Ideas for Teaching History and Systems

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This article presents some ideas and activities (reaction journal, intellectual genealogy, textbook comparisons, and multiple timelines) for the history and systems class. Instead of formal testing, students prepared topic summaries that integrated their knowledge from lectures, text, and original articles. These activities can be used to increase the richness of students' experience.

The history and systems course is a popular and important one in many psychology departments (Riedel, 1974), often serving as a capstone course. Previous contributors have suggested strategies or themes for teaching the course (Han, 1986; Robinson, 1979; Smith, 1982; Tobacyk, 1987) as well as specific exercises to facilitate classroom learning (Benjamin, 1979; Berrenberg, 1990; Caudle, 1979; Coffield, 1973; Davis, Janzen, & Davis, 1982; Weigel & Gottfurcht, 1972). In this article, I suggest specific revisions for some old ideas and present some new ones.

Class Assignments

During the fall 1989 and fall 1990 semesters, I taught History and Systems of Psychology using Hergenhahn's (1986) textbook. For the fall 1989 class, a straight lecture format was used, with four essay tests given periodically. The course format was changed drastically for the fall 1990 semester. Lectures were presented, but the four essay tests were dropped and the following five new assignments were added.

Reaction Journal

Students read original articles from the history of psychology available at the library on reserve. Each student kept a journal containing reactions to the material. Journals were graded four times during the semester. Instructors should select articles that highlight points covered in lectures or that supplement the textbook. Excellent sources for original articles are Dennis (1948) and Benjamin (1988). Students kept a double-entry journal with notes about the readings on one side of the page and their personal reactions on the other. Journal entries should demonstrate students' critical thinking on the subject.

Intellectual Genealogy

The idea of a genealogy is not new. Weigel and Gottfurcht (1972) suggested that students study the genealogy of their faculty adviser to gain insight into how past experiences influence psychologists and psychology. The assignment was changed so that students could understand the influences on their own behavior. Students created their own "intellectual genealogy," indicating the major influences in their intellectual development. The genealogy included four to eight individuals who significantly influenced the students' intellectual development. Each selection was accompanied by a half-page description of the persons selected.

Textbook Comparison

The history and systems course should sensitize students to changes in psychology over time. One index of change can be found by examining the contents of introductory psychology textbooks. I provided students with the tables of contents for James's (1890) The Principles of Psychology (Vols. 1 and 2), Woodworth's (1934) Psychology, and Santrock's (1988) Psychology: The Science of Mind and Behavior. Working in groups of three, students compared and contrasted tables of contents of the three books. Each group developed a format for comparing the treatment of a topic (e.g., learning) across textbooks. Students also noted when new topics appeared and when old topics disappeared from the tables of contents.

Multiple Timelines

One major challenge of teaching history and systems is to overcome students' linear time perception. From their viewpoint, all psychological events occurred in a certain sequence. This assignment was designed to demonstrate that many events and developments in psychology happen concurrently and to promote a more global perspective of the discipline's evolution. Students working in groups of three completed timelines of psychological events from three general locations: the U.S., Europe, and the nonwestern world. Students were also asked to speculate about the future of psychology.

Topic Summaries

Replacing essay tests given in the fall 1989 semester, topic summaries were a central component of the fall 1990 course. Students wrote six topic summaries throughout the semester. They created their own reference guide of important ideas from lectures, the textbook, and library reserve readings. Each student determined what to include. Students were told that the end result should be a well organized document that provides a guide to information covered in the course.
Summary

What was the impact of these activities? Students seemed to enjoy the different assignments and were relieved not to have tests in a "history" class. I enjoyed the variety that the activities provided, and I believe that they added to the richness of the class experience.

References


Notes

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