they need outside of class. She and her students find Aplia easy to use, and Kina reports that students who use it consistently perform better on tests.

COURSES AND PARTICIPANTS

Kina’s integrated course is seated, and her students include traditional learners right out of high school as well as returning students who haven’t been in a classroom for years. “They face many life issues in addition to school issues,” says Kina. “Some are caring for children or parents. Most work part or full time. Some are focused and motivated, and others have no clue about what they want to do.” Kina says there is also considerable diversity with respect to students’ reading and writing skills.

In addition to Aplia, Kina uses two other Cengage Learning products: CourseReader for online weekly readings, which serve as the basis for several writing assignments; and Write Experience 2.0, a tool to help students learn how to edit and revise (which she is piloting in one section).

THE CHALLENGES

With the departure of separate reading and writing courses, Kina and other instructors scrambled to find appropriate teaching and learning materials. Early on, there were very few integrated textbooks or supplements, so instructors were forced to create their own materials from scratch. Faculty members who specialized in reading or writing, but not both, also had to get themselves up to speed on teaching a new subject.

The integrated course covers the same amount of information previously covered in two courses, in less time, essentially doubling the instructor workload. “I teach four sections and have about a hundred students — that’s a lot of papers to grade,” says Kina.

Students also struggle with covering vital material in a briefer timeframe. “Some don’t have the necessary basic skills to succeed in separate courses, let alone an integrated one,” says Kina. “Students have three hours of lecture with a one hour lab each week, compared to six hours of lecture per week when the courses were taught separately. Practice outside of class has always been important, but now it’s more critical than ever.”

CHALLENGES

- **Mandate for integrated reading and writing courses** leaves instructors without appropriate learning materials.
- **Instructors’ workload increases substantially** in combined courses, which cover the same material as two courses in less time.
- **Truncated lecture and lab sessions** allow little time for students to practice critical skills needed to attain proficiency and pass the course.

SOLUTIONS

- Aplia
- Kemper, Dave, Verne Meyer, John Van Rys, & Patrick Sebranek, *Fusion: Integrated Reading and Writing, Book 2*

RESULTS

- **Aplia eliminates the need for instructors to create all course materials from scratch** with exercises created specifically for the integrated reading and writing course. Exercises mirror the content, style, structure, and level of the textbook in use.
- **Auto-graded exercises save instructors time** creating and grading assignments. Diagnostic tests allow instructors to assess class and individual skill levels, and tailor class discussions to students’ needs.
- **Aplia exercises and activities, with feedback, engage students in much needed practice** outside of class, helping them develop fundamental reading, writing, and grammar skills.

“[Aplia] makes my job easier. The automatic grading saves me time, and the exercises give students the feedback and skills practice they need in order to be successful in the course — and beyond.”

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THE RESULTS

Through diagnostic tests, succinct instruction, and engaging assignments, Aplia reinforces key concepts and provides students with the practice they need to build fundamental reading, writing, and grammar skills. Terminology, style, exercise structure, and level match Kina’s textbook. Each question has different versions, but learning points are the same for each variation. “We cover topics in class, and then students do practice exercises with Aplia,” says Kina. “I like the variety of question types — not just multiple choice. There’s also an eBook for students who prefer that format to the printed textbook.”

Kina allows students to do a quiz or activity three times, and Aplia takes an average of their score. “Aplia is a great tool for study and test preparation because it provides good feedback. In class, students think they understand a concept and that they don’t need to study, but when they try it on their own, it’s often a different story,” she says. “Aplia provides a reality check. If they get a 60 on an Aplia assignment, they know they need more practice — and they’re motivated to continue.”

Kina also likes the diagnostic test that Aplia presents at the beginning of the course. “Our students have a wide range of skill levels. It’s nice to see where the students are in terms of proficiency so that we can tailor class instruction more effectively.”

The short story is that Aplia is helping Kina’s students succeed. “Students who do the Aplia work every week tend to make higher grades on the tests. Students who do very little don’t perform as well,” says Kina. “That said, Aplia is helpful for all students because we simply don’t have enough time to practice together in class.”

Kina and her students find that Aplia is easy to set up and use. “Students like being able to use it anywhere. Many do the work on their iPads or laptops,” she says. “Set up was all handled by our Digital Course Support Services representative at the start of the course. I told him how I wanted chapters covered and that I wanted weekly assignments, and that was it. If we need changes, he’s quick to answer by phone or email to help us out. I don’t have to do anything except check grades,” she says.

“I highly recommend Aplia. It makes my job easier. The automatic grading saves me time, and the exercises give students the feedback and skills practice they need in order to be successful in the course — and beyond.”

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