



Larry Thomas, Ph.D.

Instructor of Psychology — Blinn College

Aplia™ Helps Psychology Students Understand and Think Critically with Course Concepts

Larry Thomas has been teaching psychology at Blinn College in Brenham, Texas, since 2000. Blinn, which has four campuses, transfers the highest percentage of academic students to four-year universities in the state and boasts one of the highest percentage of academic students who go on to earn bachelor's degrees from those top universities. Larry is a good fit for the institution, because he is a big believer in ensuring that his students develop the critical thinking skills that they will need to succeed in four-year colleges and beyond. To that end, he supports his Cengage Learning textbook with the Aplia™ online learning solution, which helps students understand psychology as a science through compelling content, engagement activities, and thought-provoking questions.

“Aplia has done a good job with helping students build critical thinking skills, because its questions ask students to apply and analyze course concepts. Students are better prepared for class because they're familiar with those concepts,” says Larry. “We don't often get the opportunity to have students practice critical thinking during lectures, so it's important that they practice it outside of class.”

COURSES AND PARTICIPANTS

Larry teaches three sections of general psychology on campus, each with 30 students who represent a mix of traditional and non-traditional learners. Many are commuters who live off campus. Students are required to complete graded Aplia assignments on textbook chapter topics before Larry lectures about them.

Larry was drawn to Aplia in part for its analytics. “Other online tools tell students what they need to know, but they don't tell professors what they need to know. Aplia helps me know how my classes are doing and what objectives students are not mastering, which allows me to modify my lectures — and that's a big benefit,” he says. “I also like the customer support we get from Cengage Learning. It's been excellent.”

THE CHALLENGES

“Psychology is concept-based, so it really helps if students are familiar with the concepts before I lecture on them,” says Larry. “If they don't read, and some students resist it or procrastinate, they don't get as much out of class time as they otherwise would,” he says.

Most of Larry's students plan to transfer to a four-year school, and Larry wants to make sure they are prepared. “My students have great difficulty with critical thinking — with applying concepts and analyzing what they read about — and I assume many other students do, too. If we don't give students questions that require them to analyze and apply, then they are not going to magically learn how to do it.”

CHALLENGES

- **Most students need help to build critical thinking skills**, but lectures are typically not a conducive forum for practicing them.
- **Students who don't do the assigned reading** before class don't get as much out of lectures as they otherwise would.
- **Instructors sometimes don't know that students are struggling** on particular concepts because they don't have the necessary assessment tools.

SOLUTIONS

- Aplia
- Cacioppo, John and Laura A. Freberg, *Discovering Psychology: The Science of Mind*

RESULTS

- **Aplia promotes critical thinking** with thought-provoking questions and activities that engage students in learning course concepts and practicing their application.
- **Students come to class prepared** and familiar with concepts to be discussed, so lectures are more effective in reinforcing comprehension.
- **Weekly assignment deadlines hold students accountable** for their work.
- **Questions tied to learning objectives, combined with gradebook analytics**, allow instructors to monitor student progress and identify concepts most troubling to students. Instructors can then modify lectures as needed.

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THE RESULTS

“The big improvement that I’ve seen with Aplia is that students are prepared when they come to class,” says Larry. “They’ve read the chapter and taken a test on the material. They’ve interacted with the material so that when I start lecturing about it they’re more familiar with the concepts and the theories.”

Aplia’s chapter-specific problems ensure that students are learning course concepts and practicing their application. Assignment deadlines hold students accountable for their work. Terminology, notations, difficulty level, and style correspond to the textbook’s student learning objectives. For instance, the primary objective of Larry’s text (Cacioppo and Freberg’s *Discovering Psychology*) is to illustrate psychology’s role as a hub science, so Aplia has problems that engage students in learning about how psychology connects to other disciplines. “I like that the assignments work in concert with the textbook. They guide students’ learning and reinforce the knowledge that I want them to derive from the reading,” says Larry.

Larry says that Aplia assignments are challenging, and that’s fine with him. Some questions emphasize how psychological principles can be applied to real-world contexts, for instance, by asking students to weigh particular viewpoints. Case studies, journal article excerpts, and the like provide students with exposure to research. Engagement activities provide experiential learning opportunities. “Questions are designed to compel students to practice critical thinking, and over time it’s going to pay off for them,” he says. “Learning these skills is very important for students, especially community college students who need to be prepared for four-year schools.”

Aplia’s gradebook analytics allow Larry to keep close watch on how his students are doing. “With Aplia, every question is tied to a particular learning objective, so I can easily determine what students know and what they don’t know,” he says. As students complete assignments, their grades are populated into the Aplia gradebook. Instructors can see students’ scores, analyze an individual student’s performance on a single question, track class performance on student learning objectives, and more.

Larry’s students like Aplia, particularly the videos and interactive activities. “Aplia engages students. They tell me they like the critical thinking questions because they help them understand what they’re supposed to be getting out of the course. In some cases they see that they don’t know the material as well as they need to,” says Larry. “They actually come in to class and ask me to explain something they worked on in Aplia. They say that they feel much more prepared for lectures and that they’re comprehending the material more efficiently than if they were just reading over the material themselves. They like the guidance.”

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