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Creighton University

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PSYCHOLOGY

DISCOVERING HISTORY OF PSYCHOLOGY

Mark E. Ware

Department of Psychology
Creighton University
Omaha, Nebraska 68178

Research projects, reading sources, and a lecture format were used in a course on history and systems of psychology to determine their effectiveness as learning instruments. Twenty-two students enrolled in the fall and spring semesters of the course took part in the evaluation. Students selected from among several types of research projects. One secondary and two primary reading sources were used. The instructor's lectures included material from both within and outside the texts. The results of a course evaluation indicated that students reacted favorably to research projects as a means for acquiring or modifying skills, information, and attitudes. Satisfaction with reading sources varied as a function of the source and the dimension evaluated. Lectures appeared to be an important component of the course. A distinction was made between firsthand and encyclopedic approaches to learning. Since the former offers a valuable alternative, additional directions for research were suggested.

† † †

INTRODUCTION

An examination of undergraduate psychology curricula reveals that virtually all require at least one course in research methodology, usually of the laboratory variety. However, an increasing number of undergraduate teachers from several content areas are including research projects as a part of their courses. Reasons include the belief that one of the best ways to learn about behavior is to engage in the process of studying it (Maas and Kleiber, 1976).

In one area, history of psychology, Benjamin (1976) pointed out that the teaching of research skills at the undergraduate level is rare and at the graduate level is not prominent. Grigg (1974) reported his efforts at stressing a research perspective in a history of psychology course by assigning one of a variety of research projects to each team of students. The author described the approach as stimulating student discussion and providing experience in conducting historical research.

Others reported efforts to arouse student interest in the history of psychology and to assist in acquisition of firsthand knowledge about it. Prytula, Oster, and Davis (1977) pointed out that primary reading sources provided students with an opportunity to determine for themselves what was originally written about a topic. Benjamin (1979) described his approach of having students select and read articles published before 1920.

Coffield (1973) criticized use of the traditional lecture format as an impetus for learning. However, my judgment and experience are more consistent with those of Raphelson (1979) and Benjamin (1979) respectively. A working assumption was that the lecture can be an effective technique when accompanied by an instructor's enthusiastic attitude toward the subject.

The present investigation identified students' reactions toward research projects, reading sources, and a lecture format as instruments for learning in a history of psychology course.

METHOD

Subjects

Twenty-two students enrolled in History and Systems of Psychology during the fall and spring semesters at Creighton University participated in the evaluation of the course. The two classes consisted of junior and senior psychology majors (16 men and 6 women). The course was not required.

Procedures

The instructor told the students on the first day of class that the course consisted of two approaches to the study of

the history of psychology. The first consisted of a research component in which individuals or small groups undertook responsibility for investigating one of several possible topics. Others (Shaklee, 1957; Weigel and Gottfurcht, 1972; Cadwalader, 1977, Symposium paper presented at the 1977 meeting of the American Psychological Association; and Benjamin, 1979) have reported similar research approaches. A second and somewhat more traditional approach consisted of student reading and instructor lecture formats. Two of the three books used in the course were primary sources. The instructor indicated that this was the first time he had used these approaches and that students would be asked to complete an evaluation form at the end of the semester.

Research projects included a study of the professional development of department faculty, a history of the psychology department, the experience and professional backgrounds of the department chairpersons, and the life of a famous psychologist. The instructor provided a detailed description of each project and asked students to indicate their preference. About 85% of the students were assigned to projects ranked as their first choice. The instructor set a maximum number of students for each project to insure thorough supervision.

One 75-min class period was set aside for the instructor to meet with students assigned to each of the projects. He reviewed the more general objectives of the project and described the organizational and stylistic characteristics of the written paper. Students conducting interviews were required to interview the instructor for the purpose of improving their interview skills. The instructor also identified and described appropriate resource materials.

Texts used in the course included those by Wertheimer (1970), Freud (Strachey, 1962), and Maslow (1970). The instructor employed a lecture format for transmitting and clarifying information contained in the texts as well as providing additional information.

The instructor reserved the last two weeks of the semester for student presentations. The presentations were intended to communicate additional information to members of the class and to provide each student or team of students with feedback that could be incorporated in the final written report.

In the class preceding the final examination, the instructor administered a course evaluation. He told the students that the results were anonymous and that answers should be as honest as possible since the results were to be used to assess the effectiveness of the research projects, reading sources, and lectures. All students completed the evaluation form.

RESULTS

Since the design and practicality of this investigation did not permit the use of a traditional control group, a rationale for evaluating the results was derived. Students responded to each item on a six-step scale with 3, 2, and 1 indicating increasing degrees of disagreement (or dissatisfaction). Responses 4, 5, and 6 indicated increasing degrees of agreement (or satisfaction). A median score ≤ 3.5 indicates that as many or more than one-half of the students were in disagreement about a given facet of the course. It was assumed that a minimum standard of agreement should include a favorable reaction from at least a simple majority of students. Thus, a criterion of a median score of at least 4 was set to indicate a favorable student attitude. Similarly, a rationale was developed for identifying those instances in which students expressed an unusually high level of agreement. Because of the tendency to avoid making extreme judgments, finding as many as one-half the students responding with a 6 constituted a high level of agreement. Thus, a criterion of a median score in excess of 5 was set to identify an unusually favorable attitude toward an item.

Items used to evaluate the research projects were subdivided according to methodology, topic, and implementation. Results of items about the methodological aspects of the projects were mixed. The projects seemed particularly effective in clarifying and developing a better appreciation of historical events. Students agreed that they had acquired a new and different investigative procedure which was more difficult than they had realized (median = 4.5). However, students did not perceive the methodology of historical research to be as difficult as that of the laboratory approach (median = 3.5).

Regarding the topic investigated by the project, students reported the acquisition of much new information and a clarification of attitude toward the topic (median = 5.0).

The effectiveness of implementation of the projects was assessed by three items. A very high degree of student agreement was found with regard to the instructor's assistance in structuring the research projects (median = 5.5). Students also indicated that class presentations of the projects were worthwhile to them (median = 4.5). Finally the results indicated that the projects merited retention as a part of the course in the future (median = 5.0).

The bipolar dimension for evaluating the course texts varied from very unsatisfactory to very satisfactory. Students judged each text on information, enjoyment, and readability. No book was perceived as highly satisfactory. However, Wertheimer's book was evaluated as unsatisfactory with regard to enjoyment (median = 3.0); and Freud's book was

unsatisfactory on both enjoyment and readability (median = 3.0 and 2.0 respectively). Maslow's book elicited no unsatisfactory evaluations. In sum, the material by Maslow ranked most favorably, Freud least favorably, with that by Wertheimer between the two extremes.

Students viewed the instructor's lectures as helping to clarify issues (median = 5.0) and as going beyond information contained in the texts (median = 5.0).

DISCUSSION

This investigation undertook an identification of students' assessment of one approach to teaching history of psychology. The study extended Grigg's (1974) attempt by providing quantitative verification of the advantages of a research approach. Results indicated that students perceived the utility of research for providing a better understanding of historical events. Students also distinguished the historical and laboratory methods. Thus, engaging in historical research contributed to an appreciation of its difficulty and its relationship to laboratory research. One is tempted to suggest the additional advantage of better preparing and equipping students for investigative pursuits by providing a broader range of research approaches. The advantage is particularly keen when students are able to discriminate between them and the propriety of their use.

The evidence also indicated that the research projects influenced the students' perceptions about acquiring additional information and modified their attitudes toward the topic. Those results are consistent with Rogers' (1969) view that self-discovered learning significantly influences behavior.

Some of the success of the projects can be attributed to the method of implementation. The instructor spent considerable time with students to structure the plan of investigation. The instructor's previous experience had been that projects of lesser quality result when students are not provided with adequate organizational assistance. Student reaction to the assistance was extremely favorable. Other facets of implementing the research projects consisted of student presentations of their projects. It was hoped that not only would the speaker profit by giving a formal presentation but that other students would gain from hearing about the investigative efforts of a peer. The data are supportive of such a conclusion, including a favorable reaction for maintaining the projects for future courses.

A current innovation consists of arranging student presentations to simulate a convention atmosphere similar to that reported by Dawson (1976) for a course in experimental psychology. The procedure consists of preparing a program

and coaching students in convention etiquette. Student perceptions of the event will be collected and evaluated.

Reactions to the reading sources were mixed. The results supported use of primary sources. They also indicated that primary sources were not perceived favorably on all dimensions. It is recommended that primary sources be selected with caution and, when possible, with attention to more than only an informational component. A danger is that the content of a book may be overlooked because of dissatisfaction associated with enjoyment and/or readability. One advantage to using both types of reading material is that inconsistencies between the two can be pointed out by the instructor or discovered by the students. Future research should assess the consequences of identifying inconsistencies.

Under the conditions of this study, undergraduate students seemed to profit from firsthand learning about psychology. That firsthand learning can be complemented by the traditional lecture format was supported by student reactions to the lectures. Students' responses indicated that lectures provided information and organized/clarified issues.

The author has also used the multiple approach of research projects, reading sources, and lectures with comparable results in a course on the psychology of personality. In both instances, he worked from a bias preferring depth of coverage of fewer sources to breadth of topics and concentration on nomenclature. Although this study indicates that students perceived increased learning from this approach, additional research is needed to evaluate its comparative advantages and disadvantages for personal learning and the acquisition of information. Subsequent research should also evaluate the longer term effectiveness, particularly for students who do and do not attend graduate school. A more comprehensive examination of the consequences of teaching approaches is clearly warranted.

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