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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to explore the current landscape of the 21st century Introductory Psychology classroom. The authors—graduate students and current teachers of psychology—are well aware of the need to move away from traditional, top-down approaches to teaching. Personal experience has convinced them that the standard lecture format does not engage all 21st century students. A belief in the need to actively engage students in introductory psychology courses is the basis for the present paper. Through the use of technology and active-learning classroom activities, teachers might succeed in meeting students of psychology "where they are," thus improving the classroom experience for the educator and the student. This paper will explore the idea of teaching of traditional introductory psychology course content using a popular culture medium.

Keywords

Psychology, pedagogy, top-down approaches, active-learning

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Meeting in the middle: Making use of popular culture in the classroom

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Abstract. The purpose of this paper is to explore the current landscape of the 21st century Introductory Psychology classroom. The authors—graduate students and current teachers of psychology—are well aware of the need to move away from traditional, top-down approaches to teaching. Personal experience has convinced them that the standard lecture format does not engage all 21st century students. A belief in the need to actively engage students in introductory psychology courses is the basis for the present paper. Through the use of technology and active-learning classroom activities, teachers might succeed in meeting students of psychology "where they are," thus improving the classroom experience for the educator and the student. This paper will explore the idea of teaching of traditional introductory psychology course content using a popular culture medium.

I.

> It isn't enough to say these young people are uninterested in world realities. They are actively cut off from them. Or a better way to put it is to say they are encased in more immediate realities that shut out conditions beyond—friends, work, clothes, cars, pop music, sitcoms, Facebook. (Bauerlein, 2008, p. 30).

Professors used to complain that students chatted, daydreamed, or doodled during lectures; now they text, play games on their laptops, and change their Facebook status. The theme is the same—tuning out of a course that has not captured their full attention—but the medium has changed, and it affects every aspect of the lives of those we educate. The authors of this paper could take a deficit-based approach to our understanding of the changes before us, as it might be argued that Bauerlein (2008) does. We could wring our hands that students make use of Google and Wikipedia—and they do so in the blink of an eye. We ask a question in class and 30 seconds later a student using his or her Blackberry has found an answer. It might be the wrong answer, of course, as students and others using the Internet often accept the first image they see (Shifley, 2011). Should we react with disdain and apologetically explain to the world that our students are simply not as intelligent as those in the past? Or should we take a strengths-based approach, looking at what we know about these 21st century learners, and find a way to meet them in the middle?

New media technologies such as the ever-expanding Internet and the increasing use of smart phones have created a "constantly connected" environment for everyone, but especially for today's teens and young adults, who have grown up using digital technology. Phrases like "I'll Google it" and "Facebook me" have entered the daily lexicon of American life and are becoming ubiquitous. Individuals now have the option of being connected to one another and to the world 24 hours a day, seven days a week. Most young people in this country have readily embraced

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that option. As of 2009, 93% of American adolescents aged 13 to 18 were "immersing themselves in life online" (Lusk, 2011, p. 3). The always-available offerings include social websites such as Facebook, Twitter, Flickr, and YouTube, and instantaneous communication via texting and webcams. Online auctions and merchants that allow quick and easy access to virtually any item one might wish to purchase are commonplace. Television shows and movies can be accessed on demand. There is highly interactive online gaming, such as the popular World of Warcraft. We can interact in virtual worlds like Second Life, into which one can enter as an avatar. We have web feeds, weblogs, and podcasters. We have the ability to instantly search billions of webpages for information on any topic. The digital world in which young people have immersed themselves is endlessly varied, constantly changing, user-centered, and never, ever boring. With a quick click of the mouse, what is not of interest can be deleted and replaced.

Media consultant Tom Valcanis notes that these new technologies do not merely *add* to culture; rather, he says, they *transform* it. He explains that new media have essentially transformed the global culture into a participatory one:

> If the technology is the medium in which a culture grows, the interactive and user-oriented nature of these technologies have given rise to a participatory and "mash-up" culture in which the ways of producing and accessing content are deconstructed, uploaded, mixed, converged, and reconstructed through computers and smartphones mediated by online platforms; it becomes a "participatory culture" . . . (Valcanis, 2011, p. 39).

Traditional teaching methods, including class lectures and rote notetaking, are the antithesis of "user oriented" and "participatory" realities of life for the current college student. Teacher-centered, mono-directional activities can be intensely boring to students (depending, of course, on both the subject matter and the professor's delivery), and boredom is a feeling for which today's introductory college students have little tolerance. Not only are they not used to being bored, but they are also not used to being helpless to do anything about it if boredom sets in. A professor's lecture cannot be deleted with the click of a mouse but must instead be tolerated to its conclusion. As a result, students are likely to feel not only bored but also frustrated to find themselves in a situation to which they are hugely unaccustomed. Ultimately, they are likely to resist classroom activities in which their needs and desires are neither primary nor quickly satisfied, and in which their participation is largely irrelevant.

In short, 21st century media technology has resulted in a communication culture characterized by endless variety, constant interaction, and instant gratification. Although the class lecture was a successful teaching method for earlier generations, today's college students may find it neither interactive nor stimulating enough to hold their attention. If this is so, learning is more difficult for them than it was for earlier generations accustomed to a slower, relatively unchanging daily environment. Teaching methods that worked for those generations may not reach today's college learners "where they live:" a world in which they are constantly producing, accessing, and interacting. Would incorporating aspects of this new culture into the traditional college classroom facilitate learning, hinder learning, or have no significant impact?

This paper reviews some current trends in the classroom, such as the learning-style and attitude differences that exist in the millennial generation, student-centered approaches, and the need for differentiated and technologically based approaches. It culminates with a description of an alternative to the introductory-level course that relies on content that is similar to the traditional Introductory Psychology course, yet focuses on student-preferred learning strategies and makes use of materials from popular culture to explore the same basic concepts.

The aim is to reconsider the lens college instructors are using when we teach at the introductory level, specifically in psychology. The authors of this paper propose that a new introductory course may be a more effective way of engaging students. The time may have come to revamp introductory psychology so that we engage students early and keep them interested in psychology as a major. The course described and the methods suggested are new and still in the exploratory stage, but can provide food for thought in the discussion of improving pedagogy.

Millennial Generation

Today's students are from a generation so technologically savvy that technology and media are an integral part of their identity. This generation is able to connect to the Internet at any moment with their laptop computers or cell phones and can remain connected to the virtual world—and to each other—for indefinite periods of time. The fact that they have grown up online has shaped their very identity (Palfrey & Gassler, 2008). They expect to work collaboratively and are forcing teaching models to become less teacher-oriented and more student-centered (Bingham, 2009). It is clear that instructors of psychology need to challenge our traditional models of teacher-oriented strategies and ask ourselves how we can teach most effectively to this new generation of learners. We know students in both China and the United States prefer student-centered strategies (Glover, Nguyen, & Ronayne, 2011; Tam, Heng, & Jiang, 2009). Students have expressed a desire for material to which they can more easily relate, connection to material beyond the textbook, and use of less didactic, more engaging strategies. Students have expressed a dislike of excessive use of PowerPoint, especially when professors read from the slides. The present authors have responded to the criticism by investigating the use of classroom technology to see if it improves student performance (Fallon & Forrest, 2011). In fields such as the social sciences, where instructors have lagged behind in the use of such technology, confidence with technology gained early in the instructor's training can lead to more effective use of social media in the classroom (Shriner, Clark, Nail, Schlee, & Libler, 2010). Students might be frustrated that their teachers are so concerned about their use of media in the classroom. A student of one of the present authors related during a class discussion that it is the same as "doodling." Yet instructors should pay attention to what students are "doodling" and develop ways to engage these doodles with innovative content. Students are tech-savvy, and instructors can make use of that knowledge in our classroom approaches.

II.

Classroom Strategies

As Mascolo (2009) points out in his discussion of teaching and learning as guided participation, much has been written about the distinction between student-centered and teacher-centered strategies. The key, Mascolo notes, is in the distribution of power in the classroom. Teacher-centered strategies allow the professor to be in control, whereas student-centered approaches favor collaboration and an active student. There is an abundance of information about the two types of pedagogical approaches and no clear consensus about which is more effective. However, if we listen to the voices of our students, it becomes clear that they prefer learner-centered strategies. Many educators prefer them as well (Bonner, 2011; Levy & Peters, 2002; Glover et al., 2011; Tam, K., Heng, M., & Jiang, G. 2009).

Through studying the efficacy of various autobiographical techniques, Mayo (2002, 2003, 2004) has demonstrated that constructivist techniques are effective in the classroom. He has demonstrated that students do better when they can relate concepts and lesson material to their own lives.

It is not enough to change our techniques, however. Teachers need to think of ways to engage students with content as well. Teachers of psychology need to realize that traditional teaching materials for introductory psychology may be as tired as outdated techniques for teaching such courses.

Recently, one of the present authors created a new course called "Reality Television, Video Games, Social Media and You," to teach psychology through the lens of popular culture. A significant amount of evidence suggests that popular culture is a valuable tool in the classroom (Duncan-Andrade, 2004; Giroux, 2002, 2003; Guy, 2007; Sharma, 2010; Tillman & Triere, 2007). Such a course does not replace the traditional introductory course; instead it provides an alternative for students in the class who find it difficult to learn psychology in a simple survey of major elements of the field. A media-based course could excite students who do well with traditional methods and keep other, more media-focused students connecting with their technologies even while in class. The authors predict that once teachers begin to bring elements of popular culture—that interest both teachers and students—into their courses, the alternative popular culture course could supplement a standard, traditional psychology course.

Like the present authors, instructors of introductory psychology have no doubt found that most students think of psychology as a course about clinical issues. Psychology is about therapy, therapists, psychological disorders, and curing disorders. When students realize that the course will introduce them to psychological concepts that include the brain, neuropsychological concepts, cognitive models *and* clinical, social, and developmental psychology, they are surprised but often disappointed (Stalder & Stec, 2004). Students might not feel motivated to embrace all areas of psychology. This suggests that instructors of introductory psychology need to rethink the content provided in the introductory course. Engaging students with the popular culture they are exposed to in everyday life and showing how that culture reflects all areas of psychology is possibly a way to keep students from diverse perspectives excited about the field.

Popular culture is a space where we can learn about cultural meanings Giroux (2002, 2003). It speaks volumes about the lives of those creating the culture and, about those experiencing it. If teachers of psychology understand our students as products of the popular, media-based world where they are "natives" (Palfrey and Gasser, 2001; Bauerlein, 2008), we can use constructs of traditional psychology to help them learn about the reasons for the creation of popular media and about the impact it can have on those who experience that media. Thus, teachers can use the sphere of popular culture as a lens through which they can look with their students as they teach them about psychology.

Components of the Popular Culture Course

The standard introductory psychology course presents a broad array of concepts from within the discipline. The definition of psychology, methods of psychology, and psychology from the perspectives of different fields within the discipline are the usual topics. A proposed alternative course would present the same core concepts using student-centered, active methods that make use of technology. The goal is to create a new approach that does more than just complement a traditional introductory course.

What is psychology?

In a traditional course, teachers might ask students to generate a list of their ideas about psychology and follow with a discussion of the variety of disciplines within the field. This might function as an "icebreaker" to get students thinking about the definition of psychology covered in a traditional psychology textbook.

Alternatively, the present authors would start by asking students to define psychology and talk about how they see its role in society. In dialogue about our teaching experiences, the present authors have noted that many introductory psychology students get their primary knowledge of psychological disorders from television. Comparing our recent introductory psychology courses, the present authors found that students believe that use of the insanity defense is fairly common. One author found that students in her introductory course thought that 50% of court cases make use of it. The authors believe that this is extreme thinking. The same author who heard this from her students actually found that according to a National Institute of Mental Health report in 1991, only about 1% of legal cases make use of an insanity plea (Murdock, Navasky, Campbell, & O'Connor, 2002). That author believes that student misconception comes from watching shows that exaggerate the use of the insanity plea, such as *Law and Order* (Ronayne, Feister, & Heinz, in press). Right or wrong, students are learning from popular culture. When students make claims about psychology based on popular notions, this presents an opportunity for the professor to deconstruct the inaccurate notion and replace it with facts from research or from the textbook used in the class. The point of such an exercise would be to demonstrate to students the ways that their ideas are constructed by the media, a primary player in popular culture, and are not necessarily accurate representations of psychological phenomena.

Research methods in a student-based introductory psychology course

In a traditional course, instructors would review the scientific nature of the field of psychology and discuss the scientific method used in psychological inquiry. They might have students practice writing hypotheses and developing mock studies.

A popular-culture introductory psychology course would teach the same phenomenon, using *deconstruction*. Students could be asked to find a claim made by popular culture. It is easy to come up with one by searching media, and a professor can easily demonstrate this process for the students using classroom media. One of the present authors asked students to find their own claim about psychology and discuss how well the evidence for the claim was supported. In a course using popular culture as a lens, students could spend time exploring how they understand media portrayals of social concepts like violence by looking at how the term is handled in online media. A recent Google search of the term "violent video games" could return a potentially infinite number of hits. The teacher could help students select from among any of these to get them to actively see that the different assumptions about violence are coming from different and often contradictory perspectives.

For example, using such a method, one of the authors got students to find and compare an article about a June 2011 Supreme Court decision to overturn a California ban on the sale of violent video games to minors (Sullum, 2011) with another article warning parents about the dangers of allowing their children to play violent video games (Gentile & Anderson, 2011). Students were then asked to investigate research methods from their textbook that could support each claim as a way of understanding methods in psychology. Through active

deconstruction with her students, this author created richer discussion and a willingness to read research material.

Additionally, we watched the movie *The Experiment* (Adelstein & Scheuring, 2010), which depicts Zimbardo's prison experiment. Students indicated they thought the film would have a more lasting impact than reading material on the same topic, and that they would more likely remember ethical issues associated with research.

Developmental Psychology Taught through the Popular Culture Lens

There are a variety of methods for teaching lifespan development. One of the present authors employed popular culture in the form of reality television, films, and prime-time television programs in the course of discussing developmental psychology. The episode "Same Sex Parenting" from Morgan Spurlock's series *30* Days (Carney, Devenish, Lock, Panos, Taylor, & Spurlock, 2008) was used. In this episode, a woman opposed to same-sex parenting lives with a same-sex couple who are parents to four children, and abides by their rules for a month. First the theories of personality, parenting, and cognitive development were described by the instructor. The video was next used to reinforce the concepts. The class deconstructed the personalities of the people in the television program and discussed their development in terms of the definition of post-formal thought, which was described in class as thinking beyond absolutes, seeing shades of gray, and combining emotion with logic. Next, teacher and students explored different cultural ideas about parenting. Additionally, in this popular-culture focused course students and teacher discussed the role of parents in reference to video games. The literature on both the negative and positive effects of video games in the development of children was explored. When we explore the idea of Massive Multiplayer Role-playing Games, we can talk about the negative effects of overplaying but keep in mind the positive impact of playing video games as well. Students relate to these ideas because they have grown up playing a wide variety of games.

Biological Issues in a Psychology Course Using Popular Culture

Many students tend to tune out when we discuss the brain and other psychobiological functioning, finding it difficult to connect their notions about psychology to the material being presented. One of authors of this paper has found that often it is the quiz on this material that turns up the lowest scores. Videos have always been useful in teaching about brain function. They also provide vivid descriptions of how biological disturbances leads to behavioral disturbances. The plan for a media-based psychology curriculum about biological aspects of behavior is to bring in a video game and have students describe how they feel when they are playing it. This activity could work in a traditional format as well; however, students are not always sure how to respond when unusual techniques are used in a traditional format, as noted in various student evaluations (M. Ronayne, personal communication, 2011). A course that has "popular culture" in its title will allow students to respond more naturally to the exercise because they are not caught off guard by the activity—they expect it in a course that is designed to discuss various media. They can then talk about why they "feel" as they do when playing video games as a way of introducing a discussion about the chemical *dopamine*, how it is released during play, and the fact that it plays a part in disorders such as schizophrenia and addiction.

Cognitive Psychology in the Popular Culture Classroom

Cognitive psychology covers a wide variety of issues that can be exemplified in a popular media format. The film *Memento* (Ball & Nolan, 2000), clips from *Brain Games* (Leger &

Crowell 2010), and *Eyewitness* (Finkelstein, 2009) allow us to explore cognitive issues. Students in a psychology course using popular culture can learn about memory by watching a man experience the inability to create new memories. This film approach also allows students to explore questions about how it might feel to lose a part of one's self or identity. Other media clips show how malleable memory is and how easily it can be distorted. This method of sharing and discussing concepts generates more discussion than a regular review of the content in the standard textbook, and there is research evidence that effortful cognitive encoding is likely to make a more lasting impact (Dewherst & Brandt, 2007).

Clinical and Social Psychology through a Popular Culture Lens

Traditional introductory courses tend to become most interesting when based on topics that most interest students. Simply reviewing types of disorders as they are likely to be covered in a typical introductory psychology text does not always generate discussion. On the other hand, reality television might motivate even the quieter students to participate. In one class, students were able to study the idea of empathy towards those with mental health problems and explore whether or not reality television stimulates empathy. This question is currently under investigation (Ronayne, Brunelle, Gagnon, & Daley, 2011). Topics that can be discussed based on reality TV shows include mental health in society and sociopsychological topics, such as group think, prejudice, discrimination, and conformity. The possibilities in a popular culture course are endless. Entire projects that revolve around following a reality television series such as *Top Chef* (Gray, Kriley, & Serwatka, 2010)*, America's Next Top Model* (Banks, 2010)*,* and *American Idol* (Lythgoe, 2012) can be created. There are a number of shows that specifically focus on mental health, such as *Hoarders* (Butts, 2012)*, Intervention* (Sharenow & Conway, 2012)*, Hoarders: Buried Alive* (Sestero, 2012), and one television series examining obsessive-compulsive disorder by having a group of people live together in VH1's *OCD Project* (Demyankeo & Jacobs, 2010). Such programs provide a wealth of information about disorders and give students an opportunity to understand how psychologists construct the meaning of mental disorders. As Giroux (2002) suggests, teachers can allow media to be the mirror for understanding a variety of psychological phenomena.

III.

In Summary

Attention paid to students throughout a semester by the present authors has demonstrated successful and unsuccessful attempts to bring popular culture to bear on traditional psychology topics. The development of a media-based introductory psychology course is for the present authors still a work in progress, but one fact is clear: students do responded positively to popular media in the classroom of one of the present authors. One of the most successful discussions of race and gender was recently inspired by the film *HIP-HOP: Beyond Beats and Rhymes* (Hurt, 2006), which explores Black masculinity and the misogyny in hip-hop music and videos. The discussion around this film in an alternative introductory psychology class was vibrant and rich, despite some students' struggle to understand the macro-level concepts. In this case the conversation was more sophisticated than in traditional introductory psychology courses the authors have taught. In a media-supplemented introduction to psychology course, one instructor found that she ran out of time for discussion, a problem less likely to be encountered when teaching the traditional, lecture-focused Introduction to Psychology. Student-focused film and media can potentially keep students more highly engaged. Empirical research will be required to see if contemporary, student-centered,

media-inspired approaches to the delivery of introductory psychology content could ever replace the old-fashioned "Introduction to Psychology" course.

IV.

Future Directions

Another question to be explored is whether a non-traditional approach is more effective than a traditional one. Do students learn the complete introductory psychology curriculum in courses that draw heavily on film and media from their personal experiences? Furthermore, the limits of popular-media approaches offered within a typical lecture format will also need to be examined. Today's generation of students favors student-centered, active-learning strategies and collaborative models. They are a technologically advanced generation requiring differentiated strategies and innovative use of multiple forms of media in the classroom (Bauerlein, 2008). It stands to reason that the content of psychology courses needs to be updated as well. Rather than react in dismay to what may be perceived by some as the dumbing down of America (Bauerlein, 2008), teachers of psychology can embrace the current student culture and use it as a mechanism through which to teach psychology. The present authors will present their experiences using an auto-ethnographic approach to teaching Introduction to Psychology at the Eastern Psychological Association Conference in March 2012. Future analysis including the comparison of outcomes in a popular culture course and a traditional introductory psychology course will be described (Ronayne, 2012).

It might not be uncommon for seasoned professors of psychology to resist teaching the traditional introductory psychology course. If we educators can grow tired of the curriculum and pedagogy typical to this course, it is not surprising that the traditional introduction to psychology may not be meet the education needs of today's learners. Students may not be aware of any deficiency in the traditional course, as they may have come to expect introductory courses to be broad and less interesting than the courses they will take as they move on in the discipline. Perhaps the field of introductory psychology is a natural fit for a popular-media experiment such as the one described in this paper. Psychology permeates every facet of our lives. As well as being contained in books and lectures, the field is available for study through the lens of popular culture. That culture, the one in which our students are immersed, can bring the field of psychology to life for the media-savvy student today.

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