

Reflecting on Teaching Reading and Writing in Psychology

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In a way, these reflections began with *Anna Karenina* (Tolstoy, 1877/2000), not Anna O. (see Breuer, 1989)—in other words, with Tolstoy, not Freud—or any other psychologist, for that matter. Let me explain. In the fall of 2001, I taught a seminar on the psychology of self. As part of the seminar, my students read *The Fall of a Sparrow*, a contemporary novel by Robert Hellenga, who is professor emeritus of English at Knox College in Galesburg, IL.

Some colleagues and I invited Hellenga to campus to do a reading, sign books, and visit classes. A few of us got to know him at a dinner party the night he arrived. Talk turned to teaching, students, and books—books that we all like to read—and, of course, how Hellenga and, by extension, all of us sitting around the table managed to write (or not). Hellenga spoke about his reading and what he does when he gets stuck writing: He cracks open *Anna Karenina* (Tolstoy, 1877/2000) and reads whatever random page or passage he comes upon. He claims that doing so always inspires him to get back to writing.

During that dinner, I began to wonder: What are students’ attitudes toward reading and writing? As teachers, what are our attitudes toward these activities? What should we be emulating in our own reading and writing or in the work habits we urge our students to adopt?

“I may be a man of fairly wide reading, but I retain nothing.” Michel de Montaigne, *On Books*

What reading and writing do students do? To address this question, I will rely on some published data from the national biannual surveys from UCLA’s Higher Education Research Institute (HERI; Sax, Astin, Korn, & Mahoney, 2000). Here are some snippets from the HERI survey:

1. Where writing ability is concerned, there is a Lake Woebegone effect: 45.9% of the polled students rated themselves as above average.
2. Relatively few students (less than 6%) have had remedial work in English, reading, or writing; but more students (10.8%) feel the need for remedial writing.
3. Electronic mail is often used, as are the Internet and the personal computer. Therefore, we can assume some facility with a keyboard, if not writing in general.
4. Some students (14.7%) believe that writing original works—poems, novels, short stories, and the like—constitute an essential or very important objective.

5. Much student time is spent watching television each week (3 to 5 hours viewing is the mode, but I can't help feeling this is an underestimate). By comparison, little time is spent reading for pleasure. Almost 25% of first-year students did no pleasure reading each week; in contrast, less than 6% watched no TV.

What can we conclude? If most first-year students do not read for pleasure, how likely is it that assigned course reading is greeted with any enthusiasm? What is surprising, however, is the size of the self-serving bias about first-year students' writing: Many routinely assume their writing skills are quite good. Would most of us agree?

Reading and Writing: What Are Faculty Doing?

"It's easy, after all, not to be a writer. Most people aren't writers, and very little harm comes to them." Julian Barnes, *Flaubert's Parrot*

What are college-level teachers doing when it comes to reading and writing? Here are observations drawn from Sax, Astin, Korn, and Gilmartin (1999). (These data represent 4-year institutions; 2-year school data are also available in this HERI report.) Sax et al. did not highlight reading activities per se; rather, they focused on writing, although we can assume that reading is a part of scholarship.

1. Most of us (88.5%) identify our principle activity as teaching.
2. When asked how much time per week was spent on research and scholarly writing, the most frequent response (31%) was between 1 and 4 hours.
3. Writing occurs often via e-mail (just over 80% use it daily), and research (broadly defined) is now done over the Internet (only 18.2% reported they never do Internet-based research).
4. Many faculty have never written a book (52%) or a book chapter (46.7%); however, most (over 83%) have published an article.
5. A sobering statistic: Only 37.4% of the teaching faculty assign research or term papers (the data do not indicate if other types of writing are assigned instead).
6. Only about 17% of teachers require multiple drafts of written work from students.
7. Do faculty feel pressure to publish? Yes—61% of the respondents felt a distinct pressure to publish.

Do these findings encourage you to reflect on your reading and writing habits? Do you feel you are reading enough? Are you writing enough?

Reading and Writing: Teaching by Doing

"Consider Freud, Lewin, and Skinner—among the most important figures in psychology. Some of their papers are awkward, incoherent, and inconsequential. But we honor their good papers. I am sure that none of these individuals set out to write classic papers. They simply wrote." Christopher Peterson, *Writing Rough Drafts*

Thoughts on Reading. We should encourage students to read more—but how? First, we must encourage students to read interesting materials by actually requiring them to do so. Second, we must set an example for our students. If you are discussing depression, for

example, suggest Styron's (1990) *Darkness Visible*; if manic depression is the topic, suggest Redfield Jamison's (1995) *An Unquiet Mind*. Talk about the books you are currently reading or just read. Use these books to illustrate issues in your classes. Pepper your lectures or class discussions with examples from them. I routinely tell students to write down my book recommendations in their notes (hope springs eternal).

Do you incorporate novels, short stories, or nonfiction works into your teaching? If not, consider adding literature or a nonfiction work to your class. I've done so on several occasions with considerable success. Students enjoy discussing psychological issues when they appear within the context provided by stories. One problem I have noticed, however, is that unless they are veterans of several English classes or are already voracious readers, typical psychology students are not used to reading literature. Thus, we must provide concrete guidance about how to read novels or other literary works. One way to accomplish this feat is to tell students how you read a book. For example, do you ask questions of yourself and the author as you go along? Or do you only draw conclusions when you finish reading?

After all, reading is a personal activity. Why not take the time to explain to your students how you read, identifying your habits and your quirks? I am a sucker for a pretty book jacket, so I often pick up books that way. I always read all of the critics' (uniformly positive) comments, any "about the author" notes, the preface or foreword, and the epigraph. Do you write in the margins of your books? If so, tell your students it is alright to do so, that marking up a book is a way to have a dialogue with the author (see Jackson, 2001).

Students should always be reading. I remember when I was an undergraduate, I heard the president of Smith College say how important it was for students to read other things besides their class work. This president's happy assumption was that, of course students were reading things besides their assigned work. This was a revelation to me, and I've never looked back; my nightstand always contains a pile of books.

Where readings in psychology are concerned, I think undergraduate psychology programs should consider developing the equivalent of graduate-level major reading lists (without the accompanying qualifying exams). Departments should identify a set of important sources in psychology—classic and contemporary—that all majors should know and then work to spread these readings throughout the psychology curriculum.

Teaching students to read broadly and thoughtfully is important work. As one student wrote to me after my fall 2001 class, "To be perfectly honest with you, *The Fall of the Sparrow* (Hellenga, 1999) and *Being There* (Kosinski, 1999) were the first books I ever actually enjoyed reading." I was delighted and horrified at this candor. As teachers, we have much to do.

How can you encourage your students to write more often? Some straightforward suggestions include having them write other things besides or in addition to research or

term papers, including: (a) short expository essays on psychological topics, (b) critiques of published articles, (c) book reviews, (d) interpretations of novels from a psychological perspective, (e) multiple drafts of papers (students need to learn that writing is a process that can always be improved), and (f) posters based on research projects carried out for a class (for suggestions on writing and writing projects, see Dunn, 1999, 2001, 2004).

What about you? Do you write enough? Do you want to write more? To enhance the frequency and quality of your own writing:

1. Buy a journal or notebook in which to record your daily observations.
2. Agree to write book reviews for academic journals or library publications.
3. Consider writing Op-Ed pieces for the APA Science Directorate.
4. Write an article on teaching for Teaching of Psychology.
5. If your institution publishes an alumni magazine, offer to write a piece on the Psychology department, you and your research, or some psychological topic that will appeal to alumni.
6. Write a history of your school's psychology program.
7. Write a lab manual or other pedagogical document for a course (or courses) you teach.

In Closing

To become better readers and writers, should we, like Robert Hellenga, consult *Anna Karenina* (Tolstoy, 1877/2000)? Perhaps. Many Russian novels from the 19th century are full of deep psychological portrayals. I do know this: I tell my students about Tolstoy's way with words. I also tell them about what I am currently reading and writing. I encourage you to do the same. Arouse their curiosity by sharing your passion for reading broadly and writing frequently.

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