
Novel Writing Assignments in the Psychology of Learning

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For years I have observed the difficulty many undergraduates have applying psychological terminology to real situations. In the field of learning, for instance, phenomena such as “extinction” and “stimulus generalization” or terms such as “temporal contiguity” and “predictive contingency” are often explained within the context of laboratory and/or animal research. Learning theorists then attempt to explain complex and naturalistic human and animal behavior through these mechanisms. Some undergraduates, however, do not believe that more complex human behavior can be so explained, while others simply have difficulty applying learning terminology to human situations.

One approach to helping these students would be to focus the course material more exclusively on human learning rather than on laboratory research. This approach, however, would merely substitute one context for another, and the field of learning has a strong comparative basis which seeks generalities in learning processes across the species. My solution to the problem has been to use novels in conjunction with writing assignments which integrate the animal learning findings into a realistic, if fictional, human context. I accomplish this by having students read one novel in addition to the standard texts and then evaluate the learning by the characters.

In selecting novels, I avoid those with preexisting psychological interpretation, since the students will be providing their own. Similarly, I

avoid abstract writing styles in favor of novels which provide rich, concrete, realistic descriptions of characters and events. Within these constraints, I then select the best literature. Several years ago I used Salinger's *Catcher in the Rye*; this past year I have used Knowles' *A Separate Peace*. Students are instructed to view the novel as a naturalistic human laboratory ripe for an objective analysis. One advantage of a novel over actual naturalistic observation is that we can recheck facts and events after the fact, preserving some degree of objectivity.

Last semester the students located instances of terms such as "positive reinforcement," "extinction," and "stimulus control" within the novel. Their writing assignments were paragraph-length essays documenting their examples from the novel, explaining the definition of the term, and then defending their example as an instance of the term or phenomenon. As any person involved in Writing Across the Curriculum already knows, it was difficult to separate their writing skills from their analytic skills. Nor did I try. My feedback focused directly upon the psychological material under the assumption that writing follows the structure of thought.

The results from last semester were interesting. While most students enjoyed reading *A Separate Peace*, they found the assignments a challenge. Some students tried unsuccessfully to find examples that superficially resembled a laboratory rat pressing a bar for food reward. I encouraged students to think instead of human reinforcements such as praise and peer support. Another common problem was the students' failure to look closely at language. We defined "positive reinforcement," for instance, as "a stimulus which, when delivered soon after a behavior, increases the likelihood of that behavior reoccurring." Here is a faulty example. Gene, a hard-working student from the novel, begins a competition with Phineas, an athlete. Gene never quite beats Phineas, though many students made the claim that the positive reinforcement for Gene's competitive behavior was the hope (or desire) of getting even with Phineas. I pointed out that something must actually occur before it can act as a reinforcer.

Those areas in the writing which produce the most errors help me to pinpoint the places to focus our efforts. In the past some of these have been obvious. Sometimes terms were not read carefully. At other times

students didn't seek the boundaries of similar sounding yet distinct terms—problems rectified by spending more time working and writing (though students sometimes seek more imaginative answers to their woes). Last semester students were given opportunities to rewrite essays in their lab manuals. Again, improvements were noted.

This semester I have made a few changes in the assignments. First, we are compressing all the novel writing into two weeks rather than spreading it across the semester. This way we can have a block of time without distractions from other assignments. Second, only three essay questions will be used. One question asks them to detail what motivates a character (this will clarify "reinforcement" for a character). The second asks them to explore the relationship between the characters' behavior and their reinforcements, and how this relationship leads to behavior change in the novel. The final essay is open-ended, allowing the students to explore any other learning process.

Students receive one overall grade for their laboratory work. The novel writing assignment is the equivalent of one laboratory project or about 10% of the total lab grade. In spite of constant tinkering with different approaches, I have no plans to drop the novel and writing assignments. It would be fun to spend more time on the novel, but the course has other components which also need attention. (In addition to the regular text and lecture material, I have run real learning experiments, and this semester I have added some computer work which simulates recent developments in theory.)

I have always maintained that writing assists formation of critical thought. After numerous ambitious projects, I am convinced that no single assignment, with or without hints, admonitions or tricks, has lasting value in the absence of a college-wide and cultural commitment to fundamental writing and thinking skills. As I occasionally remind others, sometimes you just have to bite the bullet. And after you bite the bullet, you have to chew on it a while.

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