

# Forum Letters

April 24, 2005

## ‘Tips’ Not Cutting Edge

I DON’T UNDERSTAND THE purpose of the *Observer* column “Teaching Tips,” nor do I understand what segment of psychology teachers the feature targets. Maybe they are geared toward graduate students and beginning professors. Maybe they aren’t geared toward seasoned professors such as me.

I do know that I’m becoming increasingly dismayed with the amount of attention objectivist methods of teaching are receiving in these articles and the lack of attention that educational theory and nontraditional (i.e., non lecture-based, student-oriented) approaches to learning are receiving. Of the 32 [“Teaching Tips”](#) listed on the APS Web site, almost half are on such objectivist topics as exams/grading, the use of texts, video or other media, or lecturing. Only three could be considered theory-based — for instance, on a particular type of teaching method or pedagogy. These articles — while well written and informative to some populations — are not cutting edge, nor do they encourage psychology faculty to try something new (and perhaps more effective) in the teaching of their classes. It is well documented that this objectivist approach to teaching/learning, where teachers deposit their knowledge into the heads of their students, is less effective than other approaches.

While educational theory has been applied to the teaching of such disciplines as physics and chemistry, psychology and other social sciences continue to discuss how best to lecture and develop exams. In fact, the 2004 request for proposals for the Fund for the Improvement of Post Secondary Education grants specifically stated that the social sciences are lagging behind the “natural” sciences in implementation of student-oriented approaches in the teaching of their course material.

Lecturing began because textbooks were not readily available. With the widespread availability of texts in the United States, this is no longer necessary. What are necessary are meaningful classroom activities that are student-oriented and based in theory, and that allow students with different learning styles to actively learn meaningful material.

While some psychology professors use activities and student-oriented approaches, “Teaching Tips” leads one to believe that this is not the norm. It’s time to start using the knowledge of our sister discipline, educational psychology, and the example of other sciences, to develop similar pedagogy for our students and encourage educational reform in our discipline. “Teaching Tips” are a prime mechanism that can be used to describe educational theory and newly developed, theory-based, educational practices in our field. The time has come to use them to their full potential.

—**Donna Ashcraft**  
*Clarion University*

## Love Lost

*The following letters are in response to the February article “For Modern-Day Cupids, Data Replaces Dating” by APS Member Steven R. Carter.*

STEVEN R. CARTER’S ARTICLE IN the February *Observer* surprised me. It is the direct promotion of a business enterprise unredeemed by any information of any value to psychologists. Carter tells us the potential advantages of matching potential mates (on the Internet) through the use of compatibility measures. He infers that this can reduce the divorce rate. He lauds the use of these factors in the operation of eHarmony.

Such claims would be inappropriate to make under any circumstances, since causality in the multivariate quagmire of marriage and divorce is exceptionally difficult to determine. Carter does not even have data to present. He seems happy with the compatibility factors he has extracted from his data and that are used at eHarmony, but he doesn’t tell us what they are. Could it be that eHarmony contains a magic ingredient?

This was just an ad for a dating service, complete with the obligatory photograph of an ecstatically happy couple. I would not have expected such blatant and crass commercialism in an APS publication.

—**Howard D. Eisman**

*Executive Director*

*New York Institute for Cognitive and Behavioral Therapies*

RECENTLY I GAVE A TALK TO students at a community college in Michigan about the importance of psychology courses for promoting critical thinking. I presented a list of the ads and other persuasive communications that we are all exposed to daily, and I made the point that ad designers hope we will not think too critically about what they say about their products and services. Among those I mentioned were TV commercials for the eHarmony.com dating service. I pointed out that all those happy couples shown grinning into the camera create the impression that the company’s matching process is virtually perfect, but that no empirical evidence is presented in support of the service. In particular, no data are given on the percentage of *unsuccessfully* matched pairs, making it impossible to determine whether one’s chances of finding the perfect partner are high enough to warrant the expense of the service.

When I got home, I found the February issue of the *Observer* waiting, and imagine my surprise to see an article on the psychological science behind eHarmony.com. I thought surely I am going to have to eat the words I had spoken just the day before, but I was even more surprised to find that the article read like a long, subtle commercial. For example, the author mentions “29 Key Factors of compatibility” that are used in matching couples, but he doesn’t give examples of what those factors are. Nor does he cite any references to which the reader can turn to learn more about the research underlying the matching program.

I was particularly struck by the sentence: “To date, we estimate that over 9,000 eHarmony couples have married, and follow-up studies comparing eHarmony marriages to married couples that met in other ways have confirmed the benefit of eHarmony’s compatibility models in regards to marital satisfaction

and adjustment.” As in the TV ads, there was not a word about how many eHarmony-matched couples turned out to be *incompatible*. Given that the article appeared in an APS publication, I was expecting something more than a rough estimate of eHarmony’s results and a vague statement about research “confirming” the benefits of the company’s matching models.

—**Douglas A. Bernstein**

*University of South Florida*

IS THE *OBSERVER* AWARE THAT eHarmony [February 2005] has an explicitly stated agenda of “reducing the divorce rate,” and is the only online matching service that does not offer same-sex matching? A search of PsychInfo found no papers published by Neil Clark Warren, the founder of eHarmony, on the topic of relationships. (It found one peer-reviewed paper on therapy and one book on religion.)

If Warren has 35 years of experience studying marriage, why hasn’t he published it? PerfectMatch and True also do matching based on psychological tests, but at least Pepper Schwartz (PerfectMatch) and James Houran (True) have published their research on relationships in peer-reviewed journals. For the *Observer* to publish a cheerleading article on this particular Web site without any caveats or seemingly without any investigation represents an error in judgment.

—**Maureen Olmsted**

*Arizona State University*

## **Earth to Planet Darwinia**

HOW LUCKY HENRY L. Roediger, III has been to have spent his academic career on planet Darwinia, where the best and brightest assistant professors get tenure, the best tenured faculty become chairs, the best chairs deans, the best deans provosts, and the best provosts become presidents and are paid (on average) two to 10 times the salaries of tenured full professors. Those of us who have spent our careers on planet Earth — where we see similar salary differentials whether or not it is the cream that has risen to the top — are surprised only to learn that even in his utopia the worst-paid baseball players earn more than the most highly overpaid university presidents.

—**Justin Joffe**

*University of Vermont*

## **The Gee Factor**

I FOUND THE ARTICLE [“ARE University Presidents Overpaid or Underappreciated?”](#) [February 2005] to be very well done. But despite Henry Roediger’s argument, there are some university leaders who may not be deserving of their high earnings.

In that article, Gordon Gee of Vanderbilt was cited as the third highest private university leader, at nearly \$900,000. Gee came to Brown University before his continuing journey took him to Vanderbilt. In an amazingly short time at Brown, he and his wife, through a combination of aloofness and excessive

demands, managed to alienate a great deal of the faculty, student body, alumni, and general community. (Providence, Rhode Island, is a small community, and everyone serving on boards or in the arts and education meets everyone else professionally and socially.)

Similarly, Adelphi University president Peter Diamandopoulos was ousted a few years ago for having millions in salary, benefits, and a very expensive Manhattan apartment paid for by the university. He was later hired, ironically, by John Silber, president of Boston University, who has also been accused of high-handedness and outrageous perquisites.

Not unlike some vastly overpaid corporate CEOs who tend to “bounce around” at given levels of mediocre performance, these university presidents are no better than their private sector counterparts seeking personal aggrandizement, and often becoming traveling road shows. As with some CEOs’ lack of concern for shareholder value, this type of university leader doesn’t care at all about academic quality or the myriad complexities of leading a modern university.

—Alan Weiss

*President*

*Summit Consulting Group, Inc.*

## **Bad Buy**

I AM INCREDIBLY DISAPPOINTED in Patrick Mattimore’s “Observation” article “Is This Good Buy?” [February 2005].

“Word-of-mouth” marketing depends not on manipulation or deception, but on the “two-step flow of communication,” a phenomenon described by attitude researchers sometime in the 1950s or perhaps earlier. Basically, most people don’t form attitudes via direct experience or by responding to communications of some sort, but from listening to “opinion leaders,” those whose opinions they respect and who do pay attention to various sources of information. They are hardly “hidden persuaders.”

In addition, cognitive dissonance in its early version was said to depend on some form of inconsistency in belief or feeling (or between behavior and belief or feeling) that could not be justified or rationalized, thus prompting attitude or belief change to reduce the “discomfort.” Thus, the so-called forced compliance or insufficient justification studies like Festinger and Carlsmith’s. Today, it is recognized that the motive is much more limited and depends on a threat to one’s self-esteem.

Even in 1957, however, it was recognized that in this forced-compliance situation a person had to agree to do something he or she already knew was wrong — e.g., to lie or misrepresent their belief — before dissonance could be aroused, and to do it knowing the reward was small or nonexistent. In the present case, the person is free to give others his or her true opinion or to not say anything at all. That hardly seems like “fobbing off unwanted products.”

Lastly, “To Serve Man” was originally a short story by Damon Knight, published in *Galaxy* magazine. It was later made into a “Twilight Zone” episode. It is about aliens who promise safety, prosperity, longevity, and happiness to humanity, at the small cost of a little freedom and self-determination. The

aliens take the best, strongest, and smartest humans to their planet for “advanced education.” It is only after the system is in place that their guidebook is translated and the awful secret revealed. The relevance to the issue at hand is in the use of a distorted version of the story as pure propaganda, a “badly hidden persuader.”

—**Jack M. Feldman**

*Georgia Institute of Technology*