Content Coverage: Recommendations for Introductory Psychology

Regan Gurung, University of Wisconsin-Green Bay

The first time I taught introductory psychology I started with selecting a textbook. I then looked at the table of contents and divided up the chapters based on the number of weeks I had. I do not do that anymore. The best way to design your course is to start with your learning outcomes (see the NOBA Instructor manual essay on Assessment), but you still have to decide what to cover. In this essay I first review what is known about textbook content coverage in psychology, highlight recent research on what is done in the classroom, and then share APA's recommendations for what to cover in the Intro class.

Textbook Content Comparisons

Textbooks have little similarity in content, and vary in length and comprehensiveness (Griggs, Bujak-Johnson, & Proctor, 2004; Landrum, Gurung, & Spann, 2012). Miller and Gentile (1998) found little consensus among instructor ratings regarding important topics and those topics covered in the class. What should one cover? APA's Board of Educational Affairs (BEA) established a Working Group to Strengthen the Common Core of the Introductory Psychology Course**.** BEA charged the Working Group to examine the common core of the Intro Psych course at the college level including the content, outcomes, possibility of a laboratory component, and implications for a major vs. a non-major directed course. In this essay, I share the key recommendations regarding content coverage as a guide to designing your course and writing your syllabus.

What's Covered in Intro Psych?

There is surprisingly little information on what *is* covered in the Intro course. Homa et al. (2013) examined student learning objectives and course content in 158 Intro Psych syllabi. Student learning objectives were mapped to the 2007 version of the *Guidelines*. Over 50% of the syllabi contained objectives specific to the science and application of psychology (knowledge base, research methods, application). Analysis of content coverage revealed that 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. Importantly, this practice appeared across instructors in all specialty areas. Instructors spent a disproportionate amount of time on certain content areas. Additionally, instructors whose expertise was in social and clinical/counseling psychology spent more lecture time on their own areas than some other content areas.

APA Recommendations for Content Coverage

APA's Board of Educational Affairs (BEA) established a Working Group to Strengthen the Common Core of the Introductory Psychology Course**.** The Working Group examined existing domain models for psychology (e.g., *Standards, Guidelines*) and created a new conceptualization of the course with explicit ways to better reflect the contemporary state of the field (e.g*.,* a call for integration). The group explicitly used the five domains outlined in the *Guidelines* and each of the seven domains outlined in the *Standards* although they modified some of the labels and changed where in the model each domain is covered as described below.
To provide instructors and institutions with the maximum amount of flexibility and choice, the recommended model demarcates key conceptual areas of the field instead of specific content. This conceptual level allows individual instructors academic flexibility in topic selection and precludes the need for multiple models while still creating courses that share a common basis.

Intro Psych should be designed to serve as a stand-alone structure (for students taking it as part of a general education requirement) or as the foundation for the psychology major. The recommendations build on this metaphor and use an architectural analogy.

The content of Intro Psych can be conceptualized using the schematic of a classic Greek structure complete with pillars- the fundamental precepts of the field (Figure 1).

Figure 1. A Structure for the Undergraduate Introductory Psychology Course

The sample syllabi provides examples of how to satisfy this recommendation with
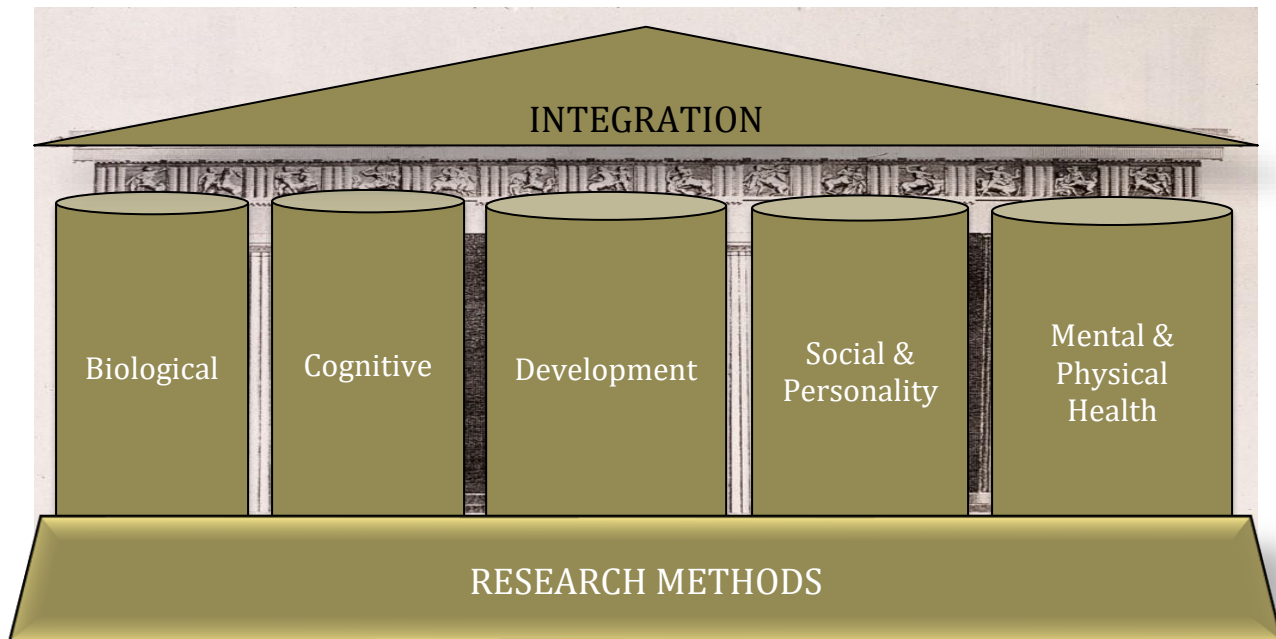
Consistent with national recommendations for the major and with reviews of the contemporary nature of the field, the Working Group recommends that instructors of Intro Psych cover:

1. **The Scientific Method:** The scientific method is the true foundational building block and core of our discipline. Consistent with Goal 2 of the *Guidelines 2.0* (APA 2013, pp. 20-25), students in Intro Psych should learn skills involving the development of scientific reasoning and problem solving, including effective research methods. Students should learn basic skills and concepts for interpreting behavior, studying research, and applying research design principles to drawing conclusions about behavior.

2. **Cross-cutting Themes:** Consistent with our goal to move away from a silo-model of psychology to better represent the cross-cutting themes in our field today and to honor calls for infusion of certain topics across the course (e.g., Dunn et al. 2010; Littleford & Nolan, 2013; Trimble, Stevenson, & Worell, 2003), we recommend that the following should be covered for **each topic** included in the course**.** Just as concrete is a composite of different ingredients, each pillar is composed of different elements that are cross-cutting common themes in the field. This recommendation explicitly elevates the importance of these themes over that of specific content topic areas (e.g., those seen in the pillars that follow). This practice should ensure that important issues such as diversity and

ethics are frequently on students' radar versus being seen as only solitary requirements, boxes to be checked off as completed.

- **Cultural and Social Diversity**: What are variations across individuals and roles, including those based on age, gender, sexual orientation, gender identity, race, ethnicity, culture, national origin, religion, disability status, language, and socioeconomic status? Choose at least two.

- **Ethics**: What are the major ethical considerations for conducting research or applying the topic or phenomenon?
- **Variations in Human Functioning:** What are the positive and negative extremes of the phenomenon under study? Highlight failures and successful examples.
- **Applications**: How does the content of the course apply to everyday life? How can the content of the course contribute to improving one's life and addressing societal problems?

3. **General Content Commonality**: We recommend that the Intro Psych syllabus include **at least two topics** from each of the main pillars of the field modified from the domains specified in the *Standards and Guidelines 2.0*. The pillars encompass all chapters in psychology textbooks (material within parentheses below) while also mapping onto course names, contemporary political structures, PhD training programs, and departmental core courses. We desired pillar labels to be easily identifiable as major chapters and sections in Intro Psych textbooks providing students with points of connection that prior domain language did not easily afford.

- **Pillar 1: Biological** (e.g., Neuroscience, Sensation, Consciousness, Motivation)
- **Pillar 2: Cognitive** (e.g., Cognition, Memory, Perception)
- **Pillar 3: Development (**e.g., Learning, Life span development, Language)
- **Pillar 4: Social and Personality** (e.g., Social, Personality, Intelligence, Emotion, Multicultural, Gender)
- **Pillar 5: Mental and Physical Health** (e.g., Abnormal, Health, Therapies)

4. **Integration:** The structure is capped by an explicit focus on integration that ties together the different areas into a coherent whole, and represents the integrative nature of contemporary psychology. In contrast to focusing on just cognition or biology or social situations, modern psychology integrates different approaches. Similar to the call for capstone courses for the major (Dunn et al., 2009) the Working Group recommends that students in Intro Psych receive explicit examples of how the different pillars of psychological science are integrated. For example, conflict in close relationships can be better understood

by personality characteristics, social or situational factors, developmental histories of each partner, and underpinning biological factors. The point is to underscore that each pillar/domain has substantive implications for the others in the pursuit of comprehensive psychological explanations and applications. The in-depth study of any one of these domains is essential, but a comprehensive understanding of the mind and behavior is more likely to be achieved by an *integration* of what we know and can learn across multiple levels/perspectives than by focusing on individual domains.

This content recommendation may present an imposing task to many faculty although many faculty already cover content consistent with this recommendation. Covering two topics from each of five pillars and also including the four common elements whenever possible may seem a difficult task. Reorganizing or pruning the extent to which some topics are currently covered (e.g., one need not always lecture on an entire chapter), makes this recommendation manageable. Examples of how to integrate the four common elements are available in the Working Group report (http://www.apa.org/ed/governance/bea/intro-psych-report.pdf; APA, 2014).

Final Considerations

The good news is that many intro psych instructors have syllabi that are consistent with the APA recommendations. There is more good news. The recommendations provide a lot of flexibility. The key is to not feel pressured to cover everything in class. I know an instructor who holds up an intro text on the first day of class and tells students they are responsible for everything in it regardless of what lectures cover. Sure, that is one way to go, but it may not lead to the best learning. The science is clear: Spending more time on less leads to better retention of what is covered. Even better, when you reallocate time to depth versus coverage you actually do not end up dropping much content (Nelson, 1999).

So although the full NOBA platform has a number of modules there is no need to assign them all just because they are free or written by experts. Pick your modules wisely using the guidelines above, and your learning outcomes, and your students will learn more.

References

American Psychological Association. (2007). *APA guidelines for the undergraduate psychology major.* Washington, DC: Author. Retrieved from www.apa.org/ed/resources.html

American Psychological Association. (2013). *APA Guidelines for the Undergraduate Psychology Major 2.0*. Washington, DC: Author. Retrieved from www.apa.org/ed/resources.html

Dunn, D. S., Brewer, C. L., Cautin, R. L., Gurung, R. R., Keith, K. D., McGregor, L. N., & … Voigt, M. (2010). The undergraduate psychology curriculum: Call for a core. In D. F. Halpern (Ed.), *Undergraduate education in psychology: A blueprint for the future of the discipline* (pp. 47-61). Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.

Griggs, R. A. (2014). Topical coverage in introductory textbooks from the 1980s through the 2000s. *Teaching of Psychology, 41,* 5-10. doi:10.1177/0098628313514171

Griggs, R. A., Bujak-Johnson, A., & Proctor, D. L. (2004). Using common core vocabulary in text selection and teaching the introductory course. *Teaching of Psychology, 31*, 265-269.

Gurung, R. A. R., Landrum, R. E., & Daniel, D. B. (2012). Textbook use and learning: A North American perspective. *Psychology of Learning and Teaching, 11,* 87-98.

Homa, N., Hackathorn, J., Brown, C., Garczynski, A., Solomon, E., Tennial, R., Sanborn, U., & Gurung, R. A. R. (2013). How consistent are Introductory Psychology course syllabi? Examining objectives and content. *Teaching of Psychology*, *40,* 169-174.

Landrum, R., Gurung, R. A. R., & Spann, N. (2012). Assessments of textbook usage and the relationship to student course performance. *College Teaching, 60*(1), 17-24. doi:10.1080/87567555.2011.609573

Littleford, L. N., & Nolan, S. A. (2013). Your sphere of influence: How to infuse cultural diversity into your psychology classes. *Psychology Teacher Network, 23*.

Nelson, C. E. (1999). On the persistence of unicorns: The tradeoff between content and critical thinking revisited. *In* B.A. Pescosolido and R. Aminzade, Eds., *The Social Worlds of Higher Education: Handbook for Teaching in a New Century.* Pine Forge Press.

Miller, B., & Gentile, B. F. (1998). Introductory course content and goals. *Teaching of Psychology, 25*, 89-96. doi:10.1207/s15328023top2502_2

Trimble, J. E., Stevenson, M. R., & Worrell, J. P. (2003). *Toward an inclusive psychology: Infusing the introductory psychology textbook with diversity content*. Washington, D.C.: American Psychological Association.