METHODS AND TECHNIQUES

Teaching Psychology's History Through a Comparative Analysis of Introductory Psychology Texts

David Zehr
Plymouth State College

Students in a history of psychology course participated in a classroom exercise designed to encourage active learning while minimizing the importance of a testing–lecture format. Teams of students received an introductory psychology text from a different decade spanning the 1880s to 1970s. They also each received a 1990s introductory psychology text. Each team assumed responsibility for two class presentations in which they compared and contrasted the historical text with the contemporary text. Students' evaluations of the exercise suggested that it facilitated their overall understanding of the history of psychology and enhanced their abilities to analyze, synthesize, and evaluate information pertaining to psychology's development as a scientific discipline.

A majority of undergraduate psychology programs offer a course in the history of psychology (McGovern, 1992). Many students enroll in that course with the preconceived idea that the class will be dull and irrelevant. A common expectation is that they will have to memorize names and dates and that the material will have no bearing whatsoever on their educational and professional aspirations. Having found my own undergraduate history of psychology course both challenging and rewarding, I am baffled by such attitudes. Nonetheless, I realize that students do have these expectations and that my job is to help them discover history's relevance and vitality.

One thing I have learned in teaching the history of psychology for 13 years is that a lecture–note taking–testing format by itself is not always an effective means of changing students' perceptions of the course. Lecturing has a valued place in the classroom, but an over reliance on it promotes passivity in students and instructor alike (Benjamin, 1991). Testing also, of course, has merits. Too often though, many students study course materials superficially with only the vision of an exam grade in mind. This approach may distract them from more meaningful analysis of course information and possible long-term retention of the material.

To make the content of the history of psychology course more accessible and more meaningful to students I have, over the past several years, used a variety of classroom models that incorporate active learning strategies. The pedagogical value of such techniques is amply documented (Mathie et al., 1993; Wittrock, 1974). I designed the one described in this article to build connections between psychology's past and psychology's present by having students compare and contrast the content of historical introductory texts with contemporary ones.

I drew initial inspiration from Webb (1991), who clearly articulated the usefulness of textbook analyses for understanding psychology's history. His work did not, however, detail specific classroom applications of the technique. Henderson (1995) described a textbook comparison exercise explicitly targeted to students. Students compared texts from several periods early in psychology's history to discover important trends. This technique is similar in intent but diverged in several critical ways. First, students made direct comparisons between historical introductory psychology texts and contemporary introductory texts. Second, students worked collaboratively, in teams, rather than individually. Last, students presented their discoveries to their peers in oral reports that also examined the social and cultural climate of the historical eras from which the texts were drawn. This addition reinforced the notion that psychologists work within the constraints imposed by societal needs and values (Leahey, 1997).

Method

I divided the semester into halves. I spent the first half of the semester reviewing psychology's history. I lectured, performed classroom demonstrations, and led discussions of readings to provide students with a foundation for understanding the contents of the historical texts. Students read a standard history of psychology text (Schultz & Schultz, 1996) as well as supplementary articles that I distributed. They also completed weekly in-class writing assignments in lieu of exams.

Preparation for the textbook comparison exercise, the focus of the second half of the semester, began during the first week of class. I assigned students to 1 of 10 teams. Each team had three or four members. To nurture and encourage the cooperation necessary for in-class group presentations (Cooper, 1995), teams completed three writing assignments out of class over a period of 6 weeks.

To further prepare for the second half of the semester, each team received an introductory psychology text from a different historical era. Texts represented each decade from the 1880s to 1970s. Some were part of my own personal collection of historical volumes and included James's (1892) *Psychology: The Briefer Course*, Hewett's (1889) *Elements of Psychology*, and Smith and Guthrie's (1924) *Gen-*

Table 1. Student Evaluations of the Textbook Comparison Assignment

Item	M	SD	Agree or Strongly Agree[a]
1. The presentation facilitated my overall understanding of the history of psychology.	4.39	.56	97
2. The presentation helped me develop my abilities to analyze, synthesize, and evaluate information pertaining to the development of psychology.	4.13	.62	87
3. The presentation helped me better understand information presented in the first half of the course.	3.77	1.02	71
4. I preferred the learning methods used in this class compared with a lecture and testing format.	3.87	1.14	61

Note. Thirty one students responded. Each item was rated based on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*).
[a]Given in percentages.

eral Psychology in Terms of Behavior. I obtained the others from a nearby university's library holdings. They included Dunlap's (1936) *The Elements of Psychology* and Cattell's (1947) *General Psychology.* Each team also received a copy of one of several different contemporary introductory psychology texts. I instructed teams to prepare a 2-day presentation that would (a) review the general nature of psychology in the era assigned, (b) review popular culture of the era, (c) relate material from the first half of the course to the historical text, (d) compare and contrast the historical and contemporary texts, and (e) convey personal reactions to the historical text. I gave the teams wide latitude in structuring their presentations, but with the admonition that a lecture format was not desirable. Most teams took this instruction to heart. For instance, the 1940s team developed a slide show, with accompanying soundtrack, to present information on popular culture and world events. The 1880s team appeared in class dressed in period garb borrowed from the theater department and recreated a 19th century classroom atmosphere. The topic of the day was moral philosophy, which gave their peers a greater appreciation for studying psychology in the late 20th century.

I graded the presentations according to several criteria. First, did a presentation make appropriate links with the first half of the course? Here, for instance, the team that handled James's *Psychology* (1892) needed to make explicit reference to his role in shaping the emergence of American Functionalism. Second, how in-depth was the comparison between the historical and the contemporary text? Did students go beyond a mere comparison of tables of contents (as one team thought was sufficient)? Did they note the emergence of well-known principles or the waning of interest in particular topics? Did they directly compare historical coverage of a topic with contemporary coverage? Third, were the personal reactions based on careful reflection and analysis? Did the students articulate precisely what they liked and disliked about a particular text? Last, to what extent were societal events and influences integrated with material on psychology? Were events, inventions, discoveries, and other information merely cataloged, or was such information used to document psychology's changing character (e.g., the impact of the World Wars on applied issues)? I took extensive notes on each presentation and provided group members with a written summary of my comments and assessment. The class presentation comprised 25% of students' final grade. A comprehensive final exam covered material from both halves of the semester and thus encour-

aged students to attend carefully to information contained in other teams' presentations.

Evaluation

Following each team's presentation, team members completed a project evaluation form. The first part of the form asked students to describe their role and their contribution to the presentation, the roles and contributions of their teammates, and any specific difficulties they encountered in preparing for the presentation. The second half of the form asked them to indicate their level of agreement or disagreement with four items that assessed the impact of the project on their learning. Scale values ranged from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). The items and the mean responses to those items appear in Table 1. A final item allowed for open-ended comments on the model.

Discussion

Both the quantitative and qualitative assessments indicated that students found the textbook comparison exercise worthwhile, suggesting it is appropriate for enhancing students' perceptions of a history of psychology course. Specifically, the evaluation data showed that the exercise helped them to understand psychology's history and facilitated their ability to work with the material in a manner consistent with what is expected from active learning practices (Mathie et al., 1993). The data also showed that a majority of students preferred the general class structure, which included the textbook comparison exercise, over traditional teaching methods. Responses to the open-ended item were also consistently positive. The comments included: "I had to think more in this class than in any previous psychology class and I feel I'm going to be leaving this class with a much better understanding of psychology as a whole;" "It was an interesting assignment. It made me think about different aspects of psychology instead of just repeating the facts;" and "I felt I learned more with this approach as opposed to the traditional lectures. This class was actually fun." Students potentially benefit in a number of ways from such an exercise. Written and oral expression are emphasized, as is peer collaboration, which together aid in the development of communication skills and interpersonal skills. These competencies are inte-

gral outcomes for undergraduate degrees in psychology (Halpern, 1988). Also, critical thinking skills replace a traditional emphasis on rote memorization as a means for achieving academic success, and a lecture-only format is replaced by a model that serves as a potent antidote to student passivity.

Implementing exercises of this nature is a challenge for both student and instructor, and without question some refinements will be necessary to strengthen the model. For instance, in the open-ended evaluations some students complained that some group members did not carry their load of the work. Adopting specific strategies to combat social loafing would enhance perceptions of equitable workload distribution and grading. Others complained that 2-day presentations were too long, which is not surprising in light of the fact that most students had probably never before been asked to assume so much of the responsibility for a course's structure. The planning and effort necessary to assume full responsibility for the class may also help explain why only 61% of the students agreed or strongly agreed with the statement that they preferred the learning methods in this class as opposed to a lecture–testing format. Also to consider in this context is that many students indicated they did not like making oral presentations, and some believed that there was too much writing in the course.

A final area on which to focus greater attention is the ease with which students accomplished the five stated goals for the presentations. Not surprisingly, they had little trouble reviewing popular culture as it pertained to the historical eras. They found more challenging comparing and contrasting the two texts and conveying personal reactions to the historical text. Their difficulties perhaps stemmed from the fact that most teams divided responsibility for various portions of the text, making it harder for individual students to think about the material beyond their limited perspectives. The lack of familiarity with late 19th century and early 20th century writing styles, as well as historical terminology, may also have played some role in making these tasks more difficult than anticipated. These problems aside, students seemed to genuinely enjoy taking an active role in learning about the historical foundations of their major discipline.

I also enjoyed the challenge of implementing the exercise and believe that it taught me a lot about both the history of psychology and the teaching process. Reading through the historical texts deepened my understanding of psychology's ongoing development and enriched my appreciation for the value of using original source materials in an undergraduate course. Teaching the class this way also caused me to rethink many of my attitudes regarding how best to present the material. Having only half a semester to cover psychology's history forced me to put into practice the belief that one does not have to "cover it all" to foster effective learning. As Benjamin (1991) pointed out, it is easy and safe to merely lecture, but my present experience shows that it is far more gratifying to develop activities that make learning a shared responsibility of both faculty and students.

References

Benjamin, L. T., Jr. (1991). Personalization and active learning in the large introductory psychology class. *Teaching of Psychology, 18,* 68–74.

Cattell, R. B. (1947). *General psychology* (2nd ed.). Cambridge, MA: Sci-Art.

Cooper, J. L. (1995). Cooperative learning and critical thinking. *Teaching of Psychology, 22,* 7–9.

Dunlap, K. (1936). *The elements of psychology.* St. Louis, MO: Mosby.

Halpern, D. F. (1988). Assessing student outcomes for psychology majors. *Teaching of Psychology, 15,* 181–186.

Henderson, B. B. (1995). Critical-thinking exercises for the history of psychology course. *Teaching of Psychology, 22,* 60–63.

Hewett, E. C. (1889). *Elements of psychology.* New York: American Book.

James, W. (1892). *Psychology: The briefer course.* New York: Holt.

Leahey, T. H. (1997). *A history of psychology: Main currents in psychological thought* (4th ed.). Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall.

Mathie, V. A., Beins, B., Benjamin, L. T., Jr., Ewing, M. M., Hall, C. C. I., Henderson, B., McAdam, D. W., & Smith, R. A. (1993). Promoting active learning in psychology courses. In T. V. McGovern (Ed.), *Handbook for enhancing undergraduate education in psychology* (pp. 183–214). Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.

McGovern, T. V. (1992). Evolution of undergraduate curricula in psychology, 1892–1992. In A. E. Puente, J. R. Matthews, & C. L. Brewer (Eds.), *Teaching psychology in America: A history* (pp.13–38). Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.

Schultz, D. P., & Schultz, S. E. (1996). *A history of modern psychology* (6th ed.). Fort Worth, TX: Harcourt Brace.

Smith, S., & Guthrie, E. R. (1924). *General psychology in terms of behavior.* New York: Appleton.

Webb, W. B. (1991). History from our textbooks: Boring, Langfeld, and Weld's introductory texts (1935–1948+). *Teaching of Psychology, 18,* 33–35.

Wittrock, M. C. (1974). Learning as a generative process. *Educational Psychologist, 11,* 87–95.

Notes

1. An earlier version of this article was presented at the fourth annual Teaching Institute of the American Psychological Society, Washington, DC, May 1997.
2. I thank Robert S. Miller, Linda M. Noble, and three anonymous reviewers for their insightful comments on the manuscript. I thank Heather Frasier Chabot for her assistance in procuring the historical texts.
3. Send correspondence to David Zehr, Department of Psychology, Plymouth State College, Plymouth, NH 03264 ; e-mail: zehr@mail.plymouth.edu.