

Michelle Wolcott

Adjunct Faculty, Mathematics — Pierce College, WA

Improved Student Outcomes in Developmental Math — With the Enhanced WebAssign® Homework Solution from Cengage Learning

Michelle Wolcott has been teaching Developmental Math courses for the past 21 years at Pierce College in Puyallup, WA and at two other local community colleges. Her courses include Pre-Algebra, Elementary Algebra, and Intermediate Algebra. All are taught on campus, but Michelle started experimenting with timed, weekly online quizzes this quarter in order to save valuable class time and to provide students with opportunities for more frequent assessments. Michelle clearly likes the idea of breaking new ground: “Some of the other instructors expressed an interest in trying this; I like being a guinea pig and decided to jump in!”

Michelle adopted Enhanced WebAssign® (EWA) from Cengage Learning four years ago, at the suggestion of a colleague from another Pierce campus, and started using a lecture capture tool at approximately the same time. Her goal was to improve student pass rates and performance by integrating additional technologies into her courses. Combined, the two have helped to increase scores in all of Michelle’s classes. She believes that EWA has made a big difference to her and to her students, contributing to increases in pass rates that are as high as 22% in some of her course sections.

COURSE PARTICIPANTS

Michelle’s classes include a diverse mix of participants — from recent high school graduates to retirees; mothers who are planning to return to the workforce; displaced workers who are learning a new set of skills; and young men and women who are returning from active duty in the armed services. For many, it is their first college experience, following a long break between high school — or GED completion — and registering for one or two courses at Pierce College.

THE CHALLENGES

Math can be difficult for many of Michelle’s students — those who need to take basic courses in arithmetic, pre-algebra, or algebra before moving on to college-level math courses. Most of Michelle’s students are highly motivated, dedicated students, many of whom intend to start a degree-based program as soon as they complete the pre-requisites such as Developmental English and Math. Still, the pace can seem fast and exceptionally challenging, especially to a participant who enters the course with a pre-conceived notion that math is either difficult or uninteresting. A majority of Michelle’s students are busy, working adults who have a difficult time balancing work, family, and school. When they sit down to work on a homework assignment, it can be 9:00 or 10:00 at night — a time when it would be nearly impossible to have a tutor “on call”, assuming Michelle’s students had the time and resources to do so!



CHALLENGES

- **Keeping up with homework assignments:** Many students have little free time after working all day and attending night classes. The pace can seem overwhelming.
- **High absentee rate** in class due to work and family commitments.
- Many participants enter the course **lacking the study skills** to efficiently prepare for tests.

SOLUTIONS

- Tussy/Gustafson: **Pre-Algebra, 4e** and **Beginning/Intermediate Algebra**.
- **Enhanced WebAssign (EWA)** is used by students for self-paced homework after hours and on days that include computer-enabled testing.

RESULTS

- **Instant feedback** is available to students at any time of the night or day, using the EWA interface
- **Better performance** on homework assignments.
- **Participants can catch up on missed material**, with class recordings and self-paced EWA use after hours.
- **EWA fosters a deep understanding of the material**, a 22% increase in pass rates for some courses, and higher scores on quizzes and tests.

“WebAssign is a better way to do homework. It’s perfect for students who have to fit homework into an overly-crowded schedule.”

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To learn more about this and other digital solutions provided by Cengage Learning, visit:

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THE RESULTS

Michelle could not be happier with her decision to incorporate EWA into her curriculum. She has observed significant improvements in pass rates since she started using EWA in conjunction with lecture capture tools. In the past, she found that students would often gloss over trouble spots while doing homework, using the examples in the book to arrive at the answers at the back of the book, without truly understanding the concepts. When test time rolled around, they would fail and become even more discouraged. “WebAssign is a better way to do homework, compared to paper and pencil,” according to Michelle. “It’s perfect for people who have to fit homework into an overly-crowded schedule.”

Enhanced WebAssign provides instant feedback to Michelle’s students, in the form of green checkmarks for correct answers and red X marks for incorrect answers. Based on the parameters that she has set in EWA, class participants are allowed five attempts per problem to arrive at the correct answer on homework and two attempts on a quiz. They also like the Practice Another Version feature, which helps to deepen their understanding of key concepts, as well as the popular Watch It video links. Students are more accountable; they have an incentive to do the homework — and to do it correctly! “The key”, Michelle says, “is to hook them in. As soon as students discover the built in videos, links to the eBook, and live chat line to math tutors, they love it!” — even if they have never used similar tools.

Before Michelle started using EWA, it was always a challenge to cover all of the new material that she had planned for a session because the first 20 minutes of a typical 50-minute class were spent on answering questions about the homework and on reviewing the material that had been taught in the last session. She still needs to spend a few minutes at the beginning of each class answering specific questions and conducting some in-class checks to ensure that students understand the material, but EWA has freed-up a lot of time that she can now spend teaching new material and conducting in-class assessments.

Michelle is also able to use her non-class time more efficiently. EWA grades all of the homework and automatically enters it into the online gradebook. This provides her with more time to use the instructor interface of EWA to rank students by their current grades, to look at homework performance, and to email individual students with suggestions on how to improve their understanding of specific concepts. As a result of her positive experience with EWA, Michelle has inspired other instructors at Pierce College to adopt EWA.

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