
Using Faculty Histories in a History of Psychology Course

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Introduction

Dr. Walter Weimer, who taught a history of psychology course while I was an undergraduate at Penn State, was very straightforward in his assertion that history is never boring. Certain texts, he stated, will often fail to stimulate interest in the subject matter, and certain professors are quite effective at reinforcing students' negative perceptions of the past. However, he was adamant in his conviction that history, as a decided human enterprise, is engaging, relevant, and intellectually rewarding. I left his course with no doubt whatsoever that he was correct.

When I came to Plymouth in 1985, with memories of my own undergraduate experience still fresh, I volunteered to teach our department's offering of history and systems of psychology. I did this with full cognizance of the fact that my attitude toward the course was quite different from the attitude of students enrolled in it. To many, the course was nothing more than another hurdle toward a bachelor's degree in psychology. Because students so often fail to even appreciate events that, historically speaking, are relatively recent, I was prepared to face a hostile crowd, a body of students who felt that they were only taking the course because it was required. Many times I overheard comments like, "I would never take this if I didn't have to," or "This course doesn't seem necessary for undergraduates." On occasion I was certain that such remarks were made expressly for my benefit.

Despite my worst fears, my first offering of history and systems was far from a debacle. The students (or at least most of them) and myself gave it our all, and we ended the semester on a positive note. The course was not, by any means, what I wanted it to be, but I was optimistic. I felt that if I could begin to develop projects that would engage the students in the history of psychology, I would accomplish two things: a heightened sense of relevance for the student and an enrichment of my own knowledge of my discipline.

The Project

In the Spring of 1987, I offered the history and systems course for the third time. During my Winterim preparations for it, I found an article describing the use of faculty genealogies as a means of enhancing student involvement in the history of psychology (Weigel & Gottfurcht, 1972). After finishing the article I knew immediately that such a project, if implemented properly, would have the potential to significantly transform students' attitudes and promote their success at mastering often difficult material. For once, a syllabus was fun to put together.

During the planning stage I also decided that, in addition to constructing a faculty genealogy, I wanted students to discover what psychology was like at PSC during the periods of its birth and subsequent development as a scientific discipline. Toward that end, students were required to trace the development of the psychology curriculum at PSC.

Method

During the first class meeting of the semester students were assigned in pairs to research teams. Each team selected at random the name of a current member of the psychology faculty. At that point students were told to set up an interview with their faculty member in order to obtain relevant biographical data. The interviews were structured through use of a brief questionnaire, which was modeled after one originally prepared by Wiegel and Gottfurcht (1972). Questions were designed to elicit information regarding educational and employment histories, teaching and research specialties, viewpoints on issues of historical interest to psycholo-

gists, professional influences (e.g., Ph.D. advisor), and motivations for entering the profession.

Armed with these data, students then contacted, by mail, faculty members' doctoral advisors. A questionnaire similar to the one used with PSC faculty was employed. When that information was received, students attempted to make contact with the mentor's mentor. This was done as far back as time (and mortality) allowed. When students hit a dead end (no pun intended) through the mails, they were given a copy of an article by Boring and Boring (1948) which documents student-mentor relationships during the early history of psychology. This allowed them in many cases to trace current department members' lineages to some of the more prominent pioneers in the history of psychology.

Tracing the psychology curriculum at PSC was somewhat more challenging. Each student team was assigned a time period covering anywhere from a decade to twenty years. The first era was the 1880s and 1890s, and the remaining years were doled out to cover the curriculum up to the present. Students were to begin by outlining the general cultural outlook of their particular era. Specifically, I wanted them to report on developments in science, arts and literature, history and politics, and entertainment and sports. They were also to describe, to the best of their abilities, the nature of campus life at Plymouth College (Normal School). To do this they consulted past issues of the college bulletin found in Lamson Library, past editions of the Conning Tower, and texts that examine the history of Plymouth State (Jim Hogan's volume comes to mind as an example).

Students were further required to identify psychology courses that were found in the curriculum, and, when possible, instructors of those courses. The main sources of information for this task were, once again, available editions of the college bulletin. Obviously, students who surveyed the more recent past had better luck with this aspect of the assignment, but those who covered the earliest years were also successful. For example, the team assigned the 1880s and 1890s discovered that Charles Round offered psychology instruction as early as 1894, and that psychology was first mentioned under its own heading in the college handbook in 1895.

Evaluation

Looking back on the experience, I wish that I had planned a formal evaluation of the project; unfortunately, I did not. My comments regarding the success of the project are therefore necessarily subjective. I am convinced, though, that impressions conveyed to me by students, as well as my own biased perceptions, bear out the value of the exercise.

Students frequently commented to me that they enjoyed working on the project. They indicated that it not only helped them better understand the history of psychology, but also allowed them to feel a part of it. Developing a connection between their own instructors and many of the greatest names in psychology made them more aware of the notion that history is not a static collection of facts, but rather, an interpretation of the successes, failures, triumphs, and tragedies of real people.

Another index of the project's success was the sheer length of many of the papers. Some of the teams went well beyond my wildest expectations in producing documents that obviously required a tremendous effort. One team, for example, submitted a 40+ page paper (not counting references and appendices) that included photographs and drawings of historical figures, as well as charts comparing those figures to their contemporaries who differed in methodological and theoretical orientations.

Conclusion

I cannot say with certainty that every student in the class enjoyed and benefitted from the project, but my guess is that the majority did. In the future I hope to revive the project, picking up where the 1987 class left off. Since that time, the psychology department has lost four members and added three. Also, there was a great deal left incomplete the first time around. Some teams, for instance, were unable to locate adequate biographical and curricular data. Hopefully, the next time I use this assignment I can expand the base of available resources; we—both teacher and students—still have much to learn.

References

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