

Buffy and Elvis: The Sequel

by David Zehr

Introduction

In an earlier WAC article (Zehr & Henderson, 1994) I wrote about Buffy and Elvis, two fictional students at a small New England college, whose escapades formed the foundation for a writing assignment in my Introductory Psychology class. Briefly, students were asked to read a small paperback book on research methods titled *How to Think Straight About Psychology* (Stanovich, 1992). The writing assignment required students to write a one-act play featuring Buffy and Elvis with the intent of demonstrating to me, through the dialogue, that they understood and could apply the concepts outlined in the Stanovich text. I provided a general outline, and beyond that students were given complete creative control over the play's content. The assignment was, at least in my mind, a huge success.

Since I feel that the Stanovich book is an invaluable adjunct to the course, I use it every semester. I also now have two writing assignments based on its contents rather than one. That leaves me with a dilemma; I can't ask students to write two plays in one semester, nor do I want students from one semester "looking back" at what was written the previous semester (since oftentimes more than just inspiration is garnered from perusing someone else's paper). The solution to the dilemma was easy; as a slave to popular culture I decided to mimic Hollywood, master of the sequel, and bring back Buffy and Elvis for a second go around, albeit

not in a play. They would continue to be the focus of the writing assignments, but I would vary the genre in which the students would write.

Assignment #1: The Short Story

Buffy and Elvis's next incarnation was in a short story. Once again I provided a framework for the students by writing the beginning of a science fiction piece. Briefly, Buffy overheard a devious plot by aliens to "dumb down" the earth, thereby ripening it for takeover. Buffy's job was to convince Elvis that the plot was for real, and that by using their knowledge from the Stanovich text they could thwart it.

Once again, the results of this assignment were gratifying. The creativity and variety inherent in the papers made them a pleasure to read and evaluate. I also sensed informally that the students enjoyed the freedom they had in writing the papers, and that they were happy to demonstrate their learning in a less than conventional manner (at least for a psychology course). I retained this genre in a subsequent semester, but varied the theme. The second time around the assignment was titled "The Bridges of Grafton County: Or, Buffy and Elvis, a Love Story." Going from science fiction to romance did little to stifle the success of this approach.

Assignment #2: Dear Buffy and Elvis

Last spring I was having a hard time coming up with a new twist for Buffy and Elvis, so I decided to procrastinate and read the newspaper. As I leafed through the "Living Arts" section of the *Boston Globe* I skipped several movie and book reviews, skimmed "Dear Beth," and developed a severe case of nausea when I came to the gossip column and noticed the names of Michael

Jackson, Princess Di, and Roseanne all within a single paragraph. Ready to toss the paper aside, I noticed that there was one thing left that I couldn't pass up—that witty and wise woman, Ann Landers. Witnessing once again the triumph of common sense over idiocy, I knew right then what my next assignment would be like; Buffy and Elvis were going to write an advice column for their campus newspaper.

I wrote ten letters to Buffy and Elvis, dispensers of advice to the methodologically-challenged. The students had to ghostwrite the responses for Buffy and Elvis (since they were way too busy). And of course, all of the answers had to be based on concepts derived from the Stanovich text.

This turned out to be one of my favorite assignments. The students had a wonderful time writing their responses, and I had a wonderful time reading them. A formal evaluation of the assignment corroborated what I believed about the effectiveness of this approach to learning research methodology. The written comments by students suggested that the text and the writing connected with them in ways that up to that point I didn't know were possible. For example, one student wrote, "These assignments helped me to relax and enjoy the class. They helped me be creative and have a little fun while learning. It's not often I enjoy writing papers...I learned a lot." I was so excited about this that I submitted my findings to the American Psychological Society's Teaching Institute, which is part of the annual APS conference. My presentation last summer piqued interest from psychologists across the country—Buffy and Elvis have gone national (Zehr, 1994). A sample of student writing for this assignment is included at the end of this article.

Assignment #3: Buffy and Elvis Go to the Polls

This past fall saw a sweeping change in Washington D.C., as voters overwhelmingly handed Congress over to the Republican Party. A paradox of politics is that it has tremendous implications for all people, yet many of those people don't participate in the process. Buffy and Elvis, however, were inspired by the elections, and the political arena formed the backdrop of my most recent writing assignment.

In this assignment students read that Buffy and Elvis were watching a televised debate between an incumbent Senator and his challenger, a newcomer to politics. I provided a dialogue for the debate that included the voice of a moderator and the Senator. The moderator asked questions, the Senator responded, and the students cast themselves in the role of the challenger and wrote their responses to the Senator. Of course, their answers had to be based on the Stanovich text. Most, if not all, were able to handily rebut the Senator, leaving Buffy and Elvis no choice but to vote for change. A brief sample of student writing for this assignment is included at the end of this article.

Conclusion

Buffy and Elvis continue to evolve. What I thought would be a one-time assignment has turned into a pair of alter-egos for myself. I can't guarantee that students remember all that they were taught in lecture, nor that they remember all that they read about in their regular textbook, but I dare say that they don't soon forget Buffy, Elvis, and the Stanovich text. Although most will never take another psychology course, I believe they leave my class a bit wiser about research methods, which renders them more effective consumers of scientific information that increasingly is finding its way into popular media.

Writing Sample for "Dear Buffy and Elvis"
(student responses are in italics)

Dear Buffy and Elvis:

My new boyfriend is a manipulative control freak, I think. The other night I found a *Penthouse* magazine in his room and we got into a big fight. I told him that such filth is disgusting and harmful, especially because it causes men to rape. He didn't agree with me on that point, and ranted something about "manipulating variables" and the need for "controlled conditions." Buffy and Elvis, his words frightened me. What do you think he meant?

Should I Stay or Should I Go?

Dear *Should I Stay or Should I Go?*:

We wouldn't be so quick to label your boyfriend as a manipulation freak. He is most likely referring to scientific research methods using controlled conditions and manipulating variables to eliminate a number of alternative theories that may have been proposed. Scientists try to eliminate the maximum number of incorrect explanations by directly controlling the experimental situation. Scientists manipulate the variable believed to be the cause (in this case reading pornography) and observe whether or not a different effect occurs. So before deciding whether to stay in this relationship perhaps you should look at some scientific studies done on the effect of reading pornography and its relationship to incidences of rape. It would also be advisable to investigate your boyfriend's feelings and attitudes about women and about rape. This would more likely give you a few more relevant ideas about whether or not you wish to continue your relationship with him.

Dear Buffy and Elvis:

What's all this crap I read in the newspapers about condoms and AIDS? I'm tired of people telling me I should use those things. I hate 'em. They reduce my pleasure. And besides, I got a buddy who's quite the ladies' man. He's probably slept with at least 150 women and he doesn't have AIDS.

Not One of Those Wimpy 90s Guys

Dear Not One of Those Wimpy 90s Guys:

It seems that you may be a victim of the 'man who' reasoning technique. Research done involving the use of condoms to reduce the possibility of contracting AIDS is a probabilistic trend. Probabilistic trends simply mean that there is a statistically demonstrated trend (in this case of contracting AIDS being more likely if one does not practice safe sex) yet there are exceptions in every case. Quite often we can cite examples of persons who do not fit these trends, but that does not negate the high probability of it happening to the majority. In this case we would strongly urge you not to try to beat the odds. If you knew from research done on slot machines that the probability of getting three like objects to win was 1 out of 1000 tries, how much money would you want to risk? In the case of AIDS and not practicing safe sex, remember you are gambling against the odds and risking your life!

Writing Sample for "Buffy and Elvis Go to the Polls"
(student responses are in italics)

Moderator: "Senator, there's a strong current of cynicism in the voting public. Nobody trusts anybody, and everybody seems unhappy with the direction this country is headed in. What can you do to soften the cynicism and restore a sense of happiness?"

Senator: "Well, I'm glad you asked that. Once again the answer is easy. My wife, Daffodil, just wrote her second book on that very topic. The book is called *Tickling the Child Within: Ten Steps to Being Happy*. It's on sale in all the major bookstores, and she spells out quite simply how we can all be happier. Just saw the latest sales figures and I couldn't be happier myself."

Challenger: "Well, that was a rather shameless plug. There's certainly some ethical concerns emerging here about the use of public office for private gain, but we won't get into that now."

The Senator's wife is a delightful lady, but I'm quite sure she has little understanding about the psychological workings of the human mind. She cannot possibly have a handle on the principles involved, so her work, although cute, is little more than a graphic depiction of recipe knowledge. She naively believes that if you follow these simple steps that your depression will disappear. This is grossly simplistic.

As far as the psyche of the voting public goes I couldn't agree more. The people of America are disgusted with politics as usual. No one trusts politicians today and with good reason. Even a fool knows that when push comes to shove the politicians are going to vote the way the special interest groups want them to because they hold the lifeline to their careers: money. If you're faced with a decision to vote your conscience and lose your career or vote against your conscience and keep your career, only the most principled are going to make the moral choice. Thus, Washington has become a den of thieves, and America knows it."

Moderator: "What should we do to help the poor in this country?"

Senator: "Nothing! The poor are more than capable of helping themselves. Just last week I met a family whose annual income is \$3,000. They're healthy and happy, and that's what America is all about. Sure, they don't drive BMWs or have jewels and furs like I do, but they don't need that stuff—they got each other. They eat two square meals a day and the patches on their clothes look pretty strong to me."

Challenger: *"I hate to say it, but I agree with Senator Fullovit on this issue, but for drastically different reasons. Senator Fullovit is relying on what we call 'man-who' statistics. These are colorful stories that seem to contradict the actual statistics. But there are always exceptions. Statistics establish a probability of a certain situation, not an absolute law. Using these anecdotes may be emotionally vivid but they do a disservice to the facts of the given situation."*

References

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