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Mark W. Ware
Creighton University

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USE OF THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY FOR PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT
AND AS AN INVESTIGATIVE TECHNIQUE*

MARK E. WARE

Department of Psychology
Creighton University
Omaha, Nebraska 68178

Theory and previous research indicated that an autobiographical project should facilitate personal development and the acquisition of an investigative technique. Twelve students from classes in Personality and History/Systems of Psychology participated in the study by writing autobiographical papers as one option for a course project and by completing an evaluation form. Quantitative and qualitative evaluations of the effectiveness of the autobiography for personal development and as an investigative method were obtained. Data from both sources supported the use of an autobiographical project for acquiring and clarifying information about one's self and his/her relationships to others. Student reactions also indicated that they had acquired an investigative technique and discriminated between it and the laboratory approach. Finally, the advantages of using multiple forms of evaluation were discussed, and qualifications for use of the autobiography were identified.

† † †

INTRODUCTION

A theoretical approach to learning derived from therapeutic experience has recommendations to make for pedagogy (Rogers, 1969). Among several principles governing learning, two assert that learning occurs when the material is perceived as relevant and when the person is confronted with practical problems. In the context of the theory, an autobiographical study should facilitate certain learning.

Although use of the autobiography is not new (Allport, 1942), published reports on its use as a teaching technique can be traced to Jung (1972). Students in a personality course wrote confidential autobiographies. The data from the autobiographies was used to illustrate the organization and development of personality. Student evaluations indicated that the autobiographies had generated considerable enthusiasm and served as an important learning experience. Others

have reported similar applications and results from the use of the autobiography (Brender, 1976; Hettich, 1976; White, 1974). However, one limitation in most of the aforementioned studies has been the use of informal student evaluations.

In addition to predicting cognitive gains, the theory permits a prediction that the autobiography can be effective for learning about one's self for personal development. No research has been found which directly investigated that hypothesis; however, one study (Jung, 1972) reported post hoc findings of increased personal awareness and growth.

Finally, one is led to predict that the autobiography can be used as an investigative technique which is different from the more commonly taught laboratory method. Although one study reported using the autobiography for hypothesis testing (Jung, 1972) and another for modifying attitudes toward research (Klos, 1976), attention to using the autobiography as an investigative technique has been lacking.

The present investigation was designed to test further the theory of learning and to extend previous research. The primary objectives included an evaluation of the role of an autobiographical project for facilitating personal development and acquiring a distinctive technique of research. The present study incorporated both quantitative and qualitative student evaluations, in contrast to most research, which has employed only qualitative forms. The rationale for using both measures was to achieve precision and to reveal consequences inaccessible to the form imposed by a more structured questionnaire. Finally, the procedure used to implement the project was examined.

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METHOD

Subjects. A total of eight men and four women enrolled in Personality and History/Systems of Psychology courses at Creighton University during fall and spring semesters selected the autobiographical project from among several course projects. Neither course was required, but both were upper-division and had pre-requisites of Introductory Psychology plus six additional hours of psychology.

Procedure. All students were told at the first class meeting that a course project was required but that they would have several alternatives from which to choose. By the third meeting of the semester, students were informed about which project they would be doing. For about 75 percent of the students, their first preference for a project was granted. No student was assigned a project in which he or she ranked less than second.

The instructor met separately with each group of students assigned to a particular research project. He spent approximately 75 minutes with each group. The instructor reviewed the more general objectives of the projects and described the organizational and stylistic characteristics required of the written paper. Students were told that the instructor regarded the contents of their autobiographies as confidential. They were encouraged to be as candid as possible.

Students in both classes were expected to provide a one-to two-page descriptive evaluation of the autobiographical project, including an identification of the advantages and disadvantages of having done the project. In the last class before the final exam, students were administered a course evaluation which covered the course projects. The only identification requested was with regard to the type of project each student had done. All students completed the quantitative and qualitative evaluations of the project.

RESULTS

Table I contains items which appeared on the course evaluation. Students responded to each item by indicating their reaction on a six-step scale which varied from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (6). Table II contains the results of the quantitative evaluation for both classes. The percent of students responding at each step on the scale for each item and the median response for each item is reported in Table II.

Since the design of this investigation did not permit the use of a traditional control group, a rationale for evaluating the results was derived. A median score of ≤ 3.5 indicates that as many as or more than half of the students were in disagreement with a given statement about 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 median score of at least (4) was set to indicate a student's

TABLE I

Student Evaluation Form
for Autobiographical Projects

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1. As a consequence of doing the project, I acquired much new information about the topic.
 2. The projects demonstrated that autobiographical research can clarify and/or develop a better appreciation toward past events.
 3. One of the experiences I acquired was a method of inquiry different from the experimental/laboratory method.
 4. Compared to the experimental/laboratory approach, I feel that autobiographical research is more difficult.
 5. Structuring of the autobiographical project by the instructor was helpful. (Included an identification of the problem, a method for gathering data, and advice on how to organize and write the report.)
 6. The autobiographical project should be retained in the course in the future.
-

TABLE II

Percent of Students and Median Response
for Each Item on the Evaluation Form (N = 12)

Questions	Responses						Median
	1	2	3	4	5	6	
1	----	----	----	33	50	17	5.0
2	----	----	----	----	50	50	5.5
3	----	----	----	66	33	----	4.0
4	----	33	50	----	17	----	3.0
5	----	----	----	33	33	33	5.0
6	----	----	----	----	50	50	5.5

agreement with a statement. A second 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 half of the students responding with a (6) was assumed to be unlikely. Thus, a median score greater than (5) was set to identify an item as indicating an unusually high degree of agreement.

Samples of students' responses from the qualitative evaluation are reported in Table III. Comments were identified as illustrating items on the evaluation form.

Items (1) and (2) on the evaluation were assumed to provide a measure of student reaction to the autobiography for personal development. Table II reveals that the median response for both items was in the region of agreement, 5.0 and 5.5 respectively. Students indicated that they had acquired new information about and clarified existing attitudes toward themselves as a consequence of doing the autobiography. The following student comments from Table III illustrate the dimensions of new information and clarification respectively: "This paper has opened up some important characteristics and beliefs held by me." "It brought home to me, very dramatically, that I am still a growing, maturing person with a lot left to learn about being human."

Items (3) and (4) were designed to evaluate student reaction to the role of the autobiography as an investigative technique. The results in Table II indicate considerable variability in student reaction. Students agreed (median = 4.0) that they had acquired a distinctive method of inquiry. However, they did not agree that the autobiographical approach was as difficult as the experimental method (median = 3.0). The following student comment from Table III illustrates the acquisition of a technique: "Writing this paper has been a very valuable experience for me. It required a degree of introspection and self-analysis that I had never achieved before."

The last two items on the evaluation assessed student reaction to the effectiveness with which the autobiography had been implemented. The instructor's assistance in organizing the project and identifying how it should be reported was reacted to favorably, as indicated by a median response of 5.0 to item (5). An unusually high level of agreement (median = 5.5) was found to the item about retaining the project in future classes.

DISCUSSION

The present study supported predictions from theory and suggestions from previous research that an autobiographical project can contribute to personal development. Thus, the autobiographical project has been demonstrated to be effective not only for acquiring information about concepts/principles, but also for improving self-understanding and enhancing one's perception of his/her relationship with others. Moreover,

TABLE III

Student Comments Illustrating Items
on the Evaluation Form

Personal Development	
1.	This paper has opened up some important characteristics and beliefs held by me. (No. 1, New Information.)
2.	After going through this (project), I was initially disgusted with myself because I was not setting very demanding goals for myself. Before this experience, I was planning on getting a masters in counseling and stopping there. However, after having to review my life and looking realistically at what I am, what I am capable of doing, and what I should do, I had to reorganize my thoughts and set higher goals for myself. (No. 1, New Information.)
3.	The paper has been extremely rewarding because it has caused me to look into myself to try to discover what type of an individual I have become. It has helped me in deciding which (type of) occupation I should pursue by forcing me to weigh the opportunities more closely. As a result, I am now more confident than ever that my decision, allowing for flexibility, is not contrary to my well being. (No. 2, Clarification.)
4.	It brought home to me, very dramatically, that I am still a growing, maturing person with a lot left to learn about being human. (No. 2, Clarification.)
5.	In conclusion I have come to realize the importance of these next few years of my life. Indeed they may be the most important ones in my life. I have also gained an added appreciation of my life, and those people who have contributed in shaping it. (No. 2, Clarification.)
6.	After looking over my life, I was disappointed at really how much I had missed in previous years as far as interactions with people, and was very disappointed at how little I had appreciated the people around me. (No. 2, Clarification.)
Investigative Method	
1.	Writing this paper has been a very valuable experience for me. It required a degree of introspection and self-analysis that I had never achieved before, mostly because of the fact that I had to write it all down. (No. 3, Distinctive Method.)
2.	It was really a new experience to sit down and really try to be honest with myself for any length of time. (No. 3, Distinctive Method.)

the effectiveness of the autobiography in more than one course, which was found in this investigation and others (Hettich, 1976), supports a conclusion for its more widespread use as one pedagogical technique. Finally, the high degree of consistency between predictions from the theory and research findings should encourage researchers to identify and evaluate additional techniques.

The finding that the autobiography can be used as an investigative technique extends findings from previous research that indicated changes in attitudes toward research as a consequence of doing case histories (Klos, 1976). Part of the distinctiveness of the method was identified by students as "introspection" and "self-analysis." The gain associated with acquiring additional research techniques should not be underemphasized. Indeed, students are better prepared for investigative pursuits and evaluation when they are provided with a broader range of investigative techniques.

Favorable student responses to implementation of the project were consistent with the qualitative findings of other investigators (Brender, 1976; Jung, 1972; White, 1974). Perhaps the strongest testimonial was the unusually favorable recommendation that the project be retained for other students.

The value of both the quantitative and qualitative evaluations was also demonstrated. The qualitative results not only clarified the quantitative measures, but they also revealed cognitive and affective dimensions of students' behavior that are not apparent with the use of quantitative data alone. The affective dimension was illustrated by students' comments about disgust/disappointment with themselves and about increased appreciation for living.

A next step in evaluating autobiographical writing should include an assessment of the change in student attitudes and values. Both pre- and post-test measures should be obtained from students who are engaged in writing autobiographies and those who are not. In addition, a content analysis of the autobiographies would provide normative data for future evaluation.

Caution is urged for those who might be tempted to use the autobiographical project. Experience has revealed inferior products when students are not provided with at least a moderate degree of structure about the objectives of the project and organizational assistance regarding the written report. Finally, the autobiography is not recommended for use as a project required of all students, but only for those who choose it.

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