The Encyclopedic Nature of Introductory Psychology: Two Examples

Introduction to Psychology: Exploration and Application (8th ed.)
by Dennis Coon

Psychology: Themes and Variations (4th ed.)
by Wayne Weiten

Review by R. Eric Landrum

Instructors who teach introductory psychology at one time or another may momentarily think about writing their own textbook. Before doing this, I encourage them to carefully review current introductory textbooks, such as Coon's eighth edition of Introduction to Psychology: Exploration and Application and Weiten's fourth edition of Psychology: Themes and Variations. A careful reading of these books reveals the gargantuan effort needed to complete an overview of an entire discipline. Both of these authors succeed in providing a comprehensive, encyclopedic review of psychology, and I am in awe of the amount of work that occurred in the creation of these texts. Given the importance of that first collegiate exposure to psychology (and for many their only exposure), this experience is critical. It is my contention that format issues do influence the ability of a student to learn from a textbook. If presented in a visually confusing and unreadable fashion, even the most accurate and up-to-date content may be for naught. Each textbook has unique contributions to make. For instance, I appreciated the question format used by Coon, where a question is printed in italics. However, why are some questions repeated in the chapter summary section whereas others are not? I do like the phonetic spellings offered in Coon's book. This draws the students' attention to correct pronunciations and signals the student that the word was important enough to warrant a phonetic spelling. Another emphasis found in Coon is to provide students with practical applications of the chapter material. That is, Coon encourages students to make the material meaningful in their own lives—a connection that, if made, is an extremely powerful and long-lasting learning tool. Weiten attempts

Both of these authors succeed in providing a comprehensive, encyclopedic review of psychology, and I am in awe of the amount of work that occurred in the creation of these texts.

DENNIS COON, retired, Psychology Department, Santa Barbara City College.
WAYNE WEITEN, Department of Psychology, Santa Clara University.
R. ERIC LANDRUM, Department of Psychology, Boise State University, 1910 University Drive, Boise, Idaho 83725-1715. Electronic mail may be sent to erlandru@boisestate.edu.

Contemporary Psychology APA REVIEW OF BOOKS, 2000, Vol. 45, No. 1

101
this less often. The problem with Coon's approach, however, is that these "applications" come at the end of the chapter—boxed off in their own section. The placement of this material may send the signal to students that this material is an "add-on" and not really part of the chapter. Students may not make the effort to read the material.

One of the most outstanding features of the Weiten text is the graphics program, or what Weiten calls the "didactic illustration program." The selection, use, and organization of graphic images in Weiten's book is outstanding. It appears that the images are selected for a purpose, and they allow the student the chance to learn from the picture and text. Every text could benefit from this approach. Coon's text suffers from what I call "feature creep." That is, as earlier additions have been revised, more and more features creep into the text. There are too many features set off in too many ways, including a preview vignette, chapter surveys, learning checks, A Closer Look sections, Cultural Diversity sections, applications, explorations, and chapter summaries. If you try to draw attention to everything by using some sort of box, the cumulative effect is that everything seems to be in a box and nothing stands out. Interestingly, Weiten has many of the same features, but they appear more integrated and flow within the text, whereas Coon's features are offset in different colored backgrounds and boxes. Whereas Coon suffers from feature creep, Weiten suffers from "margin clutter." There is too much information presented in the margins of the book, such as too many quotes, and figure captions are much too long (more on this later). My concern is that students, seeing a heavy emphasis on quotations, may suspect that they will be tested on the quotes.

Both books give substantive coverage to study tips and strategies for success. Weiten's placement of this material is more effective. Weiten presents this material in Chapter 1 (pp. 29-33), whereas Coon's placement is in the front of the book (pp. xxxvi-xlii). My concern is that if this information is not in the context of a "real" chapter, students will skip it. Not all students will be intrinsically motivated to read the material, even if it is helpful; students are more likely to discover this material through required chapter reading. Both books have particular segments that present information in a unique way. A complete enumeration is not possible here, but some examples may be useful. I found Coon's discussion of Piagetian stages by way of the Monopoly game strategies enlightening and instructive, and I thought the coverage of Maslow's list of metaneeds was fascinating (a list I have not seen elsewhere). For Weiten, I was most struck by his superb inclusion of art in the Application section of his "Sensation and Perception" chapter. I think the artwork choices are wonderful, and the commentary connects chapter concepts to how artists use these concepts in a practical, applied way. On the other hand, I found Weiten's coverage of psychoactive drugs somewhat disappointing. Why is alcohol not listed as a depressant, and similarly, why are caffeine and nicotine not listed as stimulants? While on this topic, Coon is too colloquial when referring to stimulants as uppers (p. 255)—the chapter subheads should match the rest of the text.

With respect to content, one last area to address is the use of humor. In my review, it appears that Weiten does not attempt to inject humor into most areas; this approach works for Weiten. Coon attempts to infuse humor throughout the text. Let me be clear and say that I appreciate humor, and I think it can be a valuable teaching tool. For instance, I enjoyed the Level 1 heading in the chapter titled "Child Development": The Newborn Baby—The Basic Model Comes With Options (p. 86). There are other good examples of humor as well. I would think it difficult, however, to try to write in a way that would be humorous to all. Trying to force humor into places may be unwise and actually detrimental. For instance, one of the Coon's headings in the chapter titled "Social Behavior" is Obedience—Would You Electrocute a Stranger? (p. 665). I spend a good deal of time each semester trying to overcome the stereotype that psychologists shock people, yet this heading is misleading. A more salient example occurs in Coon's chapter titled "Abnormal Behavior." The section on page 568 is labeled Sexual Deviance—Trench Coats, Whips, Leathers, and Lace. Near this is a very serious section on how to recognize the signs of child molestation. The playfulness of the section heading is not representative of the seriousness of the content, and I find the connotation offensive. This seems to be a gratuitous attempt at humor that was dramatically unsuccessful, distracting from serious and important subject matter. I believe that a risk of forcing humor is that it may have unintended effects.

There are a number of format issues that strike me as important when reading these textbooks. Though accuracy and currency of content are certainly important issues in the development of any textbook, the use of pedagogical aids must be prudent. Although many of these format issues reflect my own preferences and biases, there is an emerging literature on this topic (Marek, Griggs, & Christopher, 1999; Weiten, Degaona, Rehnke, & Sewell, 1999; Weiten, Guadagno, & Beck, 1996). Based on my overall impression, Weiten's book is better formatted and more clearly presented than Coon's, although both have limitations. A prototypical example of this is found by examining the Table of Contents. The Coon text is hard to read at times. Are so many fonts or type styles needed? It is a confusing mix, and the format lacks the ability to give the reader organizational cues—some text is red, black, in boldface, italics, boldface and italics, all caps, and regular upper- and lower-case text. It's too much! Weiten's Table of Contents has the chapter title in boldface, large type; chapter headings in boldface and all caps; and subsections in regular upper- and lowercase (with an occasional all caps). It

102 Contemporary Psychology APA REVIEW OF BOOKS, 2000, Vol 46, No. 1
is easier to read and communicates to the reader content organization. The table of contents is not critical to the success of the student, but these display and format choices typify the formatting choices made throughout.

Coon attempts to communicate the importance of a topic with boxes and shading. Frankly, the shading scheme is confusing. The shading has a gradient that typically goes from yellow to almost no color; by the end of the box, the reader is unsure if the text is still in the box or the regular text has resumed. Second, the boxes are often so long that they span more than one column, which is distracting. Third, because of feature creep, there are too many boxes. If the material is that important, why not write it in the text? Setting the material off in a box may have an unintended effect. Miller and Davis (1993) found that when asked to recall material in textbooks, the boxed material is not as well recalled as the regular text, unless the student is specifically instructed to remember the boxed material. Although the author may be trying to signal the student to pay attention to an important issue, the student may be processing this signal as "it's in a box, and probably won't be on the test, so skip it." The features are not necessarily a problem, but the format and presentation of these features may make a difference in how students choose to process the presented information.

The format of Weiten's book also has room for improvement. For instance, in the Recap of Key Points section throughout the chapters are printed in blue ink. Blue ink is not a good choice. In low-light conditions, the blue ink is not easy to read, and readability does not improve much in better lighting conditions. The best contrast is black ink on a bright white background. A more troubling format problem involves figure captions. In Weiten's book, they are too long. Too much important information is crammed into a small font. For instance, in Figure 14.16 on p. 579, a terminal stub is presented with a synaptic and postsynaptic cell. The figure caption is a complicated, 140-word explanation of the hypotheses about the neurochemical bases for depression. If this topic is truly relevant, then it should be included in the main text and not in a figure caption.

This cramming of information into the figure captions contributes, along with the numerous quotes, to the margin clutter mentioned previously. When considered in total, however, the readability and flow of the Weiten text is superior to the Coon text.

**The Encyclopedic Nature of Today's Psychology Textbook**

After reading both Coon and Weiten's books, it is impressive to consider the sheer content area covered in 733-page and 809-page books, respectively. I want to raise an issue not specific to these books per se, but two questions important to the education of introductory psychology students. How much information is enough and how much is too much?

There are strong market forces that drive textbook adoptions. On the surface, some books appear similar, and it takes more than a cursory glance at Coon and Weiten's books, for instance, to be able to understand the substantive differences. In fact, research in this area indicates that although there is typically a common core of information presented in introductory psychology textbooks, there is wide variation in the overall content (Boneau, 1990; Landrum, 1993; Quereshi, 1993; Zechmeister & Zechmeister, 1998). Given a relatively small core of items that appear in all books in these studies, what leads to the explosion of textual material? Weiten commented in his introduction that the fourth edition was reduced to 318,000 words. Are we appropriately serving our introductory psychology students with a 300,000-plus word text? Might this be too much information to present to the introductory student? Remember, this issue transcends these two books and applies to the plethora of books on the market.

I believe that textbook authors are probably steered into the encyclopedic approach for a number of reasons. It is difficult to be innovative when the stake in the market share is so large. The pressure is on to be topically inclusive rather than exclusive. For example, consider the typical textbook presentation of sodium and potassium ions and their respective roles in the action potential. Do our introductory psychology students really need to take this tidbit of information away from the course? I believe some authors today are probably challenged to make evaluative choices about content issues for fear that their book would not be adopted. Imagine being a physiological psychologist visiting the publisher's booth and not finding the obligatory sodium-potassium ion action potential drawing. That person might show outrage, and outrage might lead to an overreaction by a publisher, which might lead a publisher to encourage an author to "include everything" so as to not offend anyone. Most authors probably do not have the freedom to make these choices about inclusion or exclusion, or choose not to use that power. I am not suggesting that this particular topic is unimportant. What I am suggesting is that we as a discipline need to take a hard look at content issues and make some value judgments about what core of knowledge we want our introductory students to gain. Again, for many of these students, it is their only formal exposure to psychology, hence our only chance.

At some point the information explosion in psychology is going to force someone in the field to make these value-based decisions, whether it be textbook publishers or authors. Coon presents a table with 31 Freudian concepts presented and defined. Do our students really need to know all 31 concepts? Can we help to make some evaluative judgments about what is more and less important? At what level should that be accomplished? Should the book be encyclopedic and leave the decision making to the instructor, or should the author be responsible for making some of these value judgments? As
in most cases, there probably needs to be an equal balance and healthy compromise.

Some recently published textbooks take the risk of being different in the face of these market forces. The best example that comes to mind is Mynatt and Doherty's (1999) Understanding Human Behavior. It provides a seemingly comprehensive introduction to psychology organized into 42 chapters in 430 pages. It will be interesting to see if this book is commercially successful because it is so different from the mainstream by being more concise and having more chapters than usual. Mynatt and Doherty took a risk to make some value judgments, and clearly had to leave out conceptual coverage that is included in longer texts. Only time will tell if instructors and students value this approach or if the more encyclopedic approach of texts like Coon and Weiten's are preferred.

References


PTSD: An Engaging Read and a Wealth of Information

Posttraumatic Stress Disorder: A Comprehensive Text
by Philip A. Saigh and J. Douglas Bremner (Eds.)

Review by Alan E. Stewart

Posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) represents a burgeoning literature in both the basic and applied research fields. Since 1975 over 8,500 articles on PTSD, including 150 books, have appeared in the published literature. Within the past five years the field has witnessed an explosion of research on the etiology, assessment, diagnosis, and treatment of the disorder with an average of 650 articles appearing per year. In fact, since PTSD was introduced into the PsycINFO database in 1985, it has garnered more research citations in 10 years since its inception than did depression during its first 10 years in the database. Saigh and Bremner's edited volume, Posttraumatic Stress Disorder: A Comprehensive Text, is among the first of comprehensive texts on this flourishing research landscape to examine the disorder from a broad range of perspectives. The creation of such a resource poses myriad challenges, but nonetheless ones that Saigh, Bremner, and their 38 contributing authors adroitly meet in Posttraumatic Stress Disorder: The

PHILIP A. SAIGH, Educational Psychology, The Graduate School and University Center, City University of New York.

J. DOUGLAS BREMNER, Departments of Psychiatry and of Diagnostic Radiology, Yale University School of Medicine.

ALAN E. STEWART, Department of Psychology, University of Florida, Gainesville, Florida 32611. Electronic mail may be sent to stewart@psych.ufl.edu.