Creating Student Interest

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Psychology instructors often encounter their students years later, and the bravest among us may ask them what they remember from our courses. We hope they will remember the facts that we heavily emphasized and stressed as important to our discipline. More often they recall, usually with some pleasure, the time the fire alarm went off during the exam, or when a student fell asleep and slipped out of a chair during a lecture. After a few experiences of this sort, teachers usually realize students will remember only a small fraction of the information presented in class. But, ever hopeful, we spend considerable time and effort creating lectures, examples, and presentations to make what we feel is the most important content in our courses memorable. However, there is not even much agreement on exactly what the most important content is.

What Is Important to Psychology Teachers

Miller and Gentile (1998) surveyed a national sample of introductory psychology instructors and found that their most important goal was to "engage students in scientific inquiry about psychological processes," and that they rated learning, memory, physiology, and abnormal psychology as the most important subjects. Zechmeister and Zechmeister (2000) did a content analysis of the glossaries of 10 Introductory Psychology textbooks and found only 64 of 2,505 terms or concepts appeared in all of them. The authors then surveyed Introductory Psychology instructors and asked how important it was that each of these 2,505 entries be included in the introductory course. Only six were ranked "very important" by everyone: learning, memory, nature-nurture issue, scientific method, unconditioned stimulus, and Unconditioned Response. These topics do overlap with Miller and Gentile's list, but only partially.

Another method to identify important content in our field is to consider the classes that are valued during the graduate admission process. Norcross, Hanych, and Terranova (1996) surveyed graduate programs across the United States, asking how important it was for graduate applicants to have taken certain undergraduate courses. Eighty-five percent of respondents required or preferred statistics, 66% research methods, 36% developmental psychology, 33% abnormal psychology, 28% learning, and 28% personality. A similar study evaluated undergraduate courses valued by psychology graduate programs and found statistics (along with computer science, public speaking, and writing skills) was the most important (Norcross, 1997).

What Is Important to Students

Unfortunately, students do not always perceive the relative importance of various psychological science topics in quite the same way their instructors do. McKenzie and Cangemi (1978) surveyed introductory psychology students about their interest in 90 topics that might be included in the course. Human sexual behavior was ranked first, then love (2), suicide (3), and child psychology (4). The items that were important to instructors and textbook authors (Miller & Gentile, 1998; Zechmeister & Zechmeister,

2000), such as memory (19), factors influencing learning (37), the heredity versus environment controversy (74), research methods (85), the structure of the nervous system (87), the history of psychology (88), and statistics and measurement (89) were ranked much lower by students.

More recently, VanderStoep et. al. (2000) found that most memorable things students recalled from their introductory course were sleeping disorders, Freud, schizophrenia, and classical conditioning. Stalder and Stec (2007) found introductory psychology students were more interested in clinical and social psychology than biological, cognitive, and developmental psychology. If exam performance reflects the degree of student interest in a topic, students had better answers for questions about social psychology, memory, consciousness, and development than they did for questions about biopsychology and emotion (Peck, et. al., 2006).

We recently conducted research in which students were asked what they found interesting and important in an introductory psychology course. University students rated "explanations of human behavior" as most important to them and career information second (Burns, Ernst, & Sleigh, 2011). Despite the fact that statistics and research methods are considered so important to our field that they are commonly required courses for psychology majors (Messer, Griggs, & Jackson, 1999; Perlman & McCann, 1999), only 11 percent of upperclassmen, 8percent of women, and very few men or lowerclassmen rated these subjects as the most important thing they had learned. Similarly, no students reported a topic of interest or importance that related to the historical or societal impact of psychology. This omission is worth careful consideration, given psychology's widespread impact and the fact that it occurred despite the growing emphasis on service learning at the collegiate level.

What Is Important to Students May Depend on Student Characteristics

Our research also revealed that what students find important may depend, at least to some extent, on demographic characteristics (Burns, Ernst, & Sleigh, 2011; McCann & Kadah-Ammeter, 2011). We found that technical college and university students valued topics differently. University students were more interested in developmental issues, social psychology, and learning and memory, while technical college students were more interested in motivation, emotion, and stress/health. When we compared university Freshmen and Seniors, we found that Freshmen were more interested in personality, psychological disorders, learning, and memory. Seniors were more interested in neuroscience, sensation and perception, and critical thinking. Overall, men and women had similar responses, with the exception that women rated human development and health as more important than did men.

Why the Disconnect Between Students and Teachers?

There may be several reasons why the topics that teachers find important do not overlap with those students find most meaningful. One reason is the lack of consensus regarding what topics are most important to teachers, as noted in previous research (e.g., Zechmeister & Zechmeister, 2000). A second possibility is that students' definition of "important" might differ from that of teachers. In support of this possibility, our study revealed that upperclassmen and women equated "importance" with "usefulness," while lowerclassmen and men were more likely to equate importance with "interesting" (Burns, Ernst, & Sleigh, 2011). A third possibility, and one that may coexist with the others, is that professors are doing an inadequate job of conveying importance. In this study, one interesting finding was that 70 percent of students believe that professors focus on what is important in the field of

psychological science, but 30 percent of students felt professors teach what they personally enjoy (regardless of its importance). This finding held true across gender and class standing. As we compared the responses of students in different sections of introductory psychology, we noted considerable variation in the topics that were reported as most interesting or important. This result reinforces the idea that the way a specific instructor presents a topic is very important in determining its relevance to students, and the ease with which they learn and retain that information.

Last but not least, students and teachers have different vantage points from which to assess importance. Teachers select "important" topics out of all possible domains in the field. Students can choose only from topics they have been exposed to. When we compared lowerclassmen (Freshmen and Sophomores) to upperclassmen (Juniors and Seniors), we found that underclassmen felt that human development (a lower-level class) was more important, while upperclassmen rated biopsychology (an upper-level class) as more important (McCann & Kadah-Ammeter, 2011). This class difference may reflect the classes that students had taken closest to the time they were surveyed or the depth of their previous exposure to psychological science.

Using Student Perspectives to Convey What We Consider to Be Important

The disconnect between student and faculty perspectives suggests that we may need to try even harder to gain student attention and interest as teachers discuss the content we feel is most important, and one way to do this is to relate the content that is important to instructors, but not as interesting to our students, to topics they do find interesting and important.

Create Clear Connections Between Class Material and Real-World Behavior

Across race, gender, and school class, students placed great importance on explanations of human behavior. Thus, any time we can link classroom material to what they are experiencing in the world outside the classroom, we will be tapping into their concept of importance. Fortunately, many of the topics in psychological science have real-world applicability, such as the significant implications the current health care debate has for treatment of the mentally ill.

The challenge for instructors is to make those links explicit rather than implicit. For example, there are many classes in which instructors discuss biological gender differences(related to hormones, nervous-system development, or brain structures) and the associated behaviors. The next step is to directly tie this information to an issue of importance to the students, such as how these gender differences might influence romantic or friendship relationships. Similarly, instructors can encourage students to picture their future selves and consider how gender differences might influence employer-employee perceptions, parent-child interactions, or future goals. Research has clearly demonstrated that relevancy enhances retention (e.g., Block, Greenberg, & Goodman, 2009; Brooks & McKelvie, 1986; Kember, Ho, & Hong, 2008), and our suggestion is to take advantage of the relevance students place on explanations of human behavior by attaching class material to various behaviors.

Incorporate Career Information Into Every Class

Career information was also very important to our students, but is an area that is not always stressed, or even covered, in traditional psychology classes. The use of various psychological content and

phenomena in various job or career settings could be easily mentioned in our classes. For example, developmental information can be linked to early childhood education, parenting, elder care, or social services; or health-related material could be connected to the medical field, athletic training, or health care administration. In doing so, instructors are not only linking class material to the world outside of the classroom (thus, increasing the relevance), they are simultaneously educating students about the career options that are available to them.

Because learning is not confined to the classroom, we also can convey career information through other means. For example, departments could use bulletin boards, e-mail newsletters, Psi Chi meetings, guest speakers, or online alumni networks to share career-related psychology information.

Teach With Future Employment in Mind

At many technical colleges, training for employment is a primary goal, and having classes meet "state competencies" is a major challenge for teachers. Another trend at technical colleges is assessment to determine that class content directly relates to each competency and addresses career relevancy. These technical college priorities match the strategy that we are advocating for all psychology classes, and can be accomplished in a variety of ways. Having students generate their own career-related examples for psychological concepts and share them with the class often promotes a lively and meaningful class discussion. Plus, the best examples can be retained for use in subsequent semesters. Students might also be asked to journal about past, present and future employment opportunities. While doing this, they might incorporate various activities such as generating personal examples depicting past and possible future environments, activities that are especially meaningful to students who are taking classes while working part-time or full-time jobs.

Another way to link course material to employment training is to use the interdependent global economy as a means to introduce important content. For example, cultural social norms influence expectations between employers and employees, and ethnocentrism can compromise a company's ability to understand its clients. In addition, our research indicated that students do not rate the historical and societal impact of psychology as important (Burns, Ernst, & Sleigh, 2011). The international job market offers a context in which to examine these very ideas. Using future employment as a discussion launcher, teachers may generate a lively conversation by questioning the strengths and weaknesses of research conducted primarily on people in developed countries, as well as how the data has influenced perceptions and behaviors.

Students are more likely to perceive classroom exercises as a way to earn grades than to view them as an opportunity to build skills for employment or further education. Teachers can help students see how educational activities develop marketable skills that will benefit them in the future. Instructors might want to discuss how classroom assignments, such as research papers and short answers on tests, prepare students for the writing styles used in the workplace, such as research proposals or internal memos to colleagues. Also, group work allows students to practice communication, flexibility, conflict resolution, listening, and the integration of differing perspectives. Teachers can remind students that such interpersonal skills are rated as among the most desirable skills for employers in the United States (Appleby, 2000; Landrum & Harrold, 2003; Sleigh & Ritzer, 2004), again using students' ideas of importance to make classroom information relevant to their future.

Be Aware of the Developmental Stage of the Audience

To best relate a topic to students, instructors must consider the nature of their student population. Type of school emerged as a variable in our data. University students are often developing their identities away from home, navigating a more complex social environment, and living within an academic setting where grades and performance are highly valued. Thus, it might be no surprise that they value development, social psychology, and learning/memory. Technical college students may be living at home and juggling multiple roles, which is reflected by their interest in topics such as motivation and emotion. Teachers who can identify the unique concerns and interests of their students are in the best position to connect classroom material to topics that are important to them.

We also found some gender differences. Women rated development and health issues as more important than did men. When covering these topics, instructors may need to make an extra effort to utilize examples that target male students. For example, when discussing prenatal development, it might be helpful to encourage men to think about their own prenatal development or their role as a husband, instead of teaching exclusively from the perspective of the "pregnant mom." When covering young-adult health, we might encourage men to think about the impact of health on future job performance or athletic longevity.

Underclassmen differed from upperclassmen, again suggesting that the nature of the students is an important consideration in attracting and maintaining student attention by appropriate choice of relevant examples. Underclassmen rated the concepts to which they had been most recently exposed as most important (e.g., personality, abnormal psychology, learning). Upperclassmen, in contrast, valued biopsychology, sensation and perception, and critical thinking, possibly reflecting their broader exposure to the importance of such topics in other courses. This finding suggests that the information most important to instructors may be closer to the interests of Juniors and Seniors, and thus it will be easier to convey, while greater care may be needed in making such information memorable to Freshmen and Sophomores. It also serves as a reminder to teachers that student interests are not static; thus, constant assessment of the classroom is necessary.

Teach Statistics and Research Methods as Consumer Skills, Not Just Psychology Skills

Statistics and research methods are courses that are highly valued by teachers, but not by students. If we consider these skills critical to understanding psychological science, we must find ways to make them meaningful to students. One way might be to help students see themselves as consumers of research living in a world where they are bombarded by statistics, advertisements, and research claims. We can tangibly show students that an understanding of research will help them save money, better understand social issues, and interpret the research summaries found in trade magazines. For example, instead of relying on textbook research examples, teachers can ask students to bring in printed information that is based on data, such as newspaper articles or political polls, and then teach them to critically evaluate it to help them make wise life decisions. Nolan and Heinzen (2009) describe how to help students evaluate graphs that might be included in these examples.

Similarly, we can sell the value of research-based courses by demonstrating how research skills can enhance a resume, graduate school application, or job interview. Johanson and Fried (2003) found that undergraduates who entered the job market rated research methods and statistics courses as less

important than did students in graduate school; however, both groups rated the skills as equally useful in their current position. We need to tell students that these skills will matter in their careers, and then teach them how to communicate these skills (see Sleigh & Ritzer, 2007, for examples). They need to understand that these skills will make them more attractive or competitive in the job market, and more valuable as employees.

Conclusion

In conclusion, we need to help students understand that priorities exist within our discipline, and that these priorities reflect current research findings, technological advances, and societal priorities. Textbooks do not often provide such information. As Nairne (1999, p. 94) points out, "You will find nothing in the organizational structure of most learning chapters to indicate anything about function or purpose — there will be little, if anything, in the organization to indicate why these topics are important, or even relevant, to the study of learning. Only deep in most chapters, if at all, will you find any reference to relevance or function, usually in sections called 'Applications.'" If students don't inherently know these priorities, and the textbooks don't offer the information, then it is up to us to communicate to students the most important psychological concepts in ways that convey that importance. We hope that the suggestions above give you some useful ideas or things to consider as you continue your efforts to make our subject matter memorable and interesting to your students.