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Using One's Own Passion and Undergraduate TAs to Transform the Large-Lecture Introductory Psychology Course

11

My first experience teaching introductory psychology occurred nearly 25 years ago. I was a new faculty member at Northwestern University, and I was asked to teach the introductory course during the winter quarter. I was told that the enrollment would be between 300 and 500 students and that I would have one graduate student teaching assistant (TA). I had virtually no teaching experience while in graduate school. During the fall term, I had struggled with an 80-person introductory social psychology course and was barely able to keep my head above water. The prospect of coming up with an entirely new set of lectures and study materials for the introductory course was daunting. I knew that I was supposed to be getting my research program off the ground, but the teaching was so all-consuming that there was little time for anything else.

The Northwestern approach to covering introductory psychology—having a teacher with a microphone confront several hundred students in a lecture hall—is the norm at most schools. Indeed, because of enrollment pressures and constrained resources, it is hard for departments to offer this course any other way. Although I understood the reasons for this pedagogical approach, I nonetheless felt straitjacketed by it. I guess this was because I hoped to accomplish more through my teaching than conveying factual

This chapter represents an active collaboration between Camille B. Wortman and Joshua M. Smyth. Because much of it draws heavily on the personal experiences of Camille B. Wortman, however, sections are written in the first person.

material to the students. I wanted to spark students' intellectual curiosity about human behavior and to foster an increased understanding and tolerance of their own behavior and that of others. Mostly, I wanted students to have the opportunity to become actively engaged with the course material and to apply this material to their own life concerns.

The question facing me as I contemplated teaching my first introductory psychology course is one that I have confronted many times since: How can I teach a lively and engaging course within the constraints imposed by the large lecture format, and how can I do so in a way that permits time for activities other than teaching, such as research and having a life? In attempting to answer this question, I have tried many approaches over the years. This chapter describes two strategies that have been highly successful and that have stood the test of time. The first of these—teaching what you are passionate about—enhances the likelihood that the lectures offered in the course will be vital and engaging to the students.

Our Twofold Strategy

In this section we raise questions faced by every teacher of the introductory course: How should the lecture time be used? What topics are most important to cover? Is it really necessary to provide broad coverage of psychology in one's lectures? We argue that it is not only unnecessary to do so but also counterproductive. By focusing their lectures on topics that they know and care about, instructors can enhance interest and motivation for themselves and ultimately for their students. This approach can make material come alive through the use of personal insight, anecdotal information, and genuine interest on the part of the lecturer. We maintain that this inevitably results in lectures that are more dynamic and compelling for the students.

The second strategy—the use of undergraduate TAs—enables the instructor to change the class structure in ways that encourage student involvement and participation. Undergraduate assistants provide the opportunity for discussion of course material in a more individualized and personal fashion, allow for feedback on and evaluation of students' efforts (e.g., essays and short papers), and provide the unique opportunity to offer specialized "minicourses" (described later) on a variety of topics of particular interest and relevance to students. Both of these strategies can help make the introductory course a more engaging, active, and personal experience for the students taking it. And each can free up the instructor's time to focus on research or

nonacademic interests. Below, these strategies are discussed in more detail.

Lecturing on What You Are Passionate About

An issue that all introductory psychology teachers must confront is how best to use the lecture time. Many instructors take it as a given that each week they should focus their lectures on the topics covered in the text, such as the brain, sensation and perception, learning and conditioning, cognition and language, and development. When an instructor is facing the introductory course for the first time, the idea of developing new lectures each week on these topics can seem overwhelming. Being a social psychologist, I knew next to nothing about most of these topics, and I had no idea how to make them come alive for the student. I was also concerned that if I drew my lecture material from the textbook, there would be too much redundancy between the lectures and the reading. On the other hand, if I drew my lectures from other sources, I was concerned that discrepancies could arise between the descriptions of psychological processes provided in the lectures and those in the text. Given my lack of knowledge about topics outside my area, I had no confidence that I could adequately address students' questions regarding such discrepancies.

The primary reason for my reluctance to offer lectures on the major topics covered in psychology textbooks is that this is how the introductory psychology course was taught when I was a student. Each lecture consisted of a dull recitation of facts, studies, and results relevant to a major theme in psychology such as learning or development. The course was a dreadful bore.

I was concerned that by trying to pay lip service to all of the major areas of psychology in my lectures, I would not do justice to any of them. Even the most conservative teachers of introductory psychology would probably agree that students do not benefit from attempts to provide encyclopedic coverage of our discipline. Typically, the instructor who strives for broad coverage of all the important concepts has no choice but to sacrifice depth. As one writer has indicated, it may not be possible to be encyclopedic and also be thought provoking and interesting (Candland, 1982). In recognition of the disadvantages of broad, encyclopedic coverage, many introductory psychology texts now include a section in each chapter that focuses on a specific issue in some depth.

In working out how I would use my lecture time, I went back to my goals for teaching the introductory psychology course. Of course, one of my goals was to provide coverage of the theories and data in the major subfields of psychology. But I had other goals that were closer to my heart, such as sharing information with students that could have profound relevance to their lives. I have always had a passionate desire to show students that the science of psychology has much to offer regarding such day-to-day matters as understanding one's own behavior; maintaining relationships with friends; and making decisions regarding dating, alcohol, and sex.

I knew, at some level, that if I was not lecturing about something that was vital and involving for me, the lectures would not have high interest value for the students. At that point, I decided that I would not try to cover the entire field of psychology in my lectures. I reasoned that this was why I had assigned a textbook. I began to see my job in the lectures as that of supplementing the textbook by covering topics that I wholeheartedly believed the students should know about.

When I teach introductory psychology, I select a lecture topic each week that is related to the material covered in the textbook but that does not duplicate that material. In each case, the topic is one that I have a passionate interest in conveying to the students. Let me provide some examples. In the early 1980s, my best friend and closest colleague committed suicide. This friend had made many suicide threats, and although I tried to be supportive, I had no idea what type of response would be most helpful. I still believe that if I had known more about suicide, I might have been able to do something before it was too late. For this reason, I am very interested in teaching students about suicide. I cover myths about suicide, indications of suicidal behavior, and what to say (and what not to say) to someone who is suicidal (see Hubbard & McIntosh, 1992, for additional suggestions on teaching about suicide). A related topic that I usually try to cover in my lectures is depression. Having witnessed the ravages of depression firsthand, I am extremely motivated to ensure that students understand the symptoms of this fairly common disorder and know about the treatments most effective in alleviating it. These topics are usually covered in the part of the course concerned with abnormal behavior and treatment.

Other topics that I am passionate about teaching are romantic love, violence in society (including violence against women and date rape), and drunk-driving behavior. I usually cover love and violence in the social psychology section of the course; drunk driving can be covered in the section on alcohol and drug use. In focusing on drunk driving, my goal is to challenge students' feelings of invulnerability and to dispel erroneous beliefs they may hold about drinking and driving. For

example, most students believe that it is the problem drinkers who cause most of the fatalities, but in fact, the vast majority of such crashes are caused by those who drink just a little too much. I show a short film illustrating how driving performance is impaired after one, two, and three drinks. I also arrange for a panel discussion in which a quadriplegic injured in an alcohol-related crash and a mother who lost a child in a drunk-driving crash address the class and answer questions.

Another topic that I am passionate about teaching is how people cope with major life events. For the past 20 years, I have been involved in research on some of life's traumas, including cancer, rape, serious injury, and loss of a loved one. At some point, most students will experience a trauma of major proportions—a trauma for which they are ill prepared and which has the potential to change their lives forever. In fact, the evidence suggests that many of the students facing us in the classroom have already endured a significant trauma. Two students in five have grown up in homes with divorced parents, and 40% of these individuals suffer serious psychological problems as a result (Wallerstein, 1987). In one study involving a national sample of college students, over half of the women had experienced some sort of sexual victimization, ranging from unwanted fondling to rape (Koss, Gidycz, & Wisniewski, 1987). A surprisingly high percentage of students have been subjected to physical or sexual abuse by a parent or relative (Silver, Boon, & Stones, 1983). In addition to trying to deal with their own traumas, most students will encounter roommates, coworkers, friends, and family members who have experienced these and other traumas and who may turn to them for advice or support.

Why is it so important to teach students about coping with life's traumas? Most people who experience trauma do not seek professional help. Instead, they attempt to deal with the event alone or with the help of friends. Unfortunately, available evidence suggests that people hold erroneous beliefs about the process of coming to terms with a traumatic event. I believe that these beliefs can make it difficult for people to handle their own distress and also to intervene effectively with others who have experienced a trauma (for a more detailed discussion of these erroneous beliefs or myths of coping with stressful life experiences, see Wortman & Silver, 1989).

Specifically, it is widely believed that people react to traumatic events with extreme distress, that a failure to show distress is indicative of pathology, and that people should recover from a trauma within several months or a year. Although these ideas are regarded to be true by the general public and by health care professionals, there is little evidence to support them. In fact, accumulating evidence suggests that initial reactions to a stressful life experience are highly variable, with some people showing intense distress while others do not;

that failure to show distress is not necessarily indicative of pathology and may signal coping strength; and that it often takes far longer than a year to recover from the effects of a traumatic loss.

Individuals who hold these beliefs may judge their own behavior harshly if they experience a traumatic event. For example, a victim of rape or sexual abuse may infer that there is something wrong if he or she continues to experience symptoms several years after the assault. Similarly, people who hold these beliefs may react judgmentally to others. If someone manifests distress longer than a potential helper expects, that helper may convey that the person is not trying hard enough to recover. Erroneous beliefs about the process of coping with trauma can lead others to respond in a variety of ways that have been found to be unhelpful. These include discouraging expression of feelings (e.g., "tears won't bring him back"), minimizing the loss ("you had many good years together"), and offering advice ("you should consider getting a dog—they're wonderful companions"). (For a more detailed discussion of helpful and unhelpful responses to the bereaved, see Lehman, Ellard, & Wortman, 1986.)

I hope that by incorporating this information into my introductory psychology lectures, I can accomplish a number of important goals. One is to normalize people's emotional reactions to traumas that they may have experienced in the past or that they may experience in the future. By illustrating the variety of ways people respond to traumatic events, I hope to encourage students to be less judgmental toward themselves should they experience a trauma and more accepting and less critical of others who may not react as they expect. I also try to elucidate how current reactions to situations or people can be influenced by earlier traumas. For example, children from divorced families often show no difficulties in coping with their parents' divorce until they begin dating. At this point it is common to experience intense anxiety about forming intimate relationships with members of the opposite sex (Wallerstein, 1991).

One of the most important reasons to lecture on topics that one is passionate about is that when a teacher conveys enthusiasm and interest for a subject, interest is far more likely to be evoked in the students. As McKeachie (1987) noted in an article on effective teaching, the most important characteristics of effective teachers are the interest, enjoyment, and motivation they bring to the classroom. An added advantage is that in most respects, it is far easier to lecture about things we know and care about. A risk of this kind of teaching is that the more passionate one is about a given topic, the greater the danger of losing one's objectivity. When lecturing about violence, for example, I have had to use extreme self-control to avoid getting into shouting

matches with students who believe it is reasonable to carry a gun. I have to remind myself that what I am really passionate about is bringing scientific evidence in psychology to bear on an important life issue, not persuading students to behave in particular ways.

When the lecture touches on such topics as suicide, rape, divorce, incest, and the death of a loved one, powerful feelings are likely to be evoked in some students. In many cases, students who have been struggling on their own with a personal problem related to these topics will become motivated to seek help. This will undoubtedly result in some difficult situations for the instructor. During office hours in a single day, I can recall talking with one student whose brother was a drug addict and one student whose parents were both dying of AIDS. That same term, I was also visited by a student who recognized, during a lecture on date rape, that he was a rapist. A danger is that when confronted with problems of this sort, the instructor will be drawn in too deeply and try to function as a psychotherapist or even a substitute parent. It is important to remember that our role is not to resolve these problems but to assist the student in obtaining help from a person who is well qualified to provide it. In our judgment, instructors should not even attempt to teach about such topics unless they are knowledgeable about how and where to make a referral. It is critically important that professors have information about referrals available before they incorporate these topics into their teaching.

Involving Undergraduates as Teaching Assistants in Introductory Psychology

The first time I decided to use undergraduate TAs, the decision was made more out of desperation than out of any sense that it would be particularly successful. I knew I did not want a large-course, lecture-only format, and there was obviously no way that a lone graduate student and I could divide up several hundred students for discussion sections. Apparently I am not the only one who recoils at the idea of facing a large, anonymous body of students each day in the introductory course. In one survey of how introductory psychology courses are staffed in departments with graduate programs, it was found that virtually all schools teach the introductory course in a large, lecture-only format (Griggs, Lange, & Meyer, 1988). Almost half of the schools surveyed reported serious problems in staffing this course.

Many schools indicated that they found it difficult to persuade faculty, especially senior faculty, to teach the introductory course under these conditions.

I made the decision to use undergraduate TAs because I saw it as a way to alter the lecture-only format and incorporate opportunities for discussion. There is considerable evidence to suggest that whereas lectures and discussions are equally effective in imparting factual knowledge, discussion sections are far superior in fostering long-term retention of factual material, critical thinking skills, and motivation for further learning (see McKeachie, 1986, for a review). Moreover, I thought that a format with regular discussion sections would enable me to structure the course so as to incorporate those topics that typically draw students to psychology classes in the first place. These include their need to do well as students (e.g., memory and study skills), to relate to other people (e. g., conflict resolution and interpersonal relationships), and to understand themselves (e.g., sexual behavior and binge eating). (See Zanich & Grover, 1989, for a survey of student interest in various topics within psychology.) Although these topics can be covered in lecture, they lend themselves particularly well to a small-group discussion format.

Another advantage of using undergraduate TAs is that it makes it possible to structure the course so as to provide different options to different students. There is abundant evidence that students taking introductory psychology have very diverse goals. In most such courses, typically more than 75% of students are not psychology majors. Hence, a course that is simply a foundation for later academic work in psychology will not meet the needs of most students. Consequently, I wanted to design the course so that nonmajors as well as majors could explore topics that were meaningful to them. A journalism major may be particularly interested in persuasion and attitude change; a speech major might wish to have some exposure to psycholinguistics. Ideally, a course structure should be flexible enough to permit this type of exploration. Most students do not typically have the opportunity to explore such interests in subsequent courses because more often than not the introductory course is the only psychology course they ever take.

Many articles about the use of undergraduate TAs appeared in the literature in the 1970s and early 1980s (e.g., Diamond, 1972; Maas & Pressler, 1973). As we detail below, these articles provide compelling evidence that the use of undergraduate assistants can play an important role in solving the problems associated with a large lecture format. Yet despite the apparent success of this approach, it has not, to our knowledge, been widely applied. Indeed, a computer search failed to reveal a single article discussing this approach that was published within the last 10 years.

As pressures intensify on college administrators to increase class size and as resources become more scarce, it may be worthwhile to consider this novel approach to teaching introductory psychology once again. It is usually feasible to recruit advanced undergraduates to assist with introductory psychology in exchange for some (typically ungraded) course credit. In schools or situations where instructors cannot give credit, having this experience to add to a resumé or graduate school application, as well as being able to request a letter of recommendation from the sponsoring faculty, is often incentive enough. A major advantage of choosing undergraduate TAs is that they are typically enthusiastic about having the opportunity to become involved in teaching. This is not always the case with graduate student TAs, who often regard teaching duties as a burden and a distraction from their research.

There are at least three different ways that advanced undergraduates can be used to help individualize a large lecture course. First, they can be involved as leaders of discussion sections much the same way as one would typically involve graduate students. Second, they can assist in providing feedback, making it possible to use forms of evaluation that are otherwise not feasible in a large lecture course, such as essay exams, short papers, and journals. Finally, undergraduate students can develop and teach specialized minicourses, or seminars on topics of high student interest, that run for 1 or 2 weeks during the term (for a more detailed discussion, see Wortman & Hillis, 1976). Through the minicourses, it is possible to offer students choice among various topics in psychology. Below, we offer more detailed information about student-led discussions, grading by undergraduate students, and student-led minicourse seminars.

DISCUSSION GROUPS

Undergraduate TAs can lead weekly discussion groups of 10–15 students. As was noted earlier, research suggests that students benefit from the active participation that such small discussion groups permit. In my introductory psychology classes, I typically have undergraduates lead discussions of paperback books, such as *Walden 2*, *Ordinary People*, or *Sybil*, and films, such as Milgram's film *Obedience*. Each TA is asked to write one or two discussion questions on each book, and these are compiled and shared among the TAs (I circulate discussion questions on the films). I have also asked undergraduate TAs to lead discussions focused on specific problems, such as mental illness or date rape. In so doing, I encourage them to bring in guest speakers from the community. For example, a student might invite a former mental patient to discuss mental illness or a volunteer at a rape crisis center

to discuss how misattributions about another person's motives can lead to date rape. On occasion, I have asked undergraduates to use their discussion sessions to review the lectures or textbook in preparation for an upcoming test. However, I have found this to be less effective than the other options described earlier.

To enhance the value of the experience for the TA as well as the introductory psychology students, I distribute materials designed to help assistants augment their skills as discussion leaders. One useful reference is chapter 4 of McKeachie's (1986) book *Teaching Tips*. This chapter provides a wealth of information that is helpful to discussion leaders, such as how to start the discussion, how to facilitate group problem solving, how to handle nonparticipants, how to deal with students who monopolize the discussion, and what to do if students do not read the assignment and are thus unprepared to participate in the discussion.

EVALUATIVE FEEDBACK

Surveys have indicated that in the vast majority of cases, introductory psychology professors rely solely on objective tests (Ross, Anderson, & Gaulton, 1987). Use of undergraduate TAs provides the option of incorporating short-answer exams and papers into the class. We have asked undergraduate students to grade essay exams and short papers as part of their duties. Initially, I was reluctant to ask undergraduates to become involved in such grading, but evaluations have suggested that undergraduates enjoy grading as long as the amount is reasonable. It is very important to provide students with clear guidelines about how many points should be given for various kinds of answers and that the introductory students understand that such criteria are in use. Available research suggests that it is indeed possible for such grading to be done with a high degree of reliability (Bernstein, 1979).

In many schools, however, undergraduates are not permitted to be involved in the grading process. Undergraduates may still be used to provide personalized feedback on work that has already been graded. It should be noted that personalized comments have been shown to result in improved test performance even if they are made on objective tests. Evans and Peeler (1979) conducted a clever experiment in which half of the students in their introductory psychology class were randomly assigned to receive encouraging comments on their objective tests, such as "Excellent job" (for an A) or "It was a hard test. Keep on truckin'" (for a D). The remaining students received no feedback. Students who were randomly assigned to receive feedback scored higher on subsequent tests than students who did not. Hence, under-

graduate TAs might be asked to make such personalized comments on the objective tests taken by students in their section.

One particularly successful way that we have used undergraduates in providing personal feedback is by having them make comments on student journals. Students in my introductory psychology classes are typically required to keep a journal. They are asked to pick a topic that reflects some area of their life they would like to change. They are then instructed to apply concepts covered in the course to their problem and to make at least one journal entry per week summarizing their efforts. Each week, the journal is submitted to their undergraduate discussion leader, who in turn provides personalized feedback on their insights, progress, and so forth. This process continues throughout the entire semester.

In most cases, keeping a journal has been rated as the single most valuable aspect of the introductory psychology course. In addition to reporting this to be a worthwhile experience, many students indicated that they had successfully changed their behavior in a way that was highly significant to them. Some recent examples of change include quitting smoking, losing weight, and seeking professional help for a serious mental health problem.

Several articles have appeared in the literature extolling the virtues of journal writing in introductory psychology classes (see Fulwiler, 1987, for a review). As one writer has noted, however, the major disadvantage of using journals is that it is extremely time-consuming to provide written feedback if the class is large (Hettich, 1990). On the basis of our experience, the use of undergraduate assistants would seem to be an ideal solution to this problem. Because journals do not have to be graded, undergraduate TAs can be asked to make comments even at those schools that prohibit undergraduates from involvement in grading.

MINICOURSES

Of all the ways that we have involved undergraduate assistants in the introductory psychology course, perhaps the most successful has been allowing them to offer independent seminars that we call minicourses. Minicourses are short specialty courses taught by the undergraduate TAs on a topic of their choosing. Students from the introductory psychology course are invited to sign up for and attend one or more minicourses during the semester. Each minicourse is limited to 10-15 participants to maximize the personal and interactive nature of this experience. Although there is certainly some flexibility, minicourses generally meet for 1–4 hours spread over 1–4 course meetings.

Early in the semester, undergraduate TAs are instructed to select a topic for their minicourse and to begin looking for interesting reading materials. It is emphasized that the topic selected can be either broad (e.g., mental illness) or narrow (e.g., biofeedback). Each week the undergraduate assistant is required to hand in a tentative syllabus in which topics to be covered, proposed readings, and plans for the use of class time are described. Weekly meetings provide a forum wherein students can receive feedback from the teacher and their peers on how their minicourse can be improved. In these meetings, students are encouraged to design sessions that take advantage of the small class size by actively involving students in the material (e.g., visiting a home for autistic children as part of a minicourse on autism). They are discouraged from lecturing to their students. Students are required to submit refined and improved syllabi each week until it is time for the minicourses to begin.

Minicourses have been offered on a wide variety of topics. Some of the most popular have been on depression, eating disorders, meditation, smoking cessation, hypnosis, AIDS awareness and prevention, family and domestic issues, cultural differences in behavior, the psychology of religion, and sexual assault. If two or more undergraduate assistants want to offer minicourses on the same topic, no attempt is made to dissuade them. It was reasoned that if a topic is popular among the undergraduate assistants, it well be popular among the introductory psychology students as well.

Although students are advised against requesting departmental faculty to appear in their seminars, we encourage the undergraduates to consult with faculty and graduate students for advice about their topic. In our experience faculty members and graduate students have been very helpful when approached in this way. They have often gone out of their way to help the undergraduate assistants procure books, articles, or films. Apparently, the context in which faculty and graduate students were sought out—to provide advice in their area of specialty—was one that they found acceptable and in many cases enjoyable.

Every time we have used the minicourse option as part of the introductory psychology course, we have been impressed by the creativity and imagination TAs have shown in planning class activities, bringing in experts, and arranging educational trips for students. For example, an ex-offender was invited to attend one class in a minicourse on the psychology of imprisonment. He not only discussed life in contemporary prisons but also had a unique perspective on the problems faced by ex-offenders seeking employment. The leader of a minicourse on mental illness arranged a bus trip to a nearby state hospital, where the students had the opportunity to observe inmates in a variety of situations. The leader for a seminar on animal training and

behavior took her students to an aquarium for a demonstration of how fish are trained as performers.

After trying various structural arrangements, we have found that it works best to permit each TA to offer his or her minicourse twice. It is extremely valuable for the TAs to have the opportunity to modify their minicourse and try it again on a second group. Having the minicourses offered twice also has the advantage of allowing each introductory psychology student to take two minicourses—an option they find highly desirable.

Each time the minicourse has been included in an introductory psychology class, it has been enormously successful (for a more detailed discussion of the results of an evaluation, see Wortman & Hillis, 1976). Both the introductory psychology students and the undergraduate TAs rate their experiences very highly. For example, on a 5-point scale with endpoints of 1 (*strongly disagree*) and 5 (*strongly agree*), the introductory psychology students expressed clear agreement with the statement that "the leader did a good job of organizing and planning the minicourse" (the main score of 519 students was 4.25). Students also expressed strong agreement with statements that the leader communicated ideas effectively, that he or she was genuinely interested in helping students, that the grading was fair, and that the readings were worthwhile. Students expressed strong disagreement with the statement that the minicourse would have been more effective with a faculty leader.

The undergraduate TAs also appeared to benefit from planning and offering a minicourse. On a 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*) scale, the mean rating of 33 TAs one term was 4.48 for the item "How valuable an experience was it for you to prepare and teach a minicourse?" The experience of offering a minicourse did not always have the effect of enhancing students' enthusiasm for a career in teaching. Some students were disillusioned by the amount of busywork involved in teaching and by the fact that students seemed concerned only about grades. Others found the experience of providing an intellectual climate exhilarating and could not wait for an opportunity to be in a teaching role again. Virtually all students were glad to have had the exposure to a teaching role and felt better prepared to make job and career decisions that might involve teaching.

RECRUITMENT OF UNDERGRADUATE TEACHING ASSISTANTS

I usually recruit undergraduate TAs by circulating a flyer in upper-division classes. The flyer provides information about what is required of

a TA, and it is attached to a one-page application form. The form asks students why they want to be a TA and also requests information about their undergraduate and psychology grade point average and their areas of interest and expertise. Students are asked to provide the names of at least two faculty members who can serve as references.

The course description sheet indicates that only highly qualified students who are recommended by their professors can be selected for the undergraduate teacher role. Hence, applicants probably screen themselves, knowing that those who do not meet strict criteria will not be selected. Perhaps this is why I have rarely had to turn down students who express interest in the position. I typically interview each applicant and ask my colleagues about applicants I do not know. In most cases, the vast majority of students who apply to serve as TAs are selected.

Evaluation of Undergraduate Teaching Assistants

Because the use of undergraduate TAs is somewhat controversial, it is important that such teaching experiences be evaluated. In an educational climate where parents often complain if their son or daughter has too many classes taught by graduate students, what will parental reaction be to undergraduate teaching? Moreover, parents who are devoting significant resources to sending their children to college may not be pleased to learn that (possibly in exchange for course credit) they are spending time grading papers and leading discussions. Concerns of this sort might make deans and department chairpersons uncomfortable about the involvement of undergraduates in teaching introductory psychology. Hence, it is of paramount importance to determine whether the use of undergraduate TAs benefits students enrolled in introductory psychology classes and whether this arrangement is beneficial to the undergraduate TAs themselves.

A number of studies have compared introductory psychology students' reactions to undergraduate and graduate student discussion leaders. For example, White and Kolber (1978) compared the performance of graduate and undergraduate TAs in their introductory course at a private metropolitan university. Students were asked to indicate the extent to which the TA clarified lectures, encouraged discussion, helped skill development, facilitated the examination of psychological concepts, and facilitated the application of such concepts. In each case, there was a highly significant difference between ratings of the graduate and undergraduate TAs, and in each case, these difference favored the *undergraduate* TA. (The authors speculate that the closeness in age between the undergraduate TAs and the introductory psychology stu-

dents may have had a positive influence on the students' experience with the undergraduate assistants.) In another study (Fremouw, Millard, & Donahoe, 1979), undergraduate TAs were rated as being equally knowledgeable as graduate student assistants and as significantly more helpful than graduate students.

In addition to the other benefits that are conferred, our evaluations suggest that students benefit considerably from regular contact with a small group of undergraduates. Such contact may facilitate integration, particularly for those students who are not gregarious by nature and who may be experiencing some difficulty becoming acquainted with other students. Students also seem to value the opportunity to get to know a junior or senior psychology major who can provide information about such matters as which courses to take and which instructors are most approachable for independent study.

There is also substantial evidence to suggest that the TAs benefit from their involvement in the introductory course. In the evaluation we conducted (Wortman & Hillis, 1976), undergraduate TAs were asked to indicate whether they were glad they had served as TAs. On a scale ranging from 1 (*not at all glad*) to 5 (*extremely glad*), the mean rating made by the 33 TAs was 4.76. In another study, Fremouw et al. (1979) reported that students who served as undergraduate TAs displayed greater knowledge of information presented in an introductory course than did comparable undergraduate controls. Taken together, these studies provide compelling evidence that serving as a TA can be an extremely valuable experience. Along similar lines, undergraduate TAs rated themselves as significantly less anxious in subsequent group situations (Boeding & Vattano, 1976).

Two additional advantages of serving as an undergraduate TA should be noted. One that may be obvious is that students have an opportunity to work closely with a faculty mentor. This often results in a strong and enthusiastic letter of recommendation. Second, the experience of serving as a TA places students in a peer group of highly motivated psychology majors. Students are able to exchange information about such topics as where to apply to graduate school, how to tackle a personal statement, and how to study for Graduate Record Exams.

It should be noted that some schools may have policies or philosophies that make it difficult to integrate the use of undergraduate TAs. In situations like this, it may be possible to utilize only certain portions of this approach. Each portion of this approach (utilizing selected undergraduates to lead discussion sections, provide evaluative feedback, or teach minicourses) can add to an introductory psychology course on its own. For example, advanced undergraduates may be recruited to teach a minicourse, exceptional introductory psychology

students may be asked to return the next semester and lead a discussion section, and so forth.

Although some schools or departments may oppose the use of undergraduate TAs in principle, we believe this is unfortunate. Such a policy is often based on a commitment to the highest standards of undergraduate education. In our judgment, whether the use of undergraduate TAs facilitates or impedes the education of introductory psychology students, and of the TAs themselves, is an empirical question. The research evidence in support of this innovation is extremely compelling. Virtually every study to address the matter has documented the extraordinary effectiveness of this approach in enhancing the value of the introductory psychology course for both students and the TAs.

Conclusion

The two teaching techniques reviewed in this chapter—teaching what you are passionate about and using undergraduate TAs—were successful in transforming the teaching of introductory psychology from something dreaded to an exhilarating experience. Within a year, the course was so popular at my university that a lottery had to be instituted to determine who would be permitted to register.

I believe that this format results in higher quality lectures, in part because instructors lecture about things they know and care about and in part because they can devote more time to each lecture. Using the undergraduates as discussion and minicourse leaders creates a win–win situation wherein both introductory students and TAs appear to benefit considerably. The minicourse option provides a unique opportunity to customize the course and hence meet the needs of a diverse body of students. Some students have described our minicourse registration process as "like being a kid in a candy store." Overall, offering the course this way generates a great deal of enthusiasm and excitement.

I'll admit that my goals in offering this course go beyond creating an intellectual milieu that is engaging to the students. What I really want to do is to change students' lives. I believe that for many students, this kind of course can serve as a catalyst for positive change. The last time I lectured about depression, at least five students showed up during office hours stating that they wanted help, and the appropriate calls were made to initiate treatment. A few weeks after lecturing about conflict resolution, I received a visit from a student who indicated that she had drawn on the material to reestablish a relationship with her estranged mother. About a year after the last time I

taught introductory psychology, I was contacted by a student who wanted to let me know that she had ended a relationship with her abusive boyfriend. Although incidents of this sort are certainly not conclusive, they suggest that this type of course has the potential to make a difference in students' lives.

Taken together, the options described in this chapter allow for a level of active involvement and personal attention that is unusual in a large introductory psychology course. Moreover, these changes can have the impact of improving the quality of the course without placing additional burdens on the instructor. Perhaps the most compelling reason to consider incorporating these changes, however, is that they provide an experience for the instructor that is particularly gratifying and rewarding.

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