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Reflections on Teaching Introductory Psychology

2

I was pleased to be asked to describe my views on teaching introductory psychology and to explain why I became the lead author of a textbook on the subject. However, the prospect also worried me because writing a chapter like this is a little like writing your own obituary. You want to tell the story, but you don't want to sound pretentious. So here's my disclaimer.

The following description of how I teach introductory psychology, and why, is offered as information only. I make no claim to special insight about the best way to teach this, or any other, course. My approach to teaching makes sense to me, but I don't expect everyone to agree with it. I have numerous teaching goals, but I do not pretend to have reached them all, and certainly never two semesters in a row.

With this pathetic effort at humility out of the way, let me tell you how I teach—and why I write about—introductory psychology.

My Approach to Teaching

I began teaching in the psychology department at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign in 1968 with almost no experience as a teacher and absolutely no train-

ing in how to teach. Formal preparation for my teaching career came during my final year of graduate school and consisted entirely of a note from the head of the department informing me that I had been assigned a section of introductory psychology that fall. Were my students to be bright-eyed, “I’ll-believe-whatever-you-tell-me” 18-year-olds? No, I was to take on a section of 50 evening school students, most of whom were old enough to be my parents and came to class after a full day of work in the real world—tired, savvy, serious, questioning, and expecting a real course from a real teacher.

Needless to say, I did not feel up to the task. All I knew about teaching was what I had seen demonstrated by my own teachers from grade school to grad school. Panic took hold as I realized that I could recall more about what my worst teachers had done wrong than about what the best ones had done right. I longed to turn back the clock and, this time, pay attention to how the good teachers had organized their courses and lectures, led discussions, handled questions, and written exams. I also would have asked them for tips on how to be confident and inspiring. My distress grew as I began to examine textbooks, first because I had no clue how to *order* a textbook, let alone choose one, and second because so much of the material I read was unfamiliar. I recall wondering if 50 minutes of hyperventilation could count as a lecture on biopsychology.

The thought of asking someone for help or advice never crossed my mind. I assumed that I was the only graduate student in my department who didn’t know how to teach. If I asked too many questions, perhaps I would lose the teaching assistantship that would be my only source of income. So although I had no intention of ever going to medical school, I decided to base my teaching philosophy on the Hippocratic Oath, or at least the part that says “First of all, do no harm.” My idea was to teach in a way that would at least not misinform and that might leave my students with a good impression of psychology and psychologists. The plan was to assign the entire textbook, focus as many lectures as possible on the material that I knew best, and, while testing on every chapter, ask questions that focus on “big” concepts rather than arcane details.

Having this plan did nothing to calm me down on the first night of class. I stopped at two service stations on the way to campus, and, believe me, buying gasoline was the last thing on my mind. Still, the course went better than I had expected. I was shaky, to be sure, and I know I made plenty of mistakes, but several features of my desperation-driven approach served me well enough then that I still rely on them almost three decades later.

First, I continue to view college students, regardless of their age, as responsible adults whose task it is to learn textbook material

whether I lecture on it or not. Even if it were possible to cover an entire textbook in class, students have a lot of learning to do when their teachers are not around.

Second, I still try to spend as much class time as possible on material that I like and understand. Fortunately, this now includes a wider range of topics than before, so I no longer have to skip over certain processes, such as vision, or certain organs, such as the brain. I want to show students how interesting and important psychology can be, so I usually focus my lectures on the things I think students will find fascinating once they understand them. I punctuate my lectures with lots of demonstrations and classroom activities, and I don't worry very much about what I have to leave out. I have found that this use of class time helps motivate students to read, or even reread, their textbook, to ask questions and make comments in class, and to visit me during my office hours for discussion and clarification. I also find that doing things that stimulate my students in the classroom helps maintain my enthusiasm for teaching. Knowing that I am going to surprise, delight, confound, or challenge my students in tomorrow's class continues to make teaching—and planning my teaching—one of the most exciting and enjoyable aspects of my life.

Third, I still find it best to be myself in class—and not to take myself too seriously. I had little choice in the matter with that first class; many of those students were clearly skeptical about whether I belonged at the front of the classroom. It would have been disastrous had I tried to play the “tough teacher” role by insisting on being called “Mr. Bernstein” or making sarcastic remarks about late-arriving students. But even as my confidence has grown over the years, I still feel most comfortable when I let my students see me as I am, even when it means doing things that some of my own teachers would have frowned on. For example, I recall laughing along with my students one spring day when a pair of dogs charged through our classroom's open door and proceeded to have sex. (I can think of at least one former teacher of mine who would surely have tried to continue with his lecture.) Similarly, I am as quick now as I was as a graduate student to acknowledge when I don't know the answer to a student's question. Knowing that I don't have to appear omniscient makes my classes, and the questions students ask in them, seem more challenging than threatening.

Finally, I still try to test students on material that although not always easy, I consider important enough to be worth knowing when the course is over. And whether essay or multiple choice, my questions almost always test students' ability to *apply*, not just recall, what they have learned. For example, I tend to stay away from questions like “Which of the following substances is *not* a neurotransmitter?” I

would much rather ask something like this: “Leshon has been severely depressed lately. According to the biological approach to psychopathology, which of the following neurotransmitters is most likely to be involved in his disorder?” I think it is more important for an introductory student to know the answer to the latter question than the former. Even students who miss such questions can understand why I ask them.

My Course and My Students

Until 1984, the courses I taught at the University of Illinois were all in the clinical area: abnormal, methods of treatment, psychotherapy practicum, research design, and the like. That year, probably because word had leaked out about my one-semester experience with the introductory course 17 years earlier, I was asked to take over as director of our department’s Introductory Psychology Program. Psychology 100 enrolls nearly 4,000 students each year, so in addition to teaching my own students, I became responsible for selecting, training, monitoring, and evaluating the graduate student instructors who teach all of the other students.¹ (For better or for worse, I try to encourage in those I supervise the same values, policies, and methods I apply in my own classes.) Section sizes in this one-semester course range from 15 students in the honors seminar to amphitheater crowds of 350 or more. Most sections enroll about 60 students. I usually teach the honors course, but I have also taught sections as large as 750 students.

Evaluation of student performance in Psychology 100 is utterly objective and depends entirely on how many points a student earns out of a possible 300. Students in all sections take the same two multiple choice examinations—an 80-point midterm and a 100-point final. One hundred more points can be earned through some combination of quizzes, short papers, and other work assigned at the discretion of each instructor, and 20 points are awarded for participating in psychology experiments. (The honors section follows the same system, but its exams and quizzes are take-home essays, and a 15-page term paper is required.)

Most Psychology 100 students are in their first year of college, and for many, the introductory course will be their only psychology course. I do not believe that this is my fault. In fact, I bet that because of me,

¹This enormous task would be impossible without the help of Sandra Schweighart Goss, who serves as associate course director.

thousands of students over the years have become psychology majors—and even psychologists. Hundreds, at least. OK, I know of *one* case for sure in which I inspired a student to go to graduate school in psychology. He went on to become a professor at a major university where he conducts important research and has written a competing introductory psychology textbook—proving once again that no good deed ever goes unpunished.

My Goals in Teaching Introductory Psychology

Such bizarre cases aside, my approach to teaching is shaped by the recognition that most students take the introductory psychology course because it (a) sounds more interesting than sociology, (b) satisfies a general education requirement in the behavioral sciences, and (c) is all common sense and intuition. In other words, whether I like it or not, most introductory students are not as immediately interested in all aspects of my course as I wish they were, and certainly not as interested as I am. They are taking several courses in addition to mine, and they are not necessarily eager to read the textbook. Worst of all, and in spite of my best efforts, it is unlikely that most of my students will remember for very long the details of what I have taught and what they have read.

Yet, teaching introductory psychology leaves me neither depressed nor disappointed. Indeed, I suspect that when faculty has a bad experience with this course, the problem can often be traced not so much to student apathy or teacher incompetence, as to unrealistic, even counterproductive, expectations and goals. My goals in Psychology 100 are quite modest, but because they are attainable I think the course works. I try to introduce psychology in a way that students are likely to enjoy, appreciate, and understand. Over the years, I have come to think of myself less as a taskmaster (although my course is a tough one) and more as a museum guide—a person who gives visitors a map of the exhibits, knowing that they will not have time to explore them all in detail but hoping that the experience will either encourage future visits or at least bring good reviews. In short, I try to keep in mind that even if all of my students wanted to hear it, it is impossible to tell the whole story of psychology in one semester. I try to help students learn as much psychology as they have time for and, in the process, show them that the discipline is far more diverse and interesting and important than they might have realized. I think this gen-

eral goal can be accomplished regardless of whether students remember a lot of specific facts about psychology. My more specific goals for the introductory course follow.

PORTRAY PSYCHOLOGY AS AN EMPIRICAL SCIENCE BASED ON CRITICAL THINKING

I spend about two class sessions at the beginning of the course describing the empirical approach, the methods of scientific research, and how psychologists apply critical thinking processes in studying all aspects of behavior and mental processes. Many students have little interest in these abstract research principles and critical thinking methods, but that's before they find out that I have psychic powers. During the last few minutes of the first class period, I perform a few very simple, but very impressive, magic tricks. I describe these tricks as demonstrations of the psychic ability I allegedly acquired as the result of a closed head injury. When the class is suitably impressed with my "power," I confess to having used trickery. I then challenge the students to spend some time before the next class session applying their critical thinking skills (and the methods described in the assigned chapter on Research Methods) to discover how the tricks were done.²

When the class meets again, the students are inevitably motivated to talk about research methods that might help them figure out how I could have fooled them so convincingly. To highlight the need to use these methods in the context of critical thinking, I organize discussion of the psychic tricks around a five-step analytic process. (The steps take the form of five questions: What am I being asked to believe? What evidence is available to support the assertion? Are there alternative ways of interpreting the evidence? What additional evidence would help to evaluate the alternatives? What conclusions are most reasonable?) The discussion tends to focus on the third and fourth steps: alternative explanations for my apparent psychic abilities and the best methods for evaluating those alternatives. I encourage the students to state their alternative explanations as hypotheses and to design—as a group or in small groups—research methods (experiments, usually) for testing their hypotheses. I have found that this session does a reasonably good job of highlighting the general value of research methods and critical thinking for evaluating any phenomenon or claim, from infomercials to political speeches. (In fact, if graduate student instructors tell me they are not comfortable doing a "psychic" act, I suggest that they use other critical thinking targets instead: TV com-

² I got this idea from Morris (1981).

mercials, magazine ads, and direct mail promotional pieces are ideal.) It also gives me the opportunity to point out that psychologists use the same critical thinking process and the same range of research methods. I note that these methods will be encountered throughout the textbook and the lectures and that the five-step process will be used throughout the course in evaluating the results of all kinds of psychological research.

In my honors section, I follow up on the psychic analysis by assigning small groups of students to read, critically evaluate, and then redesign research articles I have selected for them from psychological journals. The write-ups and class presentations describing the results of their five-step analyses help create in the students the kind of reasonable skepticism about psychological research that I like to see.

PORTRAY PSYCHOLOGICAL KNOWLEDGE AS DYNAMIC, NOT STATIC

I have found that most students want simple, clear, and final answers to questions such as, *Is personality inherited? Does TV violence cause aggression? Does therapy work? and Which theory of prejudice is right?* They are frustrated when I don't give them what they want, but I try to help them understand why it has to be this way. To help reach this goal, I am forever reminding students that the process of critical thinking and the continuous flow of research arising from it tend to raise questions as well as answer them. I repeatedly emphasize that the question, "What conclusions are most reasonable?" really means "What conclusions are most reasonable given the evidence available so far?" I also highlight many of the questions in our field that simply cannot be answered with a simple yes or no. I point out that this situation does not arise because psychology is "just a matter of opinion" or because psychologists are incompetent, but because the phenomena under study are so complex that the "correct" answers often turn out to be "It depends on the interaction of x , y , and z " or "We don't yet know for sure."

To help convince students that I am not just making this up to save face, I send them out in teams of two to do a simple observation and recording of the walking speed of males and females in a public place.³ The difficulties they encounter—in obtaining valid measurements, in selecting subjects for observation, in preventing extraneous factors (such as slopes, crowds, or weather) from contaminating results, in guarding against inadvertently cueing each other as to when each starts

³ I got this idea from Stephen Buggie at Presbyterian College, Clinton, South Carolina.

and stops timing, and in a dozen other aspects of the project—go a long way toward helping them appreciate the task researchers face in studying “simple” topics such as interpersonal attraction or hunger. I also remind students that like the psychologists whose work they explore, they must learn to tolerate a certain amount of uncertainty.

In short, my goal is to emphasize the inherent complexity of psychological phenomena and the evolving nature of knowledge about behavior and mental processes. Doing so consistently throughout the semester helps my students accept this aspect of scientific reality, but they still aren’t too happy about it.

PORTRAY THE BREADTH AND DIVERSITY OF PSYCHOLOGY

A wise colleague once told me that we are forced to lie to introductory psychology students because we don’t have time to tell them the truth. I think this is especially true for those of us who teach the course in one semester. Those who teach a two-semester course have time to tell more of the truth, but even they must leave out a lot of material. (The ideal, eight-semester course poses some practical problems.) So in line with my museum guide analogy, my goal is to at least acquaint students with all of the subfields of psychology even though I am not able to spend much time on any of them.

I know I will never reach this goal if the students do not read the entire textbook, so as noted earlier, I assign every chapter and make all of the material in them fair game for testing, regardless of whether it is covered in class. To help the students read at a steady pace rather than merely cram for the midterm and final, at least five quizzes are administered throughout the semester. Students who keep up with their reading assignments are the ones most likely to notice the breadth of the field. I am always gratified to hear them express surprise when they discover that there is more to psychology than clinical psychology, the area with which they tend to be most familiar. I feel I have done my job if my students go home and tell their parents about subfields such as biological, cognitive, social, and developmental psychology too. In my wildest dreams, a student of mine meets a psychologist on a plane and asks, “What kind of psychologist are you?” instead of “Uh-oh, I bet you’re going to analyze me.”

PROMOTE ACTIVE LEARNING

As Martha Stewart might say, learning by doing as well as by watching or listening is “a good thing.” I do try to encourage active learning, not only in the hope that it will help students think about and

remember what happens in class but also because I think these experiences will stimulate them to read the textbook with greater interest and enthusiasm. In my experience, students enjoy the book more (even though reading it is “work”) when they are reading about things that have come alive for them in class.

There are many ways of promoting active learning, but my favorite approach is to conduct classroom activities that involve every student in demonstrations of psychological principles, concepts, or research findings. Examples of these activities abound in handbooks (Benjamin, Blair-Broeker, Ernst, & Nodine, in press; Benjamin, Daniel, & Brewer, 1985; Benjamin & Lowman, 1981; Makosky, Selice, Sileo, & Whittemore, 1990; Makosky, Whittemore, & Rogers, 1987; Ware & Johnson, 1996), in the instructor’s manuals that accompany introductory psychology textbooks, and in many other sources (including Internet news groups such as Teaching In Psychological Sciences, or TIPS).⁴ Just one illustration will suffice here. Rather than merely lecturing on the concept of compliance in the social psychology unit of the course, I begin by asking the class to do a set of utterly pointless things, such as hopping on one foot, giving me a round of applause, or exchanging seats. Inevitably, every student follows these instructions to the letter, and I initiate the discussion of compliance by asking them why they did so. The social bases for compliance are soon being described and debated. Asking the entire class, rather than one student, to do silly things gives this activity special value, because it makes it impossible for anyone to say “I wouldn’t have done that.” Students who have had this classroom experience usually want to read more about the processes involved.

EMPHASIZE THE IMPORTANCE OF PSYCHOLOGY IN EVERYDAY LIFE

Students tend to appreciate the importance of research methods most when applying them to evaluate psychic power or other claims. Similarly, students tell me that the psychological concepts and principles covered in the introductory course seem to make more sense, and “matter” more, when I describe their importance in everyday life. Fortunately, the diversity of our discipline and the wide range of appli-

⁴ To subscribe to TIPS, send SUBSCRIBE TIPS YOURFIRSTNAME YOURLASTNAME TO LISTSERV@FRE.FSU.UMD.EDU (INTERNET). Ideas for activities may also be available on World Wide Web home pages maintained by the Society for the Teaching of Psychology (Division 2 of the American Psychological Association) at [HTTP://SPSP.CLARION.EDU/DIVISION2/d2.HTML](http://SPSP.CLARION.EDU/DIVISION2/d2.HTML) GE.HTM and by Teaching of Psychology in the Secondary Schools, or TOPSS ([HTTP://SPSP.CLARION.EDU/topss/TOPSS.HTM](http://SPSP.CLARION.EDU/topss/TOPSS.HTM) top).

cations of psychological research make this easy to do. The trick, I think, is to remember to do it.

I begin my efforts to emphasize the practical importance of psychology early in the course by asking the class to tell me what surprised them about the subfields of psychology described in the opening chapter of the textbook. They usually mention areas such as industrial/organizational psychology, health psychology, engineering psychology, and biological psychology. I then say a few words about each area mentioned and include one or two examples of how research in the area has been applied, such as in personnel selection and conflict resolution, safe-sex and anti-smoking campaigns, automotive and aviation safety, and neuropsychological assessment of brain damage. I also mention some of the career opportunities in each area and remind the students that they will find many more examples as they read the text. Then, I reinforce that message by working into each lecture additional examples of the application of other basic principles of psychology in areas such as law, medicine, architecture, and computer science. I also bring to class each day a newspaper or magazine article illustrating another way in which psychology affects daily life—everything from new psychotherapy methods to insanity pleas to human-factors-influenced product designs. Soon, my students are doing this too.

Emphasizing the practical value of psychological research and practice is important not only because it helps students to learn more about our discipline but also because it may ultimately influence the public and private support psychology receives. Some of our students will become governors, congressional representatives (or staffers), or philanthropists. And even those who do not assume positions from which they can directly benefit psychology, as voters, all of them will have an indirect impact on our discipline. We do not have many opportunities to personally tell a senator why funding for psychological research ought to remain in the National Science Foundation budget, but there is plenty of time in class to give the future legislators a lasting impression of the value of psychological science. When we walk into the classroom, we don't just teach psychology; we also help to shape public opinion about its value to society.

PORTRAY PSYCHOLOGY AS AN INTEGRATED DISCIPLINE

"What does the eye have to do with psychology?" This question, blurted out after class one day, helped me to understand why my students' own eyes began to glaze over during my lectures on neuro-

anatomy, vision, and hearing. Looking back, I realize that the earliest versions of my introductory course must have struck students as a train wreck of randomly selected topics. A lecture on plant care would probably not have surprised them any more than my lecture on depth perception. For some, I bet, it was only the sight of the words *personality* and *psychopathology* on the syllabus that prevented them from dropping the course. I had simply forgotten to provide a coherent framework that showed how the apparently disparate course topics all fit together. I'm not sure why this happened. Maybe I was just so pleased at now being able to cover topics I had skipped during my first attempt at teaching that it never occurred to me that students would have no clue *why* I was covering them. In any case, I try to solve the "glazed eyes" problem in three ways.

First, when presenting the definition of psychology, I emphasize that the concept of "behavior and mental processes" includes everything from the activity of single cells to the interactions of groups. As a quick active learning illustration, I ask the class to raise their right hands on my count of three. We then discuss the biological and cognitive processes that allowed each person to detect the incoming stimulus; perceive, understand, and remember my instruction; decide what to do; and execute the response. When I ask the students to imagine how they would do at this simple task if they had no sensory or motor neurons, they begin to see why the textbook contains chapters on biological psychology, sensation, and perception.

Second, I cover the material on developmental psychology very early—right after the research methods unit—in order to emphasize that each individual, including each student in the class, represents a wondrous integration of specialized cells and processes that during the rest of the course, we will examine in more detail.

Finally, I try to include in every class session examples of how concepts, principles, and research results from one of psychology's subfields are related to, apply in, and help us understand other subfields. An obvious example is how the explanatory theories and drug treatments for certain psychological disorders are related to the action of certain neurotransmitters on nerve cell activity in certain parts of the brain. I also like to point out that the same kinds of perceptual biases that can influence us to see an ambiguous figure one way or another can also influence our perception of people, sometimes leading to self-fulfilling prophecies and prejudice.

Nothing gives me more pleasure as a teacher than hearing a student say that he or she is beginning to see how "all this stuff fits together." This does not happen every day, but often enough to make my efforts seem worthwhile. Indeed, helping students to see psychol-

ogy's "big picture" and to appreciate the importance of what psychologists have accomplished so far is a large part of what I try to accomplish as a teacher.

Writing an Introductory Textbook: Don't "Just Do It"

If current trends continue, by the year 2010 every psychology faculty member in North America will have written an introductory psychology textbook. If you are currently thinking of doing so—or if someone is trying to talk you into doing so—I can offer only one piece of advice: Don't do it unless you have at least one reason to write the book that is more important to you than the prospect of making money.

I am speaking from the heart here, because until my coauthors and I began our introductory textbook project, I had no idea how much time and effort it would take. We spent about 5 years writing the first edition, and each new edition consumes us nearly full-time for 18 months. My conversations with numerous other introductory text authors suggest that their experiences are about the same. Is it "worth it?" I think so, but not as a paying job. If your book is successful, it is likely to bring a financial return that—when divided by the number of hours you spend writing it—is about what you would earn at a fast food restaurant. There have to be other reasons to take on the challenge. The prospect of a royalty check 6 years hence is probably not going to be enough to keep you going when the book is behind schedule, many other responsibilities demand attention, and after working for an entire morning on a single page, you still can't get it to read just right.

Why did I do it? The idea of writing an introductory psychology text occurred to me only after being asked by a publisher to review someone else's book proposal. At a dinner meeting with the company's psychology editor a few weeks later, I made the mistake of being a little too specific in describing how I thought the proposal might be improved. Most of my ideas involved tailoring the book to meet the teaching goals I have already described. Without thinking where it might lead, I said that if it were me, I would want to create a book that would reinforce some of the most important messages I try to convey in class: (a) that psychology is an empirical science, (b) that its numerous subfields are related, (c) that one must think critically about psychological research, and (d) that the results of that research are being

widely applied in the service of human health, productivity, and welfare. The editor smiled, refilled my wine glass, and asked if I had ever thought of writing a book like that.

The rest, as they say, is history or, in this case, psychology. The features of the book that resulted from that conversation were shaped by the desire to do a better job of teaching introductory psychology, and my coauthors and I keep that in mind as we work on each new edition.

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