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# INDIVIDUALIZED READING IN A UNIVERSITY COURSE

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Teaching introductory classes at a university for even a few semesters makes most instructors aware of problems which are particularly common in these courses. Aside from the usual variety in student ability and interest, introductory students differ widely in their purpose for taking the courses and future aspirations in the area. The majority of introductory level students at liberal arts schools are non-majors and will have no formal academic contact with the discipline beyond the introductory course. Usually, they take the introductory course to fulfill some type of "general education" requirement. Hence, the population of the introductory class is particularly heterogeneous and the instructor is faced with the perennial problem of choosing a "level" at which to teach the course.

While not pretending to have found "the level" for course content, we deal here with attempts to meet individual needs in the area of interest in an introductory psychology course. The problems involved in teaching classroom populations with a mix of abilities has evoked many curricular innovations at the elementary and secondary school levels to individualize instruction. While individualization according to ability may be difficult or even undesirable at the college level (Gardner, 1961), individual allowance for interest and goals is exceedingly important.

One legitimate purpose of the introductory psychology course is to motivate students to a continued interest in psychology so that they may pursue advanced course work, take interest in psychological issues in the community, or read for leisure from the many paperbound book

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and periodical publications in psychology. One way that the introductory course might meet and stimulate the individual interests of students is through the course reading material.

Several researchers in reading have shown that the interest value of reading material may not only affect continued interest in the topic but may also affect comprehension of the material as it is read. For example, Fader and McNeil (1968) hypothesized that interest rather than intellect is the chief problem in teaching, so they saturated high school age students' environment with paperbacks, magazines and newspapers. Although the statistical analyses provided little credence to the claim of experimental group superiority in reading comprehension, the authors' and teachers' observations vouched strongly for the favorable influence of interesting paperbacks and creative teaching on the reading comprehension and attitude of the students.

In a second study of the relationship between interest and reading comprehension, Shnayer (1969) found that not only did sixth graders read high interest stories with greater comprehension than low interest stories, but that the effect of interest was more pronounced for low ability readers than for high ability readers. The research design and statistical analysis of Shnayer's study were of sufficient rigor to warrant serious consideration of the findings in other educational settings such as college teaching.

In another excellent study of the relationship between comprehension and interest, Estes and Vaughan (1973) found a strong relationship between comprehension and interest for fourth graders. In the teaching implications of their research they indicated that reading levels are relative to student interest in the topic, and as such are floating or wandering levels dependent on the interest variable. The need for providing for a range of interests and abilities within groups of students, and even within individual students, was aptly pointed out.

Studies such as these on the role of interest in education have not received the attention they deserve. The implications of these findings on interest and comprehension are extremely broad and call for far reaching adjustments in philosophy and practice. To implement these

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findings at the college level is a challenge worth all the effort it will take.

The instructional program described by Fader and McNeil should be very usable in introductory psychology; provide students with a list of "good" books in psychology, which can be bought in virtually any paperback bookstore, and let them read as interest dictates. After all, this is probably the way most students will pursue an interest in psychology after a formal course. McCollom (1971) produced a useful list and an approach to teaching the introductory course with this type of reading format. He identified fifteen paperbacks which were judged to be good psychology, interesting and well written. This core list with some additions each semester was the entire reading list for an "honors" introductory class and students were allowed to select several books for reading as interest dictated and were required to write reports on the books. The tone of McCollom's report suggests a good deal of satisfaction, both student and teacher, with this technique. But more importantly, in McCollom's subjective assessment, there were long term benefits in that students continued to read from the book list long after the course was finished. Once provided the model in the classroom for reading well written psychology paperbacks from the popular press, students carried this with them.

Although McCollom (1971) used this technique with an "honors" class, it can be used as effectively with any introductory course, and judging from Shnayer's (1969) research, it may be even more important for the less advanced student. With a revision of McCollom's reading list and a modification of his instructional technique, we tried to individualize course reading for the introductory student.

An introductory course was developed which replaced the standard introductory psychology text with a reading list of 30 popular paperbacks in psychology. Most of the paperbacks were locally available and were chosen for the quality of writing and appropriateness to the lecture portion of the course. As in McCollom's (1971) experience the list changed from time to time based on student interest, but a core of 18 books has been retained for several semesters. The core list included the following:

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- J. van Lawick-Goodall, J. (1972). In the shadow of man. New York: Dell.
- Skinner, B. F. (1962). Walden two. NY: Macmillan.
- Jung, C. G. (1961). Memories, dreams, and reflections. New York: Vintage Books.
- Dement, W. (1974). Some must watch while some must sleep. San Francisco: W. H. Freeman.
- Katchadourian, H. (1974). Human sexuality: sense and nonsense. San Francisco: W. H. Freeman.
- Freud, S. (1949). An outline of psychoanalysis. New York: W. W. Norton.
- Crichton, M. (1973). The terminal man. NY: Bantam Books.
- Kubler-Ross, E. (1970). On death and dying. New York: Macmillan.
- Van Dusen, W. (1972). The natural depth in man. New York: Harper and Row.
- Clark, W. (1940). The ox-bow incident. New York: New American Library.
- Frankl, V. (1963). Man's search for meaning. New York: Washington Square Press.
- Luria, A. (1968). The mind of a mnemonist. Basic Books, Inc.
- Axline, V. (1967). Dibs: in search of self. New York: Ballantine Books.
- Rubin, T. (1962) Jordi, Lisa and David. New York: Ballantine Books.
- Hesse, H. (1957). Siddhartha. NY: New Directions.
- (1966). Demian. New York: Bantam.
- Green, H. (1964). I never promised you a rose garden. New York: Signet.
- Kesey, K. (1962). One flew over the cuckoo's nest. New York: Signet.

The lecture topics partly determined which books were kept on the reading list; each of the books corre-

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lated to some degree with topics presented in lecture during the semester. During the first class meeting each student was given a detailed outline of the semester's lectures with notations regarding which books correlated with each day's lectures. In this way a student could choose to read a given book during the time that related discussion was occurring in class. Each student chose five selections from the list to be read during the semester. An exception to this concerned the last six books on the list. These were pairs and if the student read one of the books, the mate also had to be read for credit. Dibs and Jordi, Lisa and David were considered as one book, for example. This was done because these books are short, quick reading, and the pair were judged to be similar and complimentary in content.

Before reading each selection students were encouraged to (a) skim the book, (b) predict what the book would be about, (c) formulate a variety of written comprehension questions of their own to guide their reading, and (d) predict the relationship of the book to the corresponding lecture. After reading each book the students then prepared for an oral book report by jotting down on a file card salient information of a psychological nature that they felt they had learned from the book. These reports were given individually to the instructor. Each report was ten minutes long, was graded credit/no credit, and was an opportunity to discuss psychology in a relaxed, one-to-one context where the student could oftentimes bring as much insight to bear on the book as the instructor.

Each report was structured in part by the student's notations on the file card and in part by questions relating the book to other course material. To illustrate with a few selections from the reading list, In the Shadow of Man by J. van Lawick-Goodall might be related to the remainder of the course by the discussion of the appropriate place of chimpanzee studies in "human" psychology, the similarities and dissimilarities between chimp and human behavior, and the varieties of methodology including naturalistic observation necessary for doing work in psychology.

Two themes were stressed in the discussion of The

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Ox-Bow Incident by W. Clark. First, the behavior of the mob and its influence on individuals both before and after the lynching was considered in relation to studies of obedience and conformity in social psychology. In addition, students were invited to judge the level of moral development of several main characters in the book, using Kohlberg's (1968) theory of moral development.

Using the brief book, The Mind of a Mnemonist by A. Luria, language was emphasized in the report. The similarities and differences between the mnemonist's memory and the student's memory were discussed relating these, on occasion, to differences in the use of language. Also, a distinction between intelligence and a good memory was explored, a distinction that students frequently did not make on their initial reading.

Finally, the paired selections I Never Promised You a Rose Garden by H. Green and One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest by K. Kesey were used to expose students to the experiences of madness and mental institutions. Schizophrenic language was oftentimes singled out for discussion and both books provided a background for a lively discussion of Rosenhan's (1973) research on being sane in insane places. Each selection on the list was carefully considered in this way for its topical integration into the course lecture material.

This method of providing readings for the introductory course has several advantages and disadvantages. First, if the paperbacks are the sole reading for the course, considerable burden is placed on lecture-discussion to give a broad overview of psychology and an organization of its diverse subject matters. But part of the challenge of a creative use of individualized reading is the development of a fitting framework for the students' understanding, not only of the traditional topics in psychology, but of the popular psychology being read. In addition, it has been our experience that not only is it challenging to develop a good lecture framework, but the student response is very positive as they reason for themselves how particular readings fit into a larger conceptual context.

A second burden placed on a class with individualized reading is a student-oriented burden. If traditional examinations are given over lecture material, students who do not

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understand a concept developed in lecture have no readily accessible reference material to fall back on for studying that concept. It should be clear, however, that the use of an individualized reading program is not incompatible with the use of a traditional text, especially a shorter version. The important thing is that students be given some choice of reading material as interests and reading abilities dictate. The use of a paperback reading list then could be as an adjunct to a wholly traditional course and textbook, much like a book of readings but with more versatility.

A standard text, however, may not be an essential ingredient for good learning in the introductory course. We compared a section of introductory psychology being taught with individualized readings alone with a control section we taught with a standard text. On a common comprehensive final examination and on final grades the two sections did not differ,  $F(1,88) = 1.78, p > .10$ . So, the lack of a text did not seem to hurt the students with individualized reading. On the other hand, the individualized reading program may have encouraged future reading. We called 50 non-majors from the two classes one semester later to ask if they had read any psychology books since their introductory course. None of the students in the textbook section had read from an "extra credit" reading list distributed at the beginning of their class, while seven of the students in the individualized reading section had read an additional book from the reading list for fun since the course ended. While these data are not strong, they do suggest that an individualized reading program can have a place in the introductory psychology curriculum.

Third, a word about the oral book reports. Having looked forward with near dread to the hundredth report on Dibs in a given semester, we are aware of the need to develop alternatives to relieve the tedium of oral reports for the instructor. Several alternatives that have proven very successful include (a) written reports, especially for students who have difficulty articulating ideas under pressure, (b) assigning book report responsibilities to teaching assistants, (c) conducting the reports in small groups, and (d) allowing students, who have done a good job in understanding a book, to conduct oral reports on that book with classmates. The last alternative promotes learning through teaching and students are consistently highly reliable when

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given such responsibilities.

The book reports can also be used effectively to individualize instruction in small groups. For instance, students who have chosen one book might participate in small discussion groups with students reading a different book to compare and contrast the books. In this way the instructor could aid in building critical thinking skills in psychology based on the students' initial interest in reading materials. As analytical abilities develop and a record of reading interests and abilities is established the instructor can further aid students in the selection of readings and the formulation of appropriate goals in the reading program.

Finally, one feature of individualizing reading, which outweighs all others, is the time spent talking psychology with students on a one-to-one basis. Depending on the number of book reports assigned, every student may haunt the instructor's office from ten to sixty minutes a semester and that much time goes a long way toward changing the nameless faces in a large lecture into people.

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