Notes

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When Allport Met Freud: Using Anecdotes in the Teaching of Psychology

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We propose using anecdotes to illustrate and emphasize key points, principles, and people in the teaching of psychology. Research findings suggest that different students have different thinking and learning styles, thus necessitating varied teaching approaches.

Memory research reveals that people understand and remember information better when it is presented in a social context. We believe that the use of relevant anecdotes, such as the story of when a young Gordon Allport met Sigmund Freud, will not only make a lecture more enjoyable but also help students learn and remember the information.

Teaching introductory psychology is difficult because of the educational diversity of the students and the large amount of material that instructors must cover. One unfortunate consequence of a survey course is that entire topics can be only covered superficially, thus making important theories and experiments appear disjointed and lifeless. Although few professors would favor lectures consisting of dry facts and poorly illustrated ideas, most are not aware of the potential benefits of a well-timed, well-placed anecdote. In this article, we provide theoretical and empirical support for the use of anecdotes as effective teaching tools and illustrate this idea with the story of Gordon Allport’s meeting with Sigmund Freud.

The history of psychology contains many interesting characters and poignant events. Recently, Thorne (1999) presented a strong case for the use of humorous and ironic stories in teaching the history of psychology. However, we believe that in addition to understanding psychology’s past, the use of anecdotes can help teach psychology’s present and future. Although humor and irony are useful ingredients to a good anecdote, they are not essential; many psychology-related stories that do not contain irony can also be instructional. Psychology anecdotes can be educationally useful if they aid in teaching course material and enhancing student interest.
Evidence from cognitive theory and research support the notion that anecdotes can serve as teaching tools. For example, Bruner (1986) proposed that two modes of thought exist: paradigmatic and narrative. Paradigmatic thought is logical and scientific—it focuses on capturing “what is.” In contrast, narrative thought is information in the context of a story—it pertains to “what might be” and “what could be.” Bruner (1996) argued that the primary goal of education should be the acquisition of cultural “meanings,” an understanding of the self and the world in a culture. Furthermore, he suggested that narratives facilitate the acquisition of meanings by conveying aspects of individuals in culture. The use of anecdotes in a lecture appeals to narrative thought and, in Bruner’s (1996) framework, promotes the formation of meanings.

In addition, instructors tend to overlook thinking styles as an important determinant of learning. Teachers often overestimate how much their own thinking styles correspond with those of their students (Sternberg, 1995). In fact, studies have shown that students perform better when taught in a variety of ways (Sternberg & Grigorenko, 1997; Sternberg, Torff, & Grigorenko, 1998). Thus,sofar as different students employ different thinking styles, a subset of students (i.e., those who think narratively) will benefit in particular from the use of anecdotes.

Numerous theoretical and empirical investigations have suggested that information presented through anecdotes may be more comprehensible to students and also more remembered. For example, work by Cosmides (1989) showed that social information is more readily understood and interpreted than context-free information. When she asked participants to solve a logical cognitive puzzle called the Wason card selection task, she found that more participants arrived at the correct solution when the task was posed as a real-life situation (being a bouncer at a bar and checking student identifications) instead of when the task was a standard puzzle (simply turning over cards with letters and numbers).

Additional work has shown that individuals are more likely to remember the interactional content rather than the propositional content of conversations (Keenan, MacWhinney, & Mayhew, 1977; Murphy & Shapiro, 1994). Similarly, Kintsch and Bates (1977) showed that what students remembered best from a lecture were the extraneous asides, such as jokes and announcements. These results further suggest that anecdotes may be easily remembered, but they also point to a potential danger in the misuse of anecdotes. If an anecdote is provided merely for entertainment value and does not also deliver pertinent information, then students may focus on the wrong information and not remember the actual point of the lecture. An anecdote must be relevant to the material at hand.

Collectively, these findings suggest that appropriate anecdotes, as social accounts of lives in context, are more easily understood than isolated facts. Moreover, the interactional quality of delivering anecdotes in a lecture makes them more memorable. We present an anecdote that we believe is interesting and memorable—and one that helps convey an important educational point.

When Allport Met Freud

Professors often ask students to compare and contrast competing theories in an area of psychology. However, simply learning what can be devoid of the reasons why the theories came about in the first place. This story describes an early meeting between Gordon Allport and Sigmund Freud, two prominent figures in the history of personality theory. Not only does the description bring to life the individuals behind the ideas, it illustrates the germination of a competing theory.

In 1920, Gordon Allport, a recent graduate in psychology at Harvard, traveled to Vienna, Austria. He assumed that Sigmund Freud would be interested in meeting with another psychologist and contacted him. Although Freud was a renowned figure in psychology at that time, he graciously agreed to meet with the young Allport. When they met, Allport was soon greeted with silence as Freud waited for him to state the purpose of his visit. Thinking fast for something to say, Allport told of a little boy he saw on the tram ride to Freud’s office. The boy, he said, seemed to have a fear of dirt and was very concerned with staying clean. The boy’s mother, nearby, appeared quite imposing and authoritarian, and Allport quickly made a connection. On the story’s completion, Freud leaned forward and asked Allport, “And was that little boy you?” Allport was taken aback by the way Freud had so quickly interpreted his attempt at small talk as being an expression of unconscious personal motivations when, in fact, it was not (Allport, 1967; Evans, 1971).

This anecdote works on several levels. Most basically, it is amusing and entertaining; it evokes an image of the young Allport, nervous in the presence of the eminent Freud. In addition, it reinforces the notion that psychology does not develop in a vacuum—legendary psychologists met and interacted with each other. Also, most important for educational purposes, the anecdote provides a vivid illustration of the fundamental differences in Freud’s and Allport’s approaches to understanding human personality. Whereas Freud searched deep into a patient’s unconscious past for answers, Allport preferred to examine manifest motives to interpret behavior. Indeed, Allport later considered his meeting with Freud as being influential to the development of his own ideas (Allport, 1968; Evans, 1971).1

Summary

In our experience, we find that effective lecturers frequently use anecdotes, often without being fully aware of

1Perhaps another educationally useful side to the Allport–Freud story is the reaction of a number of psychoanalysts. Several authors have reinterpreted the meeting from a Freudian perspective (i.e., Elms, 1972; Faber, 1970; Morey, 1987). For instance, using biographical accounts of Allport’s childhood, Elms concluded that Allport chose to tell that particular story because he was “the dirty little boy” as a child and that his reaction and subsequent philosophical rebuke of Freudian psychology are consistent with a Freudian defense mechanism. As is often the case, the same data are open to multiple interpretations.
the benefits of doing so. Utilizing anecdotes in a lecture may do more than hold an audience’s interest; cognitive theory and research support the notion that anecdotes are potentially valuable teaching tools. A short story that provides content as well as amusement can help students remember the facts and help them understand and contextualize the material. Unfortunately, there is no “master source” of psychology-related anecdotes, but we find that introductory textbooks, biographies, psychology history books, and colleagues are good resources. The effort spent compiling useful anecdotes is likely paid back in educational benefits.

References


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Notes

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Who Would Survive the Titanic Today? A Classroom Exercise

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We describe a classroom exercise that emphasizes the subjectivity and complexity associated with generalizing psychological knowledge to different points in time. The exercise used a well-known historical event: the sinking of the Titanic. Specifically, students attempted to determine if previously obtained psychological knowledge (i.e., the characteristics of the survivors) would generalize to the present. Students indicated they found the exercise interesting, and they recommended it for future classes.

Students often perceive psychological knowledge as stable, but relations change as historical context influences human behavior (Baltes, 1987). Thus, psychological knowledge may or may not generalize to future (or past) generations because of changes in such variables as culture, economy, family structure, and societal perceptions. As Cronbach (1975) pointed out: “Generalizations decay. At one time a conclusion describes the existing situation well, at a later time it accounts for rather little variance, and ultimately it is valid only as history” (pp. 122–123). Furthermore, evaluating the stability of psychological knowledge at different points in time is often a subjective and complex process (Campbell & Stanley, 1966)—an important point that is often not adequately emphasized in psychology textbooks. For example, would the psychological knowledge obtained from Milgram’s (1963) famous obedience study generalize to a generation having less respect for authority figures?

In this article we present an exercise used in an undergraduate experimental psychology course. We designed this exercise to demonstrate the subjectivity that can accompany generalizing psychological knowledge to different historical eras (i.e., different points in time). Specifically, the demonstration is based on the tragedy of the famous ship, the Titanic.

Exercise Rationale

The Titanic’s tragedy provides psychological knowledge obtained from a previous historical era. First, the Titanic provides psychological knowledge of human behavior during a life-and-death situation. As lifeboats were available for approximately one half of the passengers, the characteristics of the survivors provides a quantifiable outcome variable. Survivors (see Table 1) were more likely to be women and children (i.e., adherence to the rule of the sea: women and children first). Also, members of the upper class were more likely to survive (i.e., class precedence prevailed). Thus, the Titanic provides real-life data to an interesting psychological