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Save the Best for Last?

Social Psychology Taught in Introductory Psychology Courses

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of the current study was to explore social psychology as it is taught within introductory psychology courses. Sixty syllabi from various educational institutions were randomly selected. Several variables such as the duration and placement of social psychology within introductory psychology courses were examined. Results indicated that social psychology is typically taught in the second half of an introductory psychology course (90.7%) and most lectures occur in the last quarter (51.2%). Results also show that 75% of the syllabi dedicated no more than 3 sessions to social psychology and over half of the courses spend no more than 3 hours teaching social psychology (65%). An argument for covering social psychology earlier in the course is made.

Keywords: teaching, courses, classes, introductory, social, syllabus

INTRODUCTION

For many students, an introductory psychology class can be an exhilarating and fascinating exploration of the nature of the human condition; for others, it can be experienced as just another boring class. The best college instructors strive to engage students in a passionate discovery of their topic and then maintain the interest of those students for the duration of a

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semester (Bain, 2004). Introductory psychology classes are where many psychology majors are created, and unfortunately where many potential majors are lost. As in every class, some students are not struck by that initial spark of interest in the topic, and others lose interest along the way. Developing a class that can effectively captivate and hold students' attention and passions generally begins in the planning stages of a course (McKeachie & Svinicki, 2006). Many instructors consider how they will successfully engage and hold the interest of students as they prepare a course syllabus.

The syllabus for an introductory psychology class serves as an organizing tool to convey synthesized expectations, but it is also the roadmap and agenda for covering the topics that serve as the pillars and cornerstones of our cherished discipline. Within a syllabus, course topics are generally provided along with details of each chapter to be covered. Course topics should be organized in a meaningful way with some conceptual rationale (Davis, 1993). Professors and lecturers are imparted with the academic freedom to organize their course in a meaningful manner, which may become a difficult task. Lecturers are given the opportunity to teach the vast areas of psychology in one semester. A teacher must make decisions regarding the organization and duration for each topic taught. Teachers may do this by a number of ways ranging from merely paralleling the text chapters to spending hours conceptually reorganizing topics to promote the topics in the most coherent sequence. In either situation, syllabi are generated in introductory psychology courses, and some topics are taught in various sequences with varying durations.

Ideally, a professor teaching introductory psychology can find ways to capture the imagination of students at the beginning of the course, planting a seed of zeal that might stay with students through the semester. One way of doing this might be to start with topics that

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genuinely grab the interest of students, filling them with enthusiasm about the course. In organizing an introductory psychology course, the instructor may want to consider starting off with relatively engaging areas of psychology that get the attention of the students. McKeachie and Svinicki (2006) claim that the first day of class can be used to set the stage and break the ice, meaning that the lecturer can set the tone for the learning environment and make the class more interpersonal. Identifying those most engaging elements of psychology and presenting them first might have some utility.

One empirical method of selecting the most interesting topics to present early in the course is to poll students at the end of the course to determine which topics held the greatest appeal for them. Granaard (2003) reported results of such an opinion poll among honors students in introductory psychology. His study revealed that among that group, social psychology was rated as the most favored topic area of the 15 topics covered in the course. In addition to being an interesting topic for students in its own right, social psychology offers a plethora of topics that can be demonstrated on the first day of class to break the ice and set the stage for things to come. For example, an obedience demonstration can be a highly effective method to engage students on the first day (LoSchiavo, Buckingham, & Yurak, 2002). LoSchiavo and colleagues sent a confederate, pretending to be a class instructor, to the first class and informed the students to write down personal data, remain quiet, and face the back of the room. The confederate left the room and the actual instructor entered. The instructor used the activity as a reference to teach topics such as stereotypes, obedience, conformity, and mindlessness. An instructor can use this activity, among others, as a tool to engage students early on and demonstrate the relevance of psychology in our lives. Furthermore, social psychology, when presented early in a course, can

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be used to introduce foundational themes such as research methodology, ethics, theory, the scientific method, etc. that will be covered throughout the course.

The current study explored social psychology as it is taught within introductory psychology. The study was exploratory and descriptive in nature and examined when and for how long social psychology is taught within introductory psychology courses. It is important to examine the placement and duration of social psychology within introductory psychology courses in order to gain an understanding of introductory psychology teaching strategies. Specific variables examined included: the course text, lecturer's research interest, date(s) that social psychology was taught, whether social psychology was the last topic taught, the number of hours spent teaching social psychology, and the number of classes dedicated to teaching social psychology.

METHOD

The researchers searched for 60 various introductory psychology syllabi via search engines. Searches were conducted via the Social Psychology Network search engine and Google. The researcher entered the phrase 'Introductory Psychology Syllabus' or 'General Psychology Syllabus' when searching for syllabi. Within the Social Psychology Network search engine, an advanced feature allowed the search engine to limit the search to a college course or syllabus. Syllabi were selected randomly and included syllabi from universities and colleges from within the United States of America. Information gathered from the syllabi was typed into an Excel document and organized by: year of course, name of institution, state, type of institution, course textbook, social psychology lecture position, whether social psychology was the last topic taught, the number of hours dedicated to teaching social psychology, and the number of class sessions dedicated to teaching social psychology. After obtaining the syllabi, the instructor's status and

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research interest were obtained from each institution's web site. The researcher examined the course schedule and divided the schedule into quartiles (first, second, third, and fourth). Then, the researcher classified the position of social psychology lectures being taught into quartiles. Syllabi that were missing dates of when social psychology was taught were excluded from data analyses.

RESULTS

Introductory psychology syllabi were selected from over 13 years with most syllabi from 2010 (23.3%). Syllabi represented courses from 30 different states. Most courses examined were from a university (75%) compared to a college (25%). Results indicated that most courses were taught by associate professors (65%) and most instructors had non-social psychology research interests (65%). Also, the most common textbook used was from David G. Myers (25%; see Table 1).

Table 1

Frequency and Percentage of Introductory Psychology Textbook Authors

Textbook Authors	Frequency	Percent
Myers	15	25.0
Glietman	3	5.0
Kassin	3	5.0
Kosslyn & Rosenberg	3	5.0
Weiten	3	5.0
Plotnik	2	3.3
Wade & Tavris	2	3.3
Passer	2	3.3
Other	27	45.0

Analyses from the study indicate that social psychology is typically taught in the second half of an introduction to psychology course (90.7%), and most lectures are scheduled in the last

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quarter of the course (51.2%; see Figure 1). Though social psychology occurs mostly within the last quartile, it is not typically the last topic covered in the course (65%).

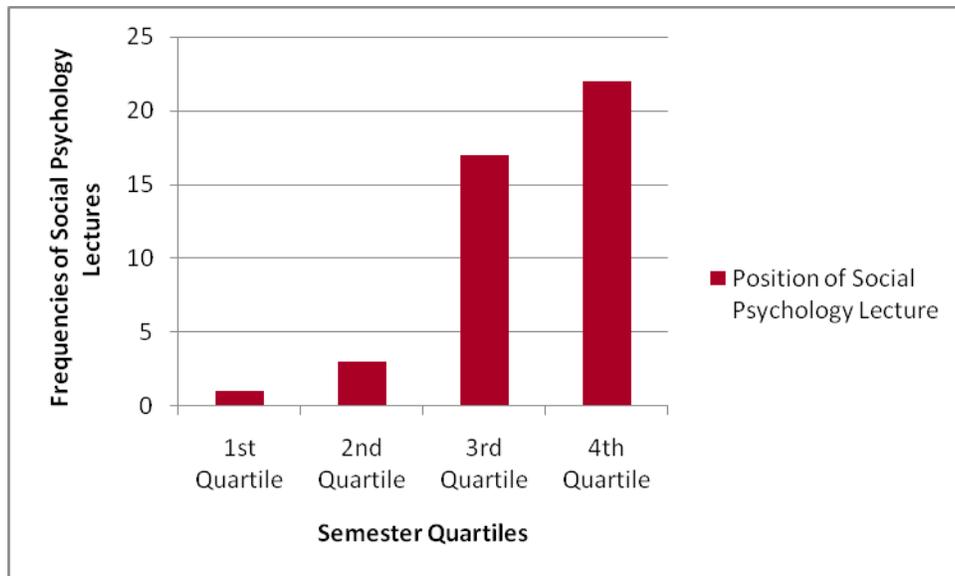


Figure 1. The frequencies and position of the social psychology lecture(s) as it was taught within introductory psychology courses.

Furthermore, 75% of the syllabi dedicated no more than 3 sessions to social psychology and over half of the courses spend no more than 3 hours teaching social psychology (65%; see Figure 2).

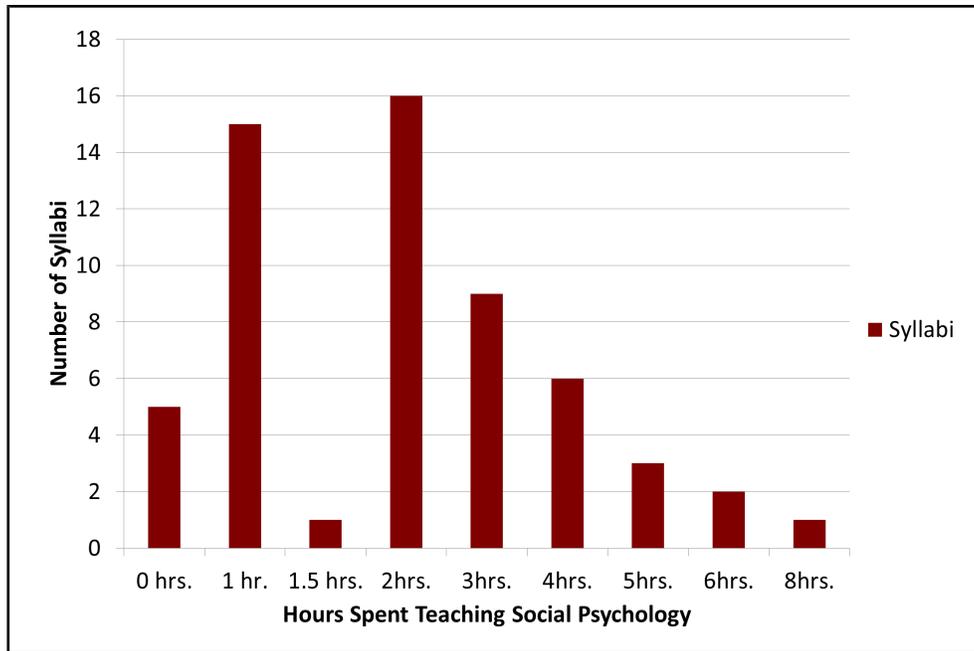


Figure 2. Number of hours dedicated to teaching social psychology as listed on the course syllabus schedule.

DISCUSSION

Introductory psychology courses are quite popular within colleges and universities. Goldstein (2010) claimed that according to a nationwide study, 40 percent of students complete an introductory psychology course during their first year of college. Creating a well developed and captivating introductory psychology experience involves creating an organized syllabus. The syllabus sets the stage for the course. Some of the best teachers exhibit complete syllabi, opposed to the worst teachers who often have unprepared or poorly designed syllabi (Myers, 2005; Simonton, 2003). Part of creating a structured syllabus is to develop and conceptualize topic areas sequence and organization. However, it is unclear whether the topic area organization used in most introductory psychology course is the most advantageous. Instructors may, in some cases, follow the topic structure of a textbook out of convenience. Or they may choose a

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sequence that is based on their personal preferences rather than considering sequences that might more effectively engage student interest.

The current study reveals that most introductory psychology teachers seem to teach social psychology toward the end of the course. Furthermore, most introductory courses cover social psychology three hours or less. The reasons why instructors teach social psychology toward the end of a course remain unknown. Integrating social psychology within the beginning of a course may offer some advantages. It has the potential to excite students by presenting a topic that students find most engaging (Grangaard, 2003), it may present several opportunities to demonstrate applied psychological concepts early in the course, and it may offer a context within which the foundational principles of research methods and ethics can be introduced. While introducing social psychology earlier in an introductory psychology course may hold some conceptual appeal, further research should investigate the relative effectiveness of various introductory psychology topic sequences on student engagement, student recruitment and retention in the major, and the achievement of learning objective.

Effective classroom instruction in psychology courses has become better understood and more objectively evaluated through empirical investigations (Tomcho & Foels, 2008). However, there remains a dearth of literature examining the effects of topic sequence on student success. Empirically evaluating outcomes and assessing other variables related to lecture sequence within courses may lead to more effective teaching and greater student success. Instructors may utilize empirical findings to inform teaching practices and to establish an organizational framework for navigating an introductory psychology course. Hierarchical semantic network models of human knowledge suggest that basic level architecture of knowledge networks will influence the synthesis, integration, storage, and retrieval of subsequent information (Sternberg, 2003, p. 262).

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It may be the case that the topics first covered in a psychology course serve to formulate the basic architecture of the cognitive network into which all subsequent course material will be integrated. Thus, an exploration of the course topics that best organize that initial knowledge network seems warranted. It seems possible to take such an empirically driven approach to course sequence decisions while still allowing the flexibility and academic freedom most instructors enjoy. Any future research examining lecture placement on student success should be aimed at encouraging instructors to utilize empirical findings in conjunction with academic freedom to create the most effective course experience for students. While there are numerous arguments for presenting social psychology early in the semester, only empirical investigations can determine whether such an approach is justified.

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