Use of Primary Source Readings in Psychology Courses at Liberal Arts Colleges

Christopher M. Oldenburg
Saint Vincent College

This study examined how frequently psychology professors at liberal arts colleges assign primary source readings. Professors provided information on 576 courses. Frequent use of primary sources suggests that professors view such readings as a valuable component of the psychology curriculum. Professors assigned primary source material in 70.8% of the courses. Professors assigned articles from scholarly journals more often in higher level courses and courses with lower enrollments. Professors reported more satisfaction with the classroom discussion of primary sources in smaller, more advanced courses. This study also provides a list of readings identified most frequently by participants as being effective.

Psychology professors can provide students with a more intensive study of the field through the assignment of primary source readings. Researchers have used various strategies to identify appropriate primary sources, including the examination of common references in introductory textbooks (Gorenflo & McConnell, 1991; Griggs & Proctor, 2002; Higbee, 1977). Other research has surveyed faculty on the importance of various psychological works (Norcross & Tomcho, 1994) and the readings recommended to graduate students (Solso, 1979, 1987). What appears to be lacking is an empirical examination of how commonly psychology professors actually use primary source readings in their undergraduate courses as well as any course factors that may be predictive of such use.

This study examined how frequently psychology professors at liberal arts colleges use primary source readings in relation to course enrollment and course level. The use of primary sources may be especially relevant at liberal arts colleges, where smaller class sizes may be more conducive to the use of discussion as a teaching tool. Therefore, I also examined professors’ practices and attitudes concerning student discussion of primary sources. I also sought to identify a list of effective primary source readings from across the psychology curriculum based on the professors’ experiences.

I expected to find that psychology professors at liberal arts colleges assign primary source readings in a wide variety of psychology courses. The frequent use of primary source readings would suggest that professors view such material as a useful and perhaps necessary component of the psychology curriculum. In addition, the use of such material may advance the virtues and benefits of a liberal education (e.g., Bloom & Rosovsky, 2003; Cantor & Schomberg, 2002; Marshall, 2003).

Primary sources, particularly articles from scholarly journals, provide a model for critical reading and thinking (Anisfeld, 1987; Henderson, 1995) and insight into the application of methodological issues (Suter & Frank, 1986). In addition, such articles are more in-depth than textbooks (Price, 1990), thereby providing students a more intense examination of psychology. Journal articles also expose students to a type of writing with which they are unlikely to become familiar except through the structure of a required assignment (Henderson, 1995). Other potential course material comes from primary source books, including excerpts from the writings of historically prominent psychologists. Introductory textbooks often cite authors such as Freud, Skinner, and Rogers (Griggs & Proctor, 2002), and excerpts from the original works of these giants of the field may provide students a unique opportunity for intensive study. However, classic works are not the only types of readings that can be of great value to students. For instance, professors of abnormal psychology have reported success using autobiographical accounts describing experiences with mental health problems (Banyard, 2000; Norcross, Sommer, & Clifford, 2001). Thus, for the purposes of this study, primary source readings included both scholarly journal articles and original books.

Primary source readings may also be interdisciplinary. The crossing of interdisciplinary boundaries is a valuable aspect of a liberal education (Levine, 1977; Williams & Kolupke, 1986). Past research has discussed the effectiveness of literature in highlighting psychological principles (Boyatzis, 1992; Cavanaugh, 1999; Chrisler, 1990; Grant, 1987; Levine, 1983). Beyond literature, material from disciplines such as philosophy (Cox, 1997; Fine & Ulrich, 1988), history (Albrecht & Nelson, 2001), and other fields may also be useful in addressing issues from psychology. Thus, in addition to using primary source material from within psychology, I expected that professors also assign, to a lesser extent, material from other disciplines.

Method

Participants and Procedure

Using a random number table, I selected 84 colleges from the 2001 U.S. News and World Report listing of the top national and regional liberal arts colleges in the United States (“Best Liberal Arts Colleges,” 2001). A search of each college’s Internet site produced 424 full-time psychology faculty. I mailed the surveys in two batches, with 220 surveys mailed in the Spring semester 2002 and 204 surveys mailed in the
Fall semester of 2002. Approximately 1 month after each mailing, I sent a reminder to the potential participants asking those who still wished to participate in the study to return the survey at their earliest convenience.

One hundred fifty-two professors participated in the study, representing a 35.8% response rate. The professors completed surveys for 576 courses. Participants reported being full-time faculty members an average of 15.8 years (range = 1 to 42 years). The most common areas of specialization were social (n = 47), developmental (n = 35), clinical or counseling (n = 30), physiological (n = 25), and cognitive (n = 20).

Survey

Participants completed a one-page survey for each course they had taught in the past two semesters. The survey asked the following: (a) approximate percentages of freshmen, sophomores, juniors, and seniors; (b) enrollment (choices ranged from 0 to 10 to 40+ with intervening intervals of 5); (c) whether they assigned a textbook; and (d) whether they required non-textbook readings. If participants answered “no” to the final question, they did not answer additional questions about the course.

Additional questions included (e) whether they assigned scholarly journal articles, (f) whether they assigned material from primary source books, (g) whether they assigned interdisciplinary readings, and, if so, (h) from which fields. The survey listed philosophy, history, political science, biology, English, education, sociology, and theology as choices and included an additional line for other fields.

Professors then answered questions concerning student discussion of the readings, including (i) the percentage of class time spent in discussion of the readings, (j) satisfaction with the quality of student discussion, (k) satisfaction with the quantity of student discussion, and (l) the percentage of the course grade based on class participation. For the purposes of this study, quality referred to issues such as the level of discussion and the students’ grasp of the reading, whereas quantity referred to issues such as the students’ efforts to participate and the liveliness of the discussion.

Finally, professors identified methods other than discussion through which they required students to demonstrate knowledge of the required primary source readings. The survey included the choices of essay exams, papers, and presentations with an additional line for other methods of evaluation. After completing the survey for each course, I asked participants to consider listing primary source readings from any course that they believed were particularly useful. Sixty-nine participants listed one or more readings.

Results

Use of Primary Source Material

The results indicated that psychology professors at liberal arts colleges assigned primary source readings frequently. Professors for 485 courses (84.2%) used a textbook and professors for 408 courses (70.8%) required primary source readings. Of the 152 participants, 143 (94.1%) required either an article from a scholarly journal or material from a primary source book in at least one course. Professors required a textbook and primary source readings in 328 courses (56.9%), a textbook only in 157 courses (27.3%), primary source readings only in 80 courses (13.9%), and neither a textbook nor primary source readings in 11 courses (1.9%).

Professors used primary source readings in a variety of psychology courses. The most commonly rated courses appear in Table 1, along with the percentage of each course using the various types of primary source material. For most of these courses, a majority of the professors reported assigning at least some type of primary source material. The exceptions to this were introduction to psychology, in which slightly less than half assigned such material, and statistics, in which a majority of professors did not require primary source readings. Interdisciplinary material came from 35 fields of study with sociology (used in 82 courses), biology (80), philosophy (61), history (45), English (31), education (24), political science (21), theology (19), and anthropology (14) being the most common.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Course</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Primary Sources</th>
<th>Journals</th>
<th>Books</th>
<th>Interdisciplinary</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Introductory</td>
<td>87</td>
<td>46.0</td>
<td>34.5</td>
<td>27.6</td>
<td>16.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research methods</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>72.0</td>
<td>72.0</td>
<td>38.0</td>
<td>26.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>60.5</td>
<td>55.3</td>
<td>28.9</td>
<td>26.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abnormal</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>76.9</td>
<td>65.4</td>
<td>46.2</td>
<td>38.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personality</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>76.9</td>
<td>53.8</td>
<td>61.5</td>
<td>38.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child/adolescent</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>77.3</td>
<td>59.1</td>
<td>50.0</td>
<td>22.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Statistics</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>22.7</td>
<td>22.7</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>9.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Developmental</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>75.0</td>
<td>55.0</td>
<td>45.0</td>
<td>30.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Biological</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>57.9</td>
<td>47.4</td>
<td>15.8</td>
<td>26.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Culture/gender</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>89.5</td>
<td>78.9</td>
<td>73.7</td>
<td>78.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>History &amp; systems</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>94.1</td>
<td>76.5</td>
<td>82.4</td>
<td>52.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cognitive</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>86.7</td>
<td>73.3</td>
<td>66.7</td>
<td>33.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learning</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>69.2</td>
<td>53.8</td>
<td>46.2</td>
<td>46.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Counseling</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>72.7</td>
<td>54.5</td>
<td>63.6</td>
<td>36.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Senior seminar</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>90.9</td>
<td>90.9</td>
<td>72.7</td>
<td>45.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All courses</td>
<td>576</td>
<td>70.8</td>
<td>60.4</td>
<td>45.1</td>
<td>34.9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. Journals = journal articles; books = material from primary source books.
Use of Primary Source Material and Course Characteristics

Professors reported the following course enrollments: 10 or fewer students (n = 39), 11 to 15 students (n = 91), 16 to 20 students (n = 108), 21 to 25 students (n = 93), 26 to 30 students (n = 81), 31 to 35 students (n = 50), 36 to 40 students (n = 35), and 40 or more students (n = 76). I conducted chi-square analyses to determine if professors teaching courses with smaller enrollments were more likely to assign primary source material than professors teaching courses with larger enrollments. Due to the number of analyses conducted, I set the alpha level at .01. The results of the analyses appear in Table 2. The results indicate that professors teaching courses with smaller enrollments were less likely to use a textbook and more likely to require readings from scholarly journals.

I transformed data on the percentage of freshmen, sophomores, juniors, and seniors in each course into three categories. The lower division category consisted of courses with 70% or more freshmen and sophomores (n = 156), the upper division category consisted of courses with 70% or more juniors and seniors (n = 289), whereas an intermediate category consisted of all other courses (n = 127).

I then conducted chi-square analyses to examine whether professors teaching higher level courses were more likely to assign primary source readings than professors teaching lower level courses. Again, I set the alpha level at .01. The results of the analyses appear in Table 2. Results indicated that professors teaching higher level courses were less likely to use a textbook but more likely to require primary source material. Analysis of the specific types of primary sources used revealed that professors teaching higher level courses were less likely to use a textbook and more likely to require material from scholarly journals, primary source books, and interdisciplinary readings.

Class Discussion and Course Characteristics

Nearly all professors (95.4%) reported using class time to discuss the primary source readings. The percentage of time spent in class discussion of primary source material ranged from 0 to 100 with a mean of 33.5% (Mdn = 20.00, SD = 30.21). On a scale ranging from 1 (very unsatisfied) to 7 (very satisfied), professors rated their average satisfaction with the quality of class discussion as 5.12 (Mdn = 5.00, SD = 1.24) and their satisfaction with the quantity of class discussion as 5.07 (Mdn = 5.00, SD = 1.35). The percentage of the student grade based on class participation ranged from 0 to 100 with a mean of 13.5% (Mdn = 10.00, SD = 14.10).

Because of the ordinal nature of the class enrollment and course level variables, I used Spearman correlation coefficients to determine whether there was a relation between the various aspects of class discussion and course enrollment and level. The results appear in Table 3. Results indicated that lower enrollments correlated positively with each of the class discussion variables (p < .001). Likewise, higher level courses also correlated positively with each of the class discussion variables (p < .001).

Professors for 250 courses (61.6%) reported using essay exams to evaluate students’ knowledge of the primary source readings, 318 (78.5%) used papers, and 183 (45.2%) used presentations. Other methods of evaluation included other forms of written testing (n = 39, 9.6%) and lab reports (n = 11, 2.7%).

Effective Primary Source Readings

Sixty-nine participants (45.4%) listed at least one primary source reading that they believed to be particularly effective. Several participants sent syllabi that included long lists of primary source readings. Because the purpose of the question was to provide professors an opportunity to list readings they found to stand out as particularly effective, I decided not to include these complete syllabi in the current list. Participants listed 193 different readings, with 149 from the field of psychology and 44 from other disciplines. Several authors had multiple readings listed, including Freud (4), Rogers (3), and Jung (3). Participants listed 13 different readings more than once. These readings appear in the Appendix. To assist teachers in assessing whether a reading is relevant for a particular course, I have listed the general topic area of each reading. Most of the readings listed more than once are books rather than journal articles.

Discussion

This study suggests that the use of primary source readings in psychology courses at liberal arts colleges is quite common. However, all findings pertaining to the frequency of use of such readings need to be interpreted in light of the possible self-selective nature of the sample. Professors who use primary source material may have been more motivated to participate in the study than those who did not use such material. In addition, because the sample consisted of rela-
tively highly rated liberal arts colleges, the data may not generalize to other types of institutions (e.g., larger research universities, community colleges).

Despite these cautions, one can conclude that many professors use primary source material on a regular basis. Professors make considerable use of material from scholarly journals and primary source books. As expected, professors used interdisciplinary readings less often than readings from within psychology. However, the finding that a sizable minority of courses included material from other disciplines suggests that students in psychology courses at liberal arts colleges get exposure to material that crosses disciplinary boundaries. Thus, psychology professors find value in assigning interdisciplinary material, thereby contributing to the liberal education of psychology students.

The use of primary sources is especially prominent in intermediate and upper division psychology courses, as the percentage of these courses using such material is markedly higher than that for introductory psychology. Likewise, professors tend to use scholarly journal articles more often in courses with smaller enrollments than in those with larger enrollments. Thus, professors may see more value in integrating primary sources into smaller, more advanced courses.

One possible explanation for this finding is that professors may be better able to conduct class discussion of the primary source readings in these classes. Professors reported being more satisfied with the quality and quantity of discussion in higher level courses with lower enrollments. In addition, professors may also encourage class discussion in these courses through the amount of time devoted to discussion as well as the impact of participation on the students’ grades. However, the correlational nature of the data should temper any conclusions concerning the class discussion variables.

For professors interested in identifying useful readings, this study adds to the list of examples of readings that colleagues have used effectively. Although participants listed many different scholarly journal articles as being effective, the individual readings listed most frequently were not original works of research. Many of the selections listed are autobiographical works or summaries of research written for the general public. The benefits gained from assigning such works may differ from the benefits gained from assigning journal articles. Although many of the selections are not of the same complexity as scholarly journal articles, their relative accessibility may contribute to their perceived effectiveness.

Whereas this study does not offer conclusive evidence for how frequently professors at liberal arts colleges use primary source readings, it does offer strong support for the hypothesis that professors use such readings on a regular basis in a wide variety of psychology courses. The high percentage of respondents who use these readings indicates that professors believe that primary source readings are important components in the education of the psychology student.

References


Appendix

Complete References, General Topic Area, and Number of Listings of the Most Frequently Listed Effective Primary Source Readings


Notes

1. Portions of this work were supported by a research grant awarded by the Faculty Development Committee of Saint Vincent College.
2. I thank Deana D’Alessandro and Holly Lovell for their assistance in conducting this study. I thank Randolph Smith and three anonymous reviewers for their comments on earlier versions of this article.
3. Send correspondence to Christopher M. Oldenburg, Department of Psychology, Saint Vincent College, 300 Fraser Purchase Road, Latrobe, PA 15650; e-mail: coldenburg@stvincent.edu.