

History Belongs in Every Course

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“Those who know only their own generation remain children forever.” A version of this saying, attributed to Cicero more than two millennia ago, is prominently inscribed in stone on the west portico of the central library of the University of Colorado-Boulder. It captures the wise insight that to develop humility, reduce gullibility, and enhance intellectual maturity- in short, to “grow up”-people need to know about their history.

Applying this observation to the teaching of psychology might generate the following “prescription”:
All teachers of all courses in psychology should develop, and emphasize, an historical perspective on the topic of the course to improve both their students’ understanding of the subject and their students’ maturity and wisdom.

In brief, students are much better prepared if they are exposed to material on the history of a subject. The remainder of this column will discuss why teaching history is desirable and provide suggestions on how to include it in our classes.

Why Include History in Psychology Teaching?

1. It Presents the Development of Ideas and How Science Works

Every academic field and subfield has a developmental trajectory. Points of view evolve and change; significant discoveries yield new understanding and leave their impact upon later work. The unfolding of thought in an area can be fascinating intellectual fare, as one realizes how later workers build on, and extend, the work of their predecessors- distort or oversimplify earlier approaches so that theories and approaches that once worked reasonably well now come crashing down.

Psychologists are not immune to Cicero’s proscription of “eternal childhood,” but the easy cure for this form of “infantilism” is the prescription for a healthy historical perspective in teaching. Not every contemporary theorist or computer modeler is aware that if “new” theory or model looks promising today, somebody else probably had the same basic idea previously. And if a brilliant and unassailable contemporary theory reveals a flaw, chances are that its flaw-or at least some aspect of it- was identified long ago.

Discovering that one is not necessarily the innovator of an idea may be a blow to one’s perceived creativity, but such disappointments do not necessarily stem from a lack of historical knowledge. Because, most specialists are the first to admit that the sheer volume of contemporary scientific information prevents even the most studious scientist from keeping abreast of all contemporary theories and approaches. But the study of disciplinary history helps demonstrate to the student the relative impermanence of accepted wisdom of the day and instills a healthy caution in accepting current theories and ideas.

Fifty years ago, nobody could talk responsibly about learning, for instance, without copious references to rats running in mazes, and 30 years ago the Skinner box was all the rage. The field of verbal learning used to mean endless variations on the memorizing of nonsense syllables, but now psycholinguists are talking about schemas, scripts, and frames. Projective tests like the Rorschach were vying with dream analysis as the royal road to understanding the most significant depths of the human psyche in the middle of this century, until massive empirical studies questioned their validity. The group mind that was the theoretical panacea for social psychologists less than a century ago was discarded in favor of balance theories, cognitive dissonance, and many other taken-for granted explain-it-all theories that in turn are being replaced today. The resourceful instructor can readily identify historical examples that can help students realize that today's "answers" to current questions often are not likely to be the ultimate answers.

2. The Intended Outcome of a Liberal Education Is Wisdom

Including history in your classes will provide your students *with* a broader perspective, and an understanding that today's taken-for-granted orientations, methods, problems, and theories are as time- and place-bound as their predecessors. Your class will make a more significant contribution to students' liberal education and help them realize that what they are learning in your course relates to the rest of their education. For example, learning how John *Locke's primary qualities fit* in with the notions of Newtonian physics, how associationism relates to the idea of elements in chemistry, or how Gestalt concepts are related to field theory in biology and in modern physics all help make the student's entire curriculum more meaningful and integrated.

Different disciplines use similar epistemological approaches to related problems, and their varying perspectives on the same kinds of problems can be enlightening. Your students' education is enhanced more if they develop such historical perspectives.

How to Teach History in Your Courses

The *how?* may be a bit of a puzzler for today's teachers of psychology – especially those who never had a course on the history of psychology, even as undergraduates. And unfortunately, in this time of fragmentation and hyper-specialization in the field, fewer and fewer new psychologists have studied the history of the discipline. Yet to be able to compete for teaching jobs in an ever tighter academic market, a healthy dose of historical sophistication could actually make them more marketable, and more successful once they get the job.

1. Use Historical Examples Throughout the Course

Psychology teachers who have some respect for the history of the discipline typically include historical themes briefly at the beginning of a course. While better than no historical content at all, this approach is not enough. Include historical themes in your course in every lecture, and in every unit. Frequent historical references repeated throughout the course can help ensure that a responsible perspective is never lost. Don't limit your examples to studies published only during the last ten years, and show how thoughtful the approaches to a problem were when it was first addressed. Such discussions should include reference to the way a question was phrased and how that changed over the years. It should also include discussion of how knowledge about an area improved—or at least changed. Help your students

understand how the field got to be where it happens to be right now.

2. Use Your Library

It might take a bit of searching to find appropriate historical material for some psychology courses, but once you have the information it can be used for years. Most texts focus on the here-and-now, and strive to be as up-to-date as possible. But visits to the library (if your text contains little about history), and focused queries to your reference librarian (they're specially trained to help with such things), can turn up books and articles on the history of almost any subfield as well as on the history of the entire discipline itself, such as several of the items listed under *further helpful readings* below. The list also includes some reference books that you're likely to find useful, such as Viney et al. and Watson.

3. Develop a Few Excellent Sources of Historical Examples

Where can you find appropriate historical material? As a start, refer to the books listed in the list of reading material below. In addition, most general texts on the history of psychology contain narratives about numerous subfields. The *Journal of the History of the Behavioral Sciences* is a rich resource. The newsletter of APA's Division 26 (History of Psychology) is a remarkably varied and rich storehouse of articles relevant to many different fields, and that division has just launched a new journal on the history of psychology. Some slide series (such as ones developed by John Popplestone at The Archives of the History of American Psychology at the University of Akron and by Ludy T. Benjamin, Jr., of Texas A&M) have pictures of famous psychologists of the past, shots of historic labs, charts from influential studies, and photos of the title pages of classic works, and several suppliers have huge inventories of films and videos. It may take some digging, but the historical material relevant to your course can be found.

Don't forget your library's journals. Many college and university libraries now have volumes of journals that go back at least 50 years. Students can be fascinated by reading selected older articles, both to see how far we have come and to gain respect for the scholarship of the past. Good ideas are not a monopoly of today's prominent psychologists; many wise scholars long ago had insights that are still highly enlightening, even about issues that are currently in the limelight.

4. Use Sketches of People and Contributions

One way to make history come alive, of course, is to present sketches of the contributions-and lives-of some of the major figures in the field you are teaching. APA and Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Inc., have jointly published two volumes of *Portraits of Pioneers in Psychology* (Kimble, Boneau, & Wertheimer, 1996; Kimble, Wertheimer, & While, 1991) and a third volume is in preparation.

Most of the chapters in these books are lively, often irreverent, accounts by experts in the pioneers' fields, sometimes with the author impersonating the pioneer. The biographies include not only the typical general psychologists of the past, but figures relevant to specialized courses. For example:

Learning: Edwin R. Guthrie, D.O. Hebb, Clark L. Hull, Walter Hunter, Karl S. Lashley, Ivan P. Pavlov, Ivan M. Sechenov, Edward L. Thorndike, Edward C. Tolman, John B. Watson.

Sensation and Perception: Gustav T. Fechner, James J. Gibson, Clarence Graham, Wolfgang Kohler, Joseph B. Rhine, Max Wertheimer.

Individual Differences: Edgar A. Doll, Leta Stetter Hollingworth, William Stern, Robert C. Tryon.

Personality: Mary W. Calkins, Sigmund Freud, Carl Jung, Silvan S. Tomkins.

Applied Psychology: Lillian Gilbreth, Harry Hollingworth, Joseph Jastrow.

Behavioral Genetics: William E. Blatz, Barbara Burks, Francis Galton, Robert C. Tryon.

Clinical Psychology: Dorothea Dix, Sigmund Freud, Carl Jung, Harry S. Sullivan, Silvan S. Tomkins, Lightner Witmer.

Animal Behavior: D.O. Hebb, Ivan P. Pavlov, Paul H. Schiller, John B. Watson, Robert Yerkes.

5. Impersonate the Famous

An approach that can work well and be enjoyable for you-and keep you on your toes-is to begin most class sessions by impersonating a famous deceased figure from the past, using a first-person format in a five- to ten-minute lecture to talk about some early ideas on the subject of the day's lecture.

Summarizing what that person's main contribution was and then inviting the students to ask questions of the "visitor" work well.

It is not as difficult as one might think to provide "answers" that could plausibly have been generated by the one being impersonated. And, at any rate, you are apt to know more about that than your students, and you can always plead "I don't know" to any question. Besides, you can preface the whole practice by warning your class that if the questions are too difficult, the person you've resurrected might just fade back into the shadows of the past. You might ask your T A to impersonate a favorite pioneer. Or, if class size permits, require each student to do at least one such impersonation.

6. Test on History

Use exam questions that reflect the historical perspective you have been trying to convey. You might even make these questions easier than routine factual content questions, to reward students for learning something about context and becoming liberally educated!

An example of an objective question for a course in cognitive psychology might be: Place the following models of cognitive processes in the brain in historical order by circling the number 1 in front of the earliest, the 2 in front of the next, the 3 in front of the next, and the 4 in front of the most recent:

1 2 3 4 electronic computers

1 2 3 4 neural grooves

1 2 3 4 telephone switchboards

A short-answer essay question for a course on perception might ask for a comparison of the use of Ohm's law in audition and in vision, while a longer essay question for a course on neuropsychology might ask students to comment on the advantages of modern brain activity imaging techniques over the classic extirpation and microelectrode recording methods. In any course, you could ask students to indicate what we now know (e.g., about color vision, schizophrenia, neurochemistry, personality traits) that was not known, say, 50 years ago. The possibilities are almost endless.

Coda

Elements of past scientific approaches, and their socio-cultural context, survive within contemporary psychology. At what point in teaching about the field is it appropriate to insert the historical background on these past approaches? At any time, anywhere, and everywhere that you can squeeze it in. Why? So your students get an education rather than just learn to memorize a list of facts that will change over time, and to instill in them a sense of humility, a well-developed intellectual maturity, and an immunization against gullibility.

Help your students become intellectually sophisticated, and prudent and productive members of our scientific community and society. Part of this goal is achieved by training students to have a healthy skepticism about what they are learning and helping them understand why the current discipline of psychology happens to be the way it is. How can you do this? It will take a bit of ingenuity, especially in those fields that are exploding so fast that they are almost ahistorical. But this endeavor will enrich your students' intellectual experience and your own.