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Buffy, Elvis, and Introductory Psychology: Two Characters in Search of a Dialogue

David Zehr and Kathleen Henderson

Introduction

by David Zehr

Few students enrolled in an introductory psychology course ever become professional psychologists. And realistically, only a small percentage of psychology majors end up employed in psychologically-oriented professions. For that simple reason many students often fail to see the relevance of learning about research methods. In the introductory course students want to learn about, among other things, deviant behavior, altered states of consciousness, and psychotherapy. I've yet to encounter a student who comes to introductory psychology drooling over the prospect of discussing internal validity, falsifiability, and the differences between experimental and correlational research. "Why do we need to know this stuff?" and "I'll never use this" are questions and statements I hear every semester. I usually counter by saying that every student is a decision maker, and that by learning about research methods one can become a better decision maker. At this point their incredulous stares suggest that I need to be a bit more explicit, so I ask them to consider the following scenarios:

A friend tells you that the son of a friend committed suicide after listening to heavy metal rock music. Your daughter loves heavy metal. What do you do?

A member of a Presidential Commission reports that pornography causes rape. You find a *Playboy* magazine under your son's bed. Will he rape?

A magazine article reports that working mothers are more likely to raise behaviorally troubled children than women who stay home. You work and are thinking of starting a family. Should you quit your job?

I encourage them to admit that before they'd censor records, burn magazines, or give up a promising career, they'd seek more information, evaluate it, and then arrive at a decision regarding the best course of action. Every one seems to realize that, yes, one needs to know what information is pertinent, what its source is, who's disseminating it, and whether it is valid. After my lengthy verbal exhortation about how research can help answer these sorts of questions, students admit that maybe knowledge of research methods could benefit them in some way. At this point in time I claim victory in a skirmish, but still face an uphill battle: getting students to see how research can be relevant in their own personal experiences and getting them to master often difficult and dry material.

Developing Writing Assignments

When I began teaching introductory psychology, I knew that I needed to create assignments that would help my students better understand research methods, for without that foundation much of the content matter is difficult to master. It was apparent from prior

experience that merely lecturing about methodology did little more than encourage them to memorize information that might be seen on an upcoming exam, and I wanted them to be able to think clearly about methodological issues and apply what they had learned. So, to supplement my lectures on the topic I began to develop writing assignments that I assumed would induce the critical analysis that I sought.

One of my first assignments was based upon a supplementary reader. Students were asked to read both sides of some controversial issue in psychology, for example, is psychotherapy effective, or, can attitudes affect recovery from illness. They were then asked to write a paper identifying strengths and weaknesses of the two arguments. It was my expectation that they'd see right through major flaws, of which there were many, e.g., drawing causal inferences from correlational data, or generalizing findings from biased samples.

Did the assignment work? Of course not! Students read both sides of the issues, but their papers were, for me, a major disappointment. Invariably they'd write papers praising the side of the issue they agreed with initially, while disparaging the opposing viewpoint no matter the merits of its supporting evidence. I was learning a lot about my students' attitudes toward controversial issues in psychology, but they weren't learning a darn thing about research methodology and its relevance to their lives; I subsequently adopted a different supplementary reader.

The new reader promised that it would help students "think straight" about psychology. It promised to explain how science is done, how science is different from pseudosciences, and how one could avoid pitfalls in evaluating the flood of information we are confronted with daily in the mass media. Those are pretty hefty promises and I suspected from my experience with the first

supplemental text that merely reading the book was not going to do the trick. So once again I sat down to devise an appropriate writing assignment based on the reading. My initial attempts were less successful than envisioned. I'd assign certain chapters for students to read, then I'd ask them to do something along the following lines: identify ten important concepts from your reading, define the terms, and write a short paper telling me where you see these principles illustrated in "real life." That's an oversimplification of the assignment but it does give you a sense of what the students were up against. Oh sure, every semester I tried something a little bit new, but it was always the same assignment in different clothing, and I was therefore chronically depressed when I did the grading. All of the papers sounded the same. Students didn't really seem to understand a lot of what they were reading, and therefore couldn't even begin to explain the relations between methodological issues and the outside world. For example, the idea that a good theory is one that is falsifiable was problematic for many students. Upon hearing the term "falsifiable" they automatically assumed it meant a given theory was false, and therefore no good.

On sabbatical in the Spring of 1991, I spent time critically examining several of my courses. Looking at my experiences in introductory psychology I realized that my writing assignments were too directive and lacked meaning for the student. It was as if I was having the students do an intellectual scavenger hunt. Scavenger hunts are a fine form of entertainment but a lousy pedagogical tool. So it was back to the drawing board.

I'm not really sure where the idea came from, but one day I decided that I had to do something to allow the students to use their own unique talents in mastering the material; I had to do something less directive; and I had to do something that would allow me to assess whether students really understood the prin-

ciples I wanted to convey. Then it hit me. I often adopt the personas of different characters in my classroom when I want to illustrate certain things. Acting out the material certainly gets students' attention, and they seem to remember those classes more than the ones that are straightforward lectures. And so I thought, if I can act out certain ideas, why couldn't the notion of acting be incorporated into my writing assignments?

Buffy and Elvis Make Their Debut

The assignment was short and direct. After reading their methodology text, students wrote plays incorporating the content into a dialogue. I provided two characters and a general theme. The characters were Buffy and Elvis, two students enrolled in an introductory psychology course. Buffy had read and loved her methodology text; Elvis had not read it and therefore not loved it. The theme was as follows: Elvis had just finished watching a TV show featuring Dr. Elmo Zehr (my evil twin), who made an incredible statement regarding human psychology. Elvis was duly impressed. Students were told to put the words in Dr. Zehr's mouth; they could write whatever they wanted but it did have to deal with psychology. They were further instructed to write a dialogue between Buffy and Elvis in which Buffy must convince Elvis, based upon her knowledge of methodology, that Dr. Zehr is a complete charlatan. Students were told that they could add additional characters, expand the setting, in essence, do whatever they wanted to do with the material and the characters.

Did the assignment work? I certainly think that it did. The play that appears at the end of this article is just one among many that induced copious tears of joy. To me it is quite clear that this student knows what the methodological concepts mean. I sense that the student found the assignment challenging and had fun doing it. From my vantage point as grader, this was one of the best

things I ever did in a class. There was little ambiguity in assessing students' levels of knowledge; plus, each paper was different. When I have to grade 90 or so papers, variety helps. I also had little fear of students violating academic dishonesty norms; two students independently writing two identical plays would have been something that not even Elmo Zehr would foresee as possible.

Conclusion

My success with this assignment was heartening. It reinforced my belief that the study of research methods does not have to be soporific. I think my students also now see that knowledge of methodology is not foreign to their interests nor their well-being. I am certain that I have not heard the last from Buffy and Elvis.

* * *

Skip the Sauce and Hold the Jalapenos

by Kathleen Henderson

(a paper written for Dr. Zehr's Introductory Psychology course)

Concepts (in order of appearance):

breakthrough
great leap
converging evidence
Einstein syndrome
connectivity
artificiality
falsifiability
replication
"Man Who"
single case

Scene: An under-maintained, over-priced student rental in Plymouth. Buffy is at the kitchen table studying diligently when her friend and fellow classmate, Elvis, bursts through the door clutching a videotape.

Buffy [startled]: What are you doing here? I thought you had a class?

Elvis [flushed with excitement]: I didn't go. I was too busy recording this. [Fumbles with VCR] How do you work this thing, anyway?

Buffy [somewhat put out, goes to the VCR and puts in the tape]: I've got a lot of studying to do for that psych paper. Have you even started the reading yet?

Elvis: When you see this tape you'll realize how unimportant all that stuff is.

Buffy [rolling her eyes, sits next to him on the sofa]: This better be good, Elvis. I'm busy.

[TV recording starts.]

TV Announcer: And now, it's live with B.S. Daley! America's favorite talk show host!

Buffy: You didn't! You skipped class for B. S. Daley?

Elvis: This is the most monumental psychological breakthrough of our time. Listen to this!

B.S. Daley [with microphone in hand before the live audience]:

We are indeed fortunate to have with us as today's guest, America's most renowned psychologist to tell us of his revolutionary new method of psychoanalysis. Here he is, ladies and gentlemen—Dr. Elmo Zehr!

[Wild applause. Dr. Zehr enters stage and takes seat next to host.]

B.S. Daley: Dr. Zehr, I understand that your years of research have led to a startling new approach to psychoanalysis. Please tell us about it.

Dr. Zehr: The clinical term I've given my procedure is cuisinanalysis. It's the process of analyzing an individual according to what he or she eats.

B. S. Daley: Amazing, just amazing! Can you tell us how it works?

Dr. Zehr: Certainly. It's a well known and often stated fact that we are what we eat. Well, I've taken that concept one step further and actually studied the behavior patterns and personality traits of people who habitually choose certain types of food. In every instance, I obtained the same findings.

B.S. Daley: Can you elaborate on some of these findings?

Dr. Zehr: In a total departure from previously held beliefs about personality and behavior, I've discovered that the food people consume is really "telling all," as they say. For instance, those who always smother their food in sauces and gravies are actually suffering from feelings of insecurity. The sauces are like a—a security blanket for these people.

B.S. Daley: Of course. That makes perfect sense! Please tell us

more.

Dr. Zehr: One discovery most people find particularly disturbing is related to the consumption of hot spicy foods. These people only eat those things when there's someone there to watch them. It's a desperate, almost masochistic attempt to get attention. And those who pile on the condiments—it's not an insult to the meatloaf, but a sign they're trying to hide something.

[Gasps from women in the audience.]

B. S. Daley: No wonder your research has catapulted you to the forefront of your field. Can we take a few questions from the audience now? Yes—you up there.

[Popping up from her chair like a coiled spring, a young rosy-cheeked co-ed waves at the camera.]

Co-ed: Yea, what about people who eat really goood, like tofu and mineral water?

Dr. Zehr: Very interesting cases. Extremely deep feelings of guilt. This response represents a subconscious attempt to purify themselves—to cast off this guilt, so to speak.

Co-ed: Oooo, thanks. I guess.

B.S. Daley: Do we have another question?

[Overweight middle-aged man in very loud tight suit, slowly stands.]

Middle-aged man: Yea, doc. I'm a butcher, and I want to know about people who always come in and buy up all the organ

meats—liver, kidneys, you know?

Dr. Zehr: Classic expression of self-hate.

Buffy [leaping up from the sofa and turning off the TV]: That's enough!

Elvis: No! No! There's more!

Buffy [thrusting the tape back into his hands]: Tell me you don't really believe this, Elvis. Please!

Elvis: Of course I do, and you would too if you'd listen to the rest of this tape.

Buffy [snatching her Stanovich text from the table and holding it before her like the cross before Dracula]: This, Elvis. This is what I believe!

Elvis: But this guy's for real! I mean, he even helped the FBI crack a murder case. They put him on a stake-out in a buffet line and he picked the guy out on his way back to the sausage and peppers!

Buffy [pulling out chair for Elvis]: Sit down, Elvis. We're going to talk.

Elvis: You're not going to read that thing to me?

Buffy [putting Stanovich aside]: No, I'm going to ask you something. Doesn't it seem odd to you that years of research by brilliant psychologists just got flung out the window by that—that—guy!

Elvis: He's a revolutionary. I mean, didn't Einstein startle people? And I bet you would have pulled the plug on him, too.

Buffy: Einstein didn't totally discredit the work of others who had also done some extremely worthwhile things. Maybe they weren't right on the money like he was, but it was all important. Real breakthroughs in science don't happen overnight. They build on what's already established.

Elvis: He's worked hard, too. Five years it took him! Hiding behind potted plants in restaurants, working the salad bar at Bonanza...

Buffy [interrupting]: What about controlled conditions?

Elvis [hostile]: I know what that means—a lab! You think he's a quack because he got his findings out in the real world and not some sterile lab with rats and buzzers and test tubes!

Buffy: Don't you see? None of his theories can be proven one way or another. Other researchers can't test his theories because they can't replicate his research.

Elvis: It doesn't take a scientist to see how right he is. I know a man who used to put sauces all over everything and then eat a jar of pickled jalapenos for dessert. And do you know what? He was abandoned as a child and no one ever noticed him. Isn't that just a bit amazing?

Buffy: That's a single case! How would you explain that millions of Mexican people eat spicy food all the time? Do you honestly think they're all starved for attention?

Elvis [momentarily subdued]: That's different. That's—culture.

Buffy: It’s more than that, Elvis. It’s multiple causation. His research is flawed. Not only that, but it’s flawed research that has absolutely no commonality with any meaningful work that’s ever been done in the field. Show me the converging evidence!

Elvis [sinking deeper in chair]: That tape is all the converging evidence I need. I mean, take me for instance. I bet after watching that tape you can tell a lot about me.

Buffy [scrutinizing him caustically]: You’re right. You should stop eating scrambled eggs and screwdrivers for breakfast!

[Buffy jumps up from the table and goes to the refrigerator. Elvis follows.]

Elvis: What are you doing?

Buffy: I’m going to have my lunch.



Elvis [breathless at the opportunity to obtain his own empirical evidence]: And just what might that be, may I ask?

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Buffy: Breaded fishsticks.

Afterword

By David Zelnor wonder what that means?

Buffy [cutting frozen sticks apart with knife]: It means that I have starved for protein and carbohydrates, and if Elvis doesn't get out of my apartment right now, he'll be dead for sure this time. I came to SO on the fall of 1985. In the spring of 1986, I was invited to campus to give a workshop on "writing across the curriculum". As a new faculty member I was encouraged to attend the two-day presentation by my department Chair. Summoning all of the enthusiasm I could about attending a summer workshop, I cheerfully, I think, agreed to do so.

The End

In all honesty I really can't remember clearly my expectations

toward the workshop, but from prior experiences they couldn't have been too high. Too often workshops are uninformative, poorly presented sermons to the already-converted. Looking back now at that first WAC program, I dare say, and happily so, that it was unlike any other workshop of which I'd ever been a part. "Inspirational" is one of those cliched adjectives used to describe so many common, everyday events which are anything but; however, Toby's presentation was truly deserving of that label. What he said was important not only for the workshop participants, but for everyone at the college. The WAC program has been tremendously successful at Plymouth State, and I feel fortunate to work at an institution which places such high value on using writing to learn.

Not long after Toby's presentation, I began to think of how I might use writing differently in my classes. My first success at using writing in the WAC framework was for a history of psychology course that I teach. Seeking to expand on the success I had with that assignment, I next applied WAC principles to my introductory psychology course. To me, an essential part of that class is learning about how psychologists do research. Methodology, however, can be difficult for students to master well, particularly at the introductory level.

At around the same time I was wondering how to do a better job at teaching research methods, I stumbled on a small textbook called, *How to Think Straight About Psychology*, written by Keith Stanovich.¹ I liked the book and the way it spelled out to the nonprofessional the value of research and the way it was conducted. I immediately adopted it and decided to use it as the cornerstone of some new writing assignments, most of which incorporated two alter ego characters, Buffy and Elvis. The first assignment developed in this context was described in the preceding article.

In looking back I assert confidently that the assignment worked in ways that I hadn't even imagined. Instead of getting and having to read the same repetitive, regurgitative, mind-numbing papers of the past, I was now getting writing assignments that were carefully crafted, humorous, and different for each and every student, all of which made grading them a delight rather than a chore.

As I continue to teach introductory psychology, I still use these sorts of assignments. I am at a point, however, where I am beginning to feel again a need for change, just as I did all those years ago when Toby Fulwiler first introduced me to those favorite little words Michelle Fistek* now likes to whisper in peoples' ears (no, not "let's go shopping", but "writing across the curriculum"). Buffy and Elvis have served me well, but perhaps they need, as did even Calvin and Hobbes, a respite from it all. In a sense they are getting one. Currently my introductory psychology students are writing a play, but this time with their own characters and their own plots. I see this as a transitional assignment; one that will allow me to keep on using proven techniques as I try to figure out where WAC will lead me next.

*Dr. Fistek is the Coordinator of the WAC Program.