

Let Me Introduce You...

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It's a new school year and at campuses all across the country, record numbers of students are taking psychology courses. And most of them are taking introductory psychology. By far the most popular course on my campus and many others is the introductory psychology course. Thousands of students take introductory psychology each semester here at the University of Florida and the same was true at my previous university, Purdue.

What an opportunity for us to present an accurate view of psychology! In this course we can expose millions of students to the excitement of psychology, and the breadth and depth of our field. We can teach them the methods of psychology so they can recognize scientifically based work. We can show them the connections between our field and so many other disciplines, from health professions to business, law, sociology, criminology, political science — any field that deals with people. We can reach students who end up in all sorts of other disciplines and in all kinds of jobs and locations that can have an influence on the reach of psychology and its funding. We can reach future state and federal legislators, corporate and foundation leaders and parents.

Why then in many universities, is the teaching of the introductory course viewed as a punishment? The course should be taught by the very best professors, who should view it as a task of central importance. The course can expose students to the excitement of research in the field and teach them that psychology is not a set of facts, but a process and a continuously changing discipline as all scientific fields are.

Also, a faculty member who teaches introductory psychology must read in all areas of the field, and be up-to-date in them. This broadens the individual and informs the teacher's own research. One way the field would become more cohesive would be if we all taught introductory psychology now and then. And if more of us taught the course, the course and the textbooks would be different than they are now.

Currently, the textbooks for introductory psychology reinforce the fractionation of our field. They generally follow a standard format beginning with biological psychology, ending with abnormal psychology, with each area covered more or less independently from the other areas.

While there is nothing wrong with this standard format, it reinforces the divisions among the areas of psychology — a chapter on cognitive, a chapter on learning, a chapter on abnormal with little or no opportunity to discuss the overlap among these fields.

While there were textbooks in the past that tried to integrate the field or take another approach, these textbooks didn't sell as well as those in the standard format and there is no room any more for niche products. Textbook publishing is big business. The textbook market itself has consolidated with far fewer textbooks available now than many years ago.

The business of textbook publishing is such that all books have moved to a common format, one that

reinforces the discipline's artificial boundaries.

Current Directions is a help. Anyone can use the articles in that journal to produce up-to-date lectures spanning the field. And now that we have the web, and web publishing, we can produce our own materials, materials that span the field, materials written by active researchers, who see the connections and the edges of the discipline.

We should share the materials we have produced. That would be fun. And maybe that would bring back some of the cohesiveness to our field.