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Teaching of Psychology 2013 40: 169 originally published online 9 May 2013

DOI: 10.1177/0098628313487456

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An Analysis of Learning Objectives and Content Coverage in Introductory Psychology Syllabi

Teaching of Psychology
40(3) 169-174
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DOI: 10.1177/0098628313487456
top.sagepub.com


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Abstract

Introductory psychology is one of the most popular undergraduate courses and often serves as the gateway to choosing psychology as an academic major. However, little research has examined the typical structure of introductory psychology courses. The current study examined student learning objectives (SLOs) and course content in introductory psychology syllabi ($N = 158$). SLOs were mapped to the *APA Guidelines for the Undergraduate Psychology Major*. Content analysis was based on the principles for quality undergraduate education promulgated by the American Psychological Association. Over 50% of the syllabi contained objectives specific to the science and application of psychology (knowledge base, research methods, and application). Analysis of content coverage revealed instructors spent significantly more time on topics related to physiological and cognitive psychology and spent significantly less time on topics related to the history and scope of psychology, research methods, and developmental psychology. The current study also explored the influence of instructor specialty area on content coverage.

Keywords

introductory psychology, learning objectives, course content, syllabi

The introductory psychology course enrolls 1.2–1.6 million students annually in the United States (Steuer & Ham, 2008). Given the importance of the introductory psychology class in American education, it is somewhat surprising that very little is known about exactly what is covered and no current national guidelines for the course exist. Recognizing the relevance of psychology to other majors and fields, most jobs, and the world in general, Dunn and colleagues (2010) recommended that all students taking introductory psychology should receive a common core of content and courses should share similar learning objectives. A common core would also greatly benefit new instructors of the course, aid with assessment of the course enabling comparisons across instructors and time (at the department level or across institutions), and provide a singular message to students and the lay public about what constitutes the field of psychology. However, there is no published research on whether introductory psychology courses share learning objectives or a common core. We examined a nationwide sample of introductory psychology courses (via their course syllabi) in an effort to investigate this issue. We measured similarity in learning objectives and course content that may guide instructors of the introductory course, aid departments in assessment of their majors, and contribute to consistency in our understanding of the discipline.

Student Learning Objectives (SLOs)

One of the first tasks in planning any course is to create SLOs or outcomes (Bain, 2004; Gurung & Landrum, 2012; Svinicki & McKeachie, 2011). SLOs are the “knowledge, skills, attitudes, and habits of mind that students take with them from a learning experience” (Suskie, 2009, p. 117). SLOs help faculty develop courses from the standpoint of skills that should be explicitly developed as part of a sound curriculum (Dunn, McCarthy, Baker, Halonen, & Boyer, 2011). The systematic measurement of SLOs provides evidence that learning occurred. In addition, SLOs should guide the instructor in preparing course assessments, calendar, activities, and lectures (i.e., via backward design; Wiggins & McTighe, 1998). Course learning objectives are likely to be based on the course topic,

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personal values, relevance to students, and university-wide objectives (Svinicki & McKeachie, 2011).

SLOs set the tone for the class and relay expectations for student outcomes. They inform students of what to expect from the flow and organization of the course and lecture, and guide the design of assignments they will receive throughout the semester (Slattery & Carlson, 2005). However, SLOs are not always achieved. For example, Miller and Gentile (1998) investigated the use of SLOs of faculty from nearly 500 college and university psychology departments and revealed discrepancies between those objectives rated as highly important by the instructors (e.g., engage students in scientific inquiry about psychological processes) and those rated as highly achieved in their classroom (e.g., provide a comprehensive survey of the field). Nevertheless, most instructors would agree that SLOs are an important part of the syllabus, as well as the course.

In an effort to improve the quality of education through consistency and accountability, the American Psychological Association (APA) Council of Representatives approved the *APA Guidelines for the Undergraduate Psychology Major* in 2006, which outlines 10 suggested learning objectives, or outcomes, for psychology majors (APA, 2007). The first five objectives (i.e., knowledge base, research methods, critical thinking, application, and values) reflect the knowledge, skills, and values consistent with the science and application of psychology. The remaining five objectives (i.e., information and technology literacy, communication skills, sociocultural and international awareness, personal development, and career planning and development) reflect the knowledge, skills, and values consistent with a liberal arts education and further developed by psychology coursework.

Research examining introductory psychology learning objectives is limited and no research has specifically addressed the *APA Guidelines for the Undergraduate Psychology Major* since their introduction in 2007. However, after a review of the field, Wolfle (1942) suggested five goals for the introductory class: teach facts and principles of psychology, develop scientific method or habits of critical thoughts, provide better ability in making personal adjustments, prepare students for later courses, or interest them in psychology, and teach what psychology is and is not, or eliminate popular superstitions. In a survey of college instructors' objectives for teaching an introductory psychology course, Benjamin (2005) found that the top objective consistently reported involved content coverage or knowledge base (i.e., to provide students a balanced overview of the elementary concepts and facts of the discipline of psychology). Moreover, Benjamin (2005) and Slattery and Carlson (2005) found that even when the course's learning objectives were content focused, underlying process skills such as increasing critical thinking and understanding of the scientific process were often secondary goals of the course. To build on this research, we examined a nationwide sample of introductory psychology courses (via their course syllabi) for similarity in stated learning objectives that specifically reflected the *APA Guidelines for the Undergraduate Psychology Major*.

Course Content

In addition to examining the similarity of reported SLOs across a nationwide sample of introductory psychology syllabi, we compared reported course content coverage across the syllabi. Covering content is an important objective for psychology faculty, ratified by the APA (2007), which identified knowledge base of psychology (i.e., content) as the first learning objective in the *APA Guidelines for the Undergraduate Psychology Major*. The APA (2011, p. 853) also considers introductory psychology "including sections from different basic domains" as a principle for quality education in undergraduate psychology. It is inevitable that instructors of introductory psychology will teach the knowledge base of psychology but pick the content based on personal knowledge, preferences, opinion, or demands placed on the course by their institutions (Goss Lucas, 2008). Because of these reasons and the fact that psychology is such a diverse field of study, content can vary dramatically from course to course.

There is limited research examining the course content of introductory psychology courses (Miller & Gentile, 1998). Instead, much research focuses on textbook content analysis. Textbooks have little similarity in content, and vary in length, writing style, number, and usefulness of pedagogical aids used, applied or research focus, tone, and comprehensiveness (Christopher, Griggs, & Hagans, 2000; Griggs, Bujak-Johnson, & Proctor, 2004; Gurung, 2004; Landrum, 1993; Landrum, Gurung, & Spann, 2012; Zechmeister & Zechmeister, 2000). It is likely that the adopted textbook influences an instructor's content coverage, and the diversity in textbooks may also influence what is taught across introductory psychology courses.

Content coverage may be influenced by a topic's perceived value to the field of psychology. However, Miller and Gentile (1998) found little consensus among instructor ratings regarding important topics and those topics covered in the class. Rating topics in the textbook as highly important did not relate to classroom assignments (e.g., readings, homework). Class assignments and lecture content related to chapters within textbooks (e.g., learning) were more likely taught than information not contained within the textbook (e.g., cross-cultural topics). The topics most assigned and seen as most important included learning, memory, physiology, and abnormal psychology. Topics rated the least important included industrial/organizational, psychology of women, applied psychology, and cross-cultural psychology.

We used introductory psychology syllabi to examine not only SLOs but the content areas covered including calculating the percentage of class time dedicated to different content areas across the semester. Focusing on the amount of time spent on a given content area allowed for inferences about depth of coverage and consistency of time allotted to content areas across instructors (e.g., coverage of cognitive psychology topics in 1 lecture day vs. 3 days).

Method

We collected introductory psychology syllabi ($N = 158$) from approximately 95 different institutions nationwide from listservs

(e.g., Society for the Teaching of Psychology), university websites, and personal contacts. Syllabi originated from all over the United States including the Northeast ($n = 28$), South ($n = 23$), Midwest ($n = 55$), and West ($n = 34$). Additionally, we collected a few international syllabi ($n = 7$). For 11 syllabi, no location was identifiable. We collected syllabi from psychology instructors with specialties in social/personality ($n = 58$), clinical ($n = 22$), developmental ($n = 21$), cognitive ($n = 21$), physiological ($n = 10$), and other areas of psychology ($n = 15$). We could not determine the instructors' specialty for 11 syllabi.

Coding Procedure

SLOs. We conducted a qualitative content analysis of syllabi to examine the SLOs. We developed a coding rubric (available upon request) and created a list of keywords that allowed for categorizing syllabi objectives into APA's 10 learning objectives. For example, we categorized those objectives outlining critical thinking, higher level thinking, creativity, and problem solving (e.g., "Be able to apply deductive and inductive reasoning to analyze social science topics") under the APA learning objective of critical thinking. It is important to note that we created a "Miscellaneous" category for items that could not be easily coded into one of the learning objectives (e.g., "For others to be as enthusiastic about psychology as the professor is").

Course Content. To examine the course content of the syllabi, we conducted a qualitative content analysis using a coding rubric developed with the aid of an introductory psychology textbook (Myers, 2003). It is important to note that while we used a textbook as a foundation for organizing the data, we created the majority of the rubric through a collective agreement as to what topics are similar and generally taught together. This is partly because not all textbooks agree on the structure and organization of material (e.g., some contain chapters while others contain modules; Griggs et al., 2004; Landrum, 1993; Landrum et al., 2012; Zechmeister & Zechmeister, 2000). Additionally, in order to optimize analysis, it was important to limit the content areas (i.e., some newer introductory textbooks have up to 39 modules); therefore, all lecture topics described in the syllabi were coded into a content area. The content areas included: (a) *history and scope* of psychology included lectures describing the history of psychology, possible careers, and the introduction to the field of psychology, (b) *research methodology* included methods, statistics, critical thinking, and writing in APA style, (c) *physiological* included neuroscience, consciousness, sensation, and perception, (d) *cognitive* included lecture descriptions of learning, memory, thinking, intelligence, and language, (e) *clinical* included psychological disorders and therapies, (f) *social* included social, personality, interpersonal relationships, and group dynamics, (g) *developmental* included various developmental time periods as well as nature/nurture, and (h) an *other* category contained descriptions of motivation, emotion, stress, health, and industrial-

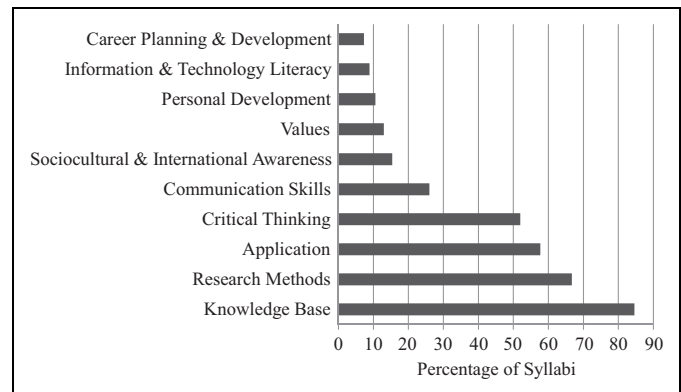


Figure 1. Percentage of syllabi that included the APA learning objective ($N = 123$).

organizational. We determined time allotted to coverage of content by calculating how many days of lecture instructors designated within the syllabus to cover that material, from which we derived the percentage of class time spent on that topic.

Results

SLOs

Of the 158 syllabi, 123 (77.8%) included at least one SLO. There were a total of 681 stated learning objectives ($M = 5.54$, $SD = 3.29$) within the 123 syllabi. Figure 1 contains a breakdown of the percentage of syllabi that included the APA learning objectives. After qualitative coding, the descriptive analysis indicated that knowledge base was present in 85% of syllabi; research methods, 67%; application, 58%; critical thinking, 52%; communication skills, 26%; sociocultural and international awareness, 15%; values, 13%; personal development, 11%; information and technological literacy, 9%; and career planning and development, 7%.

Course Content

We conducted a repeated measures analysis of variance (ANOVA) using the percentage of class lecture time spent on the content area as the dependent variable.¹ See Table 1 for descriptive information. The results of the overall analysis with a Greenhouse–Geisser correction indicated a disproportionate amount of time spent across the lecture content areas, $F(4.97, 779.68) = 149.69$, $p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .49$. Specifically, pairwise comparisons indicated that significantly more lecture time was spent on physiological and cognitive content than any other content area ($p < .001$). Moreover, significantly less time was spent on history and scope, research methods, and developmental content, relative to other areas ($p < .001$). Figure 2 contains a graphical presentation of these findings.

As asserted earlier, an instructor's area of expertise might predispose the instructor to spend more time on content similar to the instructor's specialty area. To test this idea, we conducted a repeated measures ANOVA for each instructor

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics of Percentage of Lecture Days Spent on Content Areas by Instructor Specialty ($N = 132$).

Content Area	Instructor Specialty									
	Clinical		Cognitive		Developmental		Physiology		Social	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Clinical	13.41	8.49	12.27	7.46	12.56	4.62	10.04	6.25	12.00	4.64
Cognitive	19.42	6.82	22.52	7.48	18.89	8.13	21.94	7.32	18.43	9.57
Developmental	7.13	4.42	8.58	5.1	8.03	4.67	8.57	4.76	7.53	4.37
History/scope	3.02	3.94	3.89	4.36	2.95	3.72	4.15	3.67	4.19	4.35
Physiology	18.66	5.87	21.67	7.27	16.36	7.15	22.43	4.89	16.51	6.52
Research methods	5.61	4.15	4.56	3.79	6.46	4.78	6.73	4.38	3.57	3.24
Social	11.07	5.96	12.64	5.48	12.4	5.43	10.88	6.4	13.50	5.69
Other	9.35	5.57	9.2	5.23	8.37	6.69	6.55	6.79	9.29	5.39

Note. *M* = mean; *SD* = standard deviation.

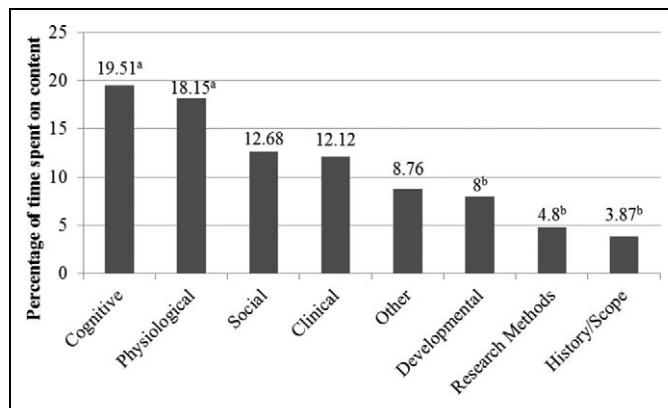


Figure 2. Percentage of time spent on content areas. Sample included 158 syllabi.

^aSignificantly more time spent than all other content areas at $p < .001$.

^bSignificantly less time spent than all other content areas at $p < .001$.

specialty area, followed by pairwise comparisons between instructor's specialty area lecture content compared to the remaining content areas. If sphericity was violated, we used the Greenhouse–Geisser adjustments for degrees of freedom.

Results indicated that instructors in all specialty areas spent a disproportionate amount of time on certain content areas. Specifically, instructors whose expertise was in social, $F(3, 399) = 49.10, p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .46$, and clinical/counseling, $F(7, 147) = 23.01, p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .52$, spent more lecture time on their own area than other content areas ($ps < .01$), excluding physiological and cognitive for which they spent considerably less time ($ps < .05$). Instructors with specialty areas in physiological, $F(7, 63) = 13.80, p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .61$, and cognitive, $F(7, 140) = 27.08, p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .58$, psychology spent significantly more time covering their specialty area than any of the other content areas ($ps < .01$). On the contrary, instructors with expertise in developmental psychology spent significantly less time covering their specialty area than almost all of the other content areas (i.e., physiological, cognitive, clinical, and social), $F(7, 14) = 19.34, p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .49$. However, developmental

psychologists spent more time on their own content area than on history and scope ($p < .01$) and the same amount on research methods or miscellaneous topics ($ps > .05$).

Discussion

We examined a nationwide sample of introductory psychology syllabi for stated learning objectives that specifically reflected the *APA Guidelines for the Undergraduate Psychology Major* and for course content by examining the percentage of time allotted to course content areas over a semester. Findings suggest that while most instructors explicitly state learning objectives within the syllabus, the type and frequency of their use vary dramatically. Although the APA has outlined SLOs that should be specified in psychology courses, it appears that, based on syllabi content, not all introductory psychology course instructors consistently use them. Similar to past research, the objectives of knowledge base, research methods, and application were largely present (Benjamin, 2005; Slattery & Carlson, 2005). However, other goals, such as values in psychology, personal development, information and technology literacy, and career planning and development were virtually ignored.

This focus on objectives related to knowledge base, research methods, and application is to be expected. After all, introductory psychology courses are just that—introductory. It could be viewed as more important to focus on the first of the APA goals addressing objectives specific to the science and application of psychology and to address those goals consistent with general education in upper-level psychology courses. A focus on discipline-specific goals may help instructors meet the goals of an introductory course (i.e., to provide students with basic content knowledge and a framework for thinking in the topic area, which for some students become the building blocks required for advanced courses in that field). In addition, instructors may choose the goals related to the science and application of psychology more frequently because they think the goals are more easily achieved as reflected in the results of Miller and Gentile (1998), whereas instructors-rated objectives similar to critical thinking, sociocultural and international

awareness, and personal development as least likely to be achieved.

Our results revealed that courses differed in type and frequency of lecture content. The findings suggest that, overall, there is significantly more lecture time spent on physiological and cognitive content than any other content that parallels some of Miller and Gentile's (1998) findings. Additionally, significantly less time is spent on research methods, history and scope, and developmental content. This is especially interesting, as the APA learning objective of research methods was the second highest reported learning objective (67% of syllabi) and research methods is critical to the curriculum of the major (Dunn et al., 2010). Of course, this may provide more evidence to support Miller and Gentile's (1998) findings which revealed that instructors believed increasing students' skills in research methodology was an important goal, but also felt it was the least achievable goal. If instructors believe the goal is not feasible, they may not be able to justify spending a lot of valuable class time on the topic.

There are many possible reasons for the disproportionate amount of time spent on lecture content. Perhaps, examining written lecture content time is not a good indicator of how much actual time is spent on each topic. Some content areas (e.g., developmental) may be interwoven or spread throughout the entire semester (e.g., physiological, cognitive, and social development), thus less explicitly scheduled lecture time is spent addressing that specific content area. This may especially pertain to research methods, as each individual topic covers research in that area. However, if instructors discuss research methods throughout the semester, it is unclear whether instructors are focused on merely stating the relevant findings of the research or discussing the research methodology (e.g., design, sampling, and reliability/validity).

Other reasons for the discrepancies across lecture content could be that some topics are more reflective of topics that hold more value for instructors, or of trends, major shifts in focus, or "hot" topics within the discipline as a whole (Spear, 2007). Some instructors may emphasize physiological content because it is considered more difficult for students, and thus is deserving of extra time (Peck, Ali, Levine, & Matchock, 2006). In contrast, Peck and colleagues found that developmental content was easier for students perhaps due in part to preexisting knowledge; therefore, instructors may believe they need to spend less time on this topic area. Future research is needed to attempt to explain these discrepancies in content coverage.

Additionally, there were differences in content based on instructor expertise. In contrast to Miller and Gentile's (1998) findings, we found instructor expertise significantly related to lecture content coverage time. Results revealed that instructors whose expertise was in social, clinical/counseling, physiological, and cognitive psychology spent significantly more time covering their specialty topic than other content areas; instructors whose expertise was developmental spent significantly less time covering their topic of expertise compared to other content areas. However, the disproportion in lecture time does not seem to be altogether specialty-specific. Overall, the findings

indicated that instructors, regardless of specialty area, spent significantly more time on physiological and cognitive lecture content than their own specialty area content. Additionally, instructors of all specialties, with the exception of developmental, spent significantly less time on research methods and history and scope than their own specialty area content.

The results of the present study have several implications. For those seeking to standardize introductory psychology courses, it is important to take into account the variability of learning objectives and course content coverage across introductory psychology courses. If department chairs seek more similarity across introductory psychology sections or plan to establish assessment criteria, these findings may guide their course of action. In addition, for instructors themselves, it is important to consider these findings during course design. Instructors should be more aware of APA's guidelines of SLOs and be more intentional (and perhaps less biased) about content coverage in introductory psychology courses.

Limitations and Future Directions

A limitation of the current study is the use of syllabi as a means of examining content coverage, especially as it pertains to depth or time allotted to the material. Although analysis of syllabi content greatly reduces social desirability in responses, it limits the ability to get deeper details and more information. That is, one can only measure what is explicitly designated to be covered, not what was actually covered within the course. This methodology does not take into account factors such as how material may be interwoven, or if instructors adhered to the guidelines stated in the syllabus. In addition, the current assessment of syllabi does not take into consideration department- or institution-enforced guidelines for learning objectives or content coverage. Moreover, there was a disproportionate amount of syllabi submitted from both social and personality psychologists, as opposed to other disciplines, as well as from instructors in the Midwest, as opposed to other regions.

Next steps should include combining syllabi examination with self-reported attitudes regarding chosen SLOs and course content (e.g., what are the reasons that you drop or spend less time on a given content area?). This approach would provide better explanations for the disproportionate content coverage found in the current study. Additionally, this methodology would be especially relevant when examining SLOs. It would be particularly useful to know how instructors plan to implement or assess those learning objectives, as those plans are rarely explicitly mentioned in the syllabus. In addition, it would be useful to gather information regarding why some APA learning objectives are included in introductory psychology syllabi and why some are omitted.

Gathering the opinions and practices of introductory psychology instructors would also help set some initial guidelines for the structure of introductory psychology courses (i.e., what SLOs and course content should be considered for inclusion in all introductory psychology courses) as recommended by Dunn and colleagues (2010). Furthermore, results from studies such as this will provide a helpful guide to faculty

teaching the introductory course for the first time in addition to creating a common core of content and learning objectives for introductory psychology courses. Establishing consistency across the discipline is important to the understanding of psychology as a field (i.e., to the public and to our students) as well as to provide structure to allow for easier assessment of one of the highest enrolled courses within departments and across institutions.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The authors received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Note

1. The results of analyses related to lecture time spent on content area did not differ after applying the appropriate arcsine transformation to these proportional data. Thus, for the sake of simplicity and interpretation, statistical values based on the untransformed data are presented below.

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