

Engaging Students in History and Systems of Psychology Courses

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Courses in the history and systems of psychology currently face neglect. Although the neglect is not vicious, neither is it benign. Stanford University, Columbia University, and many other prominent institutions have eliminated their classes in the history of psychology (Chamberlin, 2010), and in a large survey of departmental requirements and teaching goals for the history of psychology, 24 departments reported that they would drop the course if the current instructor retired (Fuchs & Viney, 2002). Additionally, Fuchs and Viney (2002) found that the mean age of members of the Society for the History of Psychology (Division 26 of APA) was 64.52 years, on the cusp of potential retirement. Many factors contribute to the challenges facing the history of psychology course, including the growing number of other subfields and related topical classes in psychology, the relatively small number of dedicated scholars in the history of psychology, and increased institutional emphasis on funding and on research areas in psychology that can generate more substantial external grants than history (Chamberlin, 2010).

In addition to these larger pressures on history of psychology instructors, students often arrive in their history and systems classes with an amount of dread commensurate with their perceptions of the title. For example, even when students had not heard or seen either option, they reported that they preferred a film about sexuality and communication over a lecture on the history of psychology (Reynolds, 1977). In my own long-distant experience as a naïve undergraduate, I noted that Edwin G. Boring was an early eminent historian and wondered whether his name was diagnostic or coincidental. Wayne Viney's engaging undergraduate history of psychology class shattered that notion and changed my life. Given the institutional challenges to the mere existence of the history of psychology class as well as students' potential concerns, student engagement may be more important than ever in this course.

The materials that follow present a previously unpublished teaching demonstration in the history of psychology along with annotated teaching

demonstrations for classes in the history and systems of psychology. I review some additional novel activities at the conclusion of the chapter. Beyond classes dedicated to history, I recommend that instructors in other topic classes strive to make the history of psychological subfields come alive for their students (see Wertheimer, 1999).

Original Demonstration: Experiencing Little Albert

The famous story of Little Albert (Watson & Rayner, 1920) is a classic in history of psychology classes as well as in other courses, and current interest remains strong (see e.g., Beck, Levinson, & Irons, 2009; for podcasts created for students, see Britt, 2010a; 2010b). Students generally know that researchers performed a classical conditioning procedure with a child and taught the child to fear a white rat by pairing the rat with loud noise, but too often students arrive in the classroom with misconceptions propagated by textbooks and other sources (Harris, 1979). An engaging, previously unpublished demonstration allows students to experience the Little Albert story in ways that are unavailable in typical classroom or textbook presentations (Woody, 2008).

The demonstration follows the procedures of Watson and Rayner (1920). I use my own 4-foot steel bar that is three fourths of an inch in diameter¹, a hammer, a teddy bear to simulate Little Albert, and a small stuffed rat or rat substitute. First, I remind students of the fundamentals of classical conditioning. Second, I portray Watson, and I ask for a volunteer to portray Rosalie Rayner while reassuring him or her that for class purposes we assume that these events occurred before the affair between Watson and Rayner (see Buckley, 1994). Third, I provide ear protection² to each student; inside a classroom, the sound of a hammer striking a steel bar can be loud. Fourth, with the student volunteer's assistance, I rigorously follow the procedures provided by Watson and Rayner (1920), who described their initial application of the loud

noise as follows: “One of the two experimenters caused the child to turn its head and fixate her moving hand; the other, stationed back of the child, struck the steel bar a sharp blow” (p. 2). Students report that reading about Little Albert does not convey Little Albert’s experience as well as hearing the actual noise from a 4-foot steel bar struck with a hammer.

After the demonstration, students better understand the differences between methodological and ethical standards of today and those of the past, both of which seem lax by current standards. Additionally, students generally report that they perceive the experiment differently, and, even though they recognize that the researchers met the ethical requirements of the time, students report being shocked at the behavior of Watson and Rayner (Woody, 2008).

Annotated Bibliography

Debates about Historical Questions

Faculty debates. Lewin and Wakefield (1983) developed a course on intelligence co-taught by two faculty members with divergent views. Although only some aspects of their topic involved historical questions, each class session involved interactive debate by the two faculty instructors. Although some students reported that the debate format was ambiguous and confusing, others found it “engrossing” (Lewin & Wakefield, 1983, p. 115). Anecdotally, the authors reported that students continued the debates outside of class sessions and even volunteered to find and review additional literature to support particular points. The authors reported that the debate format was stimulating for them as teacher-scholars and also noted that the debates demonstrated to students the dynamic and progressive nature of psychological science instead of portraying psychological ideas as fixed. Although the authors continued their debates throughout the course, teachers of the history of psychology could involve a colleague in a debate for a single class session to engage their students on a particular topic (Viney & Woody, 2002).

- Lewin, L. M., & Wakefield, J. A. (1983). Teaching psychology through an instructor debate format, *Teaching of Psychology, 10*, 115-116.

Student debates. Zehr (2006) developed several debate topics for students in classes in the history and systems of psychology. For each topic, he provided a brief summary of the issue, specified a historical time period, and provided a relevant historical article. The instructor assigned each student to a topic, and, within each topic, he randomly assigned students to

argue pro or con. Students debated each topic in teams of four to six members, and debates generally occupied 30 to 45 min of class time. The instructor and student audience members then evaluated the debaters on several dimensions, and each debate team completed a short reflection paper 1 week after the debate. Zehr (2006) found that students were more likely to change their positions on topics that they debated in class than on topics that were not the subjects of the debates (see Carroll, 2006, for similar outcomes from student debates); Zehr also found that debates “increased student awareness of historical issues” (p. 139). Additionally, students enjoyed the debates and recommended that the instructor use the activity in future classes.

- Zehr, D. (2006). Thinking about historical issues: Debates in the history and systems class. *Teaching of Psychology, 33*, 137-140.
- Carroll, D. W. (2006). Thinking about historical issues: Debates in the history and systems class. *Teaching of Psychology, 33*, 137-140.

In another study, Zehr (2004) combined debates with role-playing when he asked students to act as faculty who must decide whether to hire William James as a new faculty member. Zehr (2004) randomly assigned students to the pro or con faction of the fictitious department, and members of each faction had to contribute a reason in support of or against James’s hiring. The students spent 20 min summarizing their points, and then each faction nominated a spokesperson to present their views. Zehr (2004) also described a semester in which he added competition and asked students to decide between James and Wilhelm Wundt as a new faculty hire. He reported that students better understood the psychology of James and Wundt, better understood issues of presentism in history, found the activity interesting, and recommended it for future classes.

- Zehr, D. (2004). Two active learning exercises for a history of psychology class. *Teaching of Psychology, 31*, 54-56.

Playing the Role of a Historical Figure

Student role-playing. Playing the role of a historical figure in psychology requires students to learn about the individual as well as the context in which he or she lived. Cole (1983) required students to play the roles of psychologists and to present a historically accurate scientific talk at a mock APA meeting. Cole (1983) designated a time period (e.g., 1890-1910) and, in some variations, a topic (e.g., child and adolescent psychology). Students selected a research article and topic, acted as author of the article, and completed a 12-min convention presentation based on the article. Cole (1983) required students to present with conviction and to

avoid presentist views; students could not present flaws in their paper beyond those noted by the author, and the students playing convention attendees could only ask questions based on the psychological knowledge available at the time.

Although Cole (1983) did not formally assess this technique, he anecdotally observed that students learned about several important historical phenomena: (a) the consistent presence of errors even in highly regarded publications; (b) the influence of racism, sexism, and other prejudices on the development of psychological science; (c) the limitations of textbook portrayals of history; and (d) the diversity of topics in early psychology. Additionally, students reported that they had not realized how many women were involved in early psychological research (see also Furumoto, 1985; Furumoto & Scarborough, 1986). Cole (1983) also noted some difficulties. For example, presentations required extensive class time, and discussion of the talks remained limited. Students also reported that some presentations were boring or poorly organized. Cole (1983) emphasized these perceptions as evidence of ecological validity of the activity – even famous psychologists sometimes give boring or poorly organized convention presentations. In addition to everything else, Cole (1983) reported that the conventions “provide[d] moments of theatre” (p. 235), including “Hugo Munsterberg” prompting “Herman Goltz” to switch from German to English for the non-German-speaking majority of the audience and “Mary Calkins” excitedly discussing her new experimental psychology program at Wellesley. Overall, Cole (1983) reported that students appeared to learn about the early history of psychology.

- Cole, D. (1983). The way we were: Teaching history of psychology through mock APA conventions. *Teaching of Psychology, 10*, 234-236.

Zehr (2004) developed a second student role-playing exercise in which students play the roles of famous psychologists from the early 1900s and then engage in a series of conversations modeled on a speed-dating session. The instructor assigned each student to act as a famous historical psychologist. Next, every student met with every other student in a series of 2-min conversations. Students then wrote about their experiences and about the characteristics and perceived impacts of the historical figures. Students rated the activity as interesting and recommended its use in future classes. Additionally, as recommended by Peden (personal communication, October 25, 2010), rather than use class time for this activity, students could complete these role-playing

activities outside of the classroom and bring podcasts to their next class session.

- Zehr, D. (2004). Two active learning exercises for a history of psychology class. *Teaching of Psychology, 31*, 54-56.

Faculty role-playing. In addition to having students participate in role-playing, I recommend that faculty read a biography of a historical figure in psychology and then step out of traditional teaching methods to act as a famous psychologist (Woody, 2010). Rather than strive for painstaking preparation, intense drama, and stellar acting, I encourage teachers of psychology to act as a famous psychologist in ways that are expedient (i.e., to stay concise with their own preparation time and with class time), economical (i.e., to stay within the limits of their own comfort and abilities), and poignant (i.e., to make the experience intellectually relevant to class and meaningful to students). I recommend that faculty members aim theatrically low. As teachers of psychology, our goals are educational instead of dramatic. These goals dictate some important considerations. First, no experience is necessary. Second, enthusiasm can compensate for limited abilities such as mine. Third, simplicity is preferable to complexity. In other words, instructors should feel free to hold and read their notes, limit their costumes and props, and avoid structured rehearsal times for themselves or others. No acting awards are available, and, as stated previously, I encourage instructors to focus on instructional instead of theatrical goals and fit their endeavors to their strengths.

For example, to act as E. B. Titchener in his senior-level history and systems of psychology class, Brett King, an award-winning psychology teacher at the University of Colorado at Boulder, dons doctoral robes, a fake beard, and a British accent. I cannot maintain a British accent without offending people; therefore, when I act as Titchener, I do so without the robes, beard, or accent. I nevertheless present Titchener’s methodology, commitment to his students, and overbearing presence to the best of my ability. Although my presentation is not as realistic as King’s portrayal, my students learn about Titchener’s methods, his system of psychology, and his biography. Anecdotally, students have reported interest in and enjoyment of the activity, despite my limited acting skills.

Academic Genealogies

Almost all individuals with doctorates in psychology can retrace their intellectual heritage to a few individuals in the late 1800s, typically William James or Wilhelm Wundt (Goodwin, Dingus, & Petterson, 2001; Terry, 1980; Weigel & Gottfurcht, 1972). In this activity, students build a family tree.

They begin with their own advisors and their advisors' doctoral advisors (and other important mentors) and then trace these individuals' advisors back to early psychologists. In small departments, where a single class can complete a genealogy for every faculty member, students can also trace the lineage of famous (or perhaps just willing and available) psychologists (Goodwin et al., 2001). Academic genealogies demonstrate connections as well as diversity in the history of psychology. Genealogies remain limited in several ways, however. They emphasize people over historical context, they omit many intergenerational influences, and informal mentoring relationships are difficult and sometimes impossible to trace (Goodwin et al., 2001). Despite these limits, students report that they hone their literary search skills, learn about the history of psychology, and learn more about their faculty and advisors.

- Goodwin, J. C., Dingus, M., & Petterson, S. (2001). The genealogy project: Tracing academic roots in the history and systems course. *Teaching of Psychology, 29*, 61-63.
- Terry, W. S. (1980). Tracing psychologists' "roots": A project for history and systems course. *Teaching of Psychology, 7*, 176-177.
- Weigel, R. G., & Gottfurcht, J. W. (1972). Faculty genealogies: A stimulus for student involvement in history and systems. *American Psychologist, 27*, 981-983.

Demonstrations of Classical Apparatus

Caudle (1979) noted that early psychologists worked with a wide range of apparatus and that demonstrations were central to the teaching approaches of many early psychologists, including E. B. Titchener and others. Caudle concisely described several engaging activities for the history class, including classic low-budget activities based on the work of such historical luminaries as Aristotle, William James, Edward Thorndike, and Hermann Ebbinghaus; she also described demonstrations that included two-point thresholds, psychophysical methods, and the phi phenomenon. Caudle (1979) further encouraged seeking, collecting, or having students build replicas of the early tools of psychology. Although Caudle (1979) did not assess learning outcomes or student preferences, her long list of demonstrations provides many engaging options for history of psychology teachers.

- Caudle, F. M. (1979). Using "demonstrations, class experiments and the projection lantern" in the history of psychology course. *Teaching of Psychology, 6*, 7-11.

Original Demonstration Celebrating Historical Dates

Peden and Woody (2000) recommended celebrating the history of psychology each week or on each day of class. They designed activities to bring history into classes across the curriculum (see Wertheimer, 1999), and these engaging techniques highlight the diversity of the history of psychological science. For each day of class, instructors can consult Street's (1994) chronological history of psychology or Street's (2010) Web site, Today in the History of Psychology (www.cwu.edu/~warren/today.html). Peden and Woody noted that on a single day in the fall semester, October 22, an instructor could celebrate the birth of Julian B. Rotter in 1916, the publication of the *Schedules of Reinforcement* (Ferster & Skinner, 1957), or Gustav Fechner's dramatic 1850 insight into the possibility of a mathematical relation between the mind and body. Peden and Woody recommended homework assignments in which students must identify the most relevant event for a class or a topic for the date, week, or month. Across all of these activities, they warned instructors about the dangers of pursuing trivial details, and they recommended connecting any discussion of the events of the date or week to class content and goals so that students engage in personally relevant activities that involve meaningful learning (Peden & Woody, 2000).

Original Demonstration Guest Speakers and the Context of Psychology

Despite calls by Furumoto (1989) and others for increased awareness of the role of context in psychological history, many of the demonstrations described here emphasize historical individuals. Students should also recognize and engage with the context of history. I recommend that instructors consider inviting guests who were students or academics in the first half or the middle of the 20th century to talk about the larger academic context of psychology. Anecdotally, students in my classes often take for granted that women are present in today's classrooms and that these women can live independently, drive themselves to campus, and wear pants to class. Today's students may not realize that their mothers or grandmothers did not have some or all of those privileges on many university campuses through the 1960s and even on some campuses today. Guests may discuss the presence or absence of diversity on campuses, treatment of people from

marginalized groups, expectations of professors, or other details.

Senior or emeritus faculty members may provide historical details about the context of academia that may surprise students. Students today are often shocked to learn that Muzafer Sherif started his graduate seminars at 7:00 p.m. and did not stop before midnight (W. Viney, personal communication) or that this was appropriate in the 1950s. Additionally, today's students may also be surprised to learn that Sherif's students did not publicly complain. Today's students could evaluate the ways that these pressures may have shaped the processes of psychological research and the experience of being a student.

Conclusions

The materials I have reviewed provide a wide range of methods for increasing student engagement in history and systems of psychology classes. Student engagement is critical for the success of psychology students who are becoming teachers, scholars, and professionals and also for the continuation of the history and systems course in times of competing class requirements, small numbers of dedicated scholars, and intense pressure toward substantial external funding (Chamberlin, 2010; Fuchs & Viney, 2002). Hopefully, these activities can provide teachers of the history of psychology with additional tools to engage students creatively.

References

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Woody, W. D. (2010, April). *Be the famous psychologist*. Presented at the annual meeting of the Rocky Mountain Psychological Association, Greenwood Village, CO.

Footnotes

1. One can purchase a length of 3/4-inch steel bar in the electrical section of a hardware store and use a hacksaw and some dedication to cut the bar to the required length of 4 feet. Or, one can find a friend or professional with a hacksaw and the knowledge to use it safely.

2. One can purchase an inexpensive container of foam ear protectors during the same trip to the hardware store.