Teaching

Using New Interactive Media to Enhance the Teaching of Psychology (and Other Disciplines) in Developing Countries

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ABSTRACT—My idea for improving psychology responds to the challenge of teaching psychology in lower income, developing countries. With new Web-based e-books on the horizon, I suggest harnessing the Internet to deliver state-of-the-art, interactive, low-cost, locally adapted content to students who cannot afford books.

We North Americans and Western Europeans sometimes feel challenged when teaching psychological science to today’s students. While speaking in 2007 to representatives from South Africa’s, Botswana’s, and Namibia’s universities at an African teaching of psychology conference, I was given a reality check. Their challenges far exceed our own, as they teach (sometimes with American-made texts) students whose cultural context is not “Euro-American” and who often cannot afford even greatly discounted textbooks.

If only there could be a way for low-income students in developing countries to have access to teaching materials that were not only highest quality but also low cost and with culturally relevant examples. In the southern Africa context, this pedagogical utopia would offer text and teaching materials that are current, state of the art, affordable or accessible to low-income students, and capable of being “Africanized” (adapted or extended in ways pertinent to southern Africa).

Pondering these African colleagues’ needs, and aware of new pedagogical materials now under development, I wondered if their dreamt-of future might actually soon become feasible for three reasons:

• Broadband Internet accessibility is expanding. A joint initiative of the Rockefeller, Carnegie, Ford, and MacArthur foundations has supplemented national resources in funding “information technologies and connectivity to the Internet” in the universities of several African countries, including South Africa. An “eLearning Africa 2006” conference attracted more 332 participants (74% from African countries). A University of Namibia colleague told me that their available computer stations limit students to about 1 hr of weekly Internet use. But technology access, though as yet vastly more expensive in Africa, is expanding.

• English is the primary language of instruction. With 11 official languages in South Africa, English is the primary language of less than 10% of the population. But it is the língua franca, the shared second language, of most. And it is therefore the main language of university instruction in South Africa and its neighboring countries.

• A new generation of Web-based interactive teaching resources is under development.

The confluence of these realities lay the groundwork for a major advance in the teaching of psychology in such contexts via Web-based, interactive e-books with links to videos, animations, tutorials, simulations, quizzes, discussion boards, tracking of student engagement, and much more.

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Three potential features of this on-the-near-horizon technology could help revolutionize the teaching of courses in basic psychology and other disciplines as well:

- **Customizability.** The forthcoming electronic pedagogy to become available from my own introductory text publisher during 2008–2009, and likely with attractive options from other publishers as well, will offer not only hundreds of linked activities and “lab” experiences, but also the option of being supplemented and extended at the local end. This will enable instructors in Pretoria, Bloemfontein, or Cape Town to delete unwanted material and to develop and share materials pertinent to their students’ worlds and to their own university and course.

- **Affordability.** Some cost savings will come by not necessitating the production and shipment of physical books (though such will be available for those wishing). Moreover, in the North American context, students will pay for a time-limited access that is tied to their names, thus eliminating resold used books, which entail no revenue to the publisher. (A much smaller fee paid by a lot more students, or a site license paid for students by their university, will keep the publishers in business.) For North American students, the end result will be a much richer and more dynamic teaching medium at little more than half the cost of a traditional text. For African universities, perhaps publishers, with a benevolent mindset and also mindful of Third World economics, might make access available for a very low cost.

- **Student accountability.** With each student registered with a password, instructors will be able to track their students’ engagement with the material, which could be in advance of class sessions (perhaps freeing up more class time for the conversation).

Switching from a printed text to an interactive electronic text would require students to replace book time with scheduled access to a computer lab that has ample broadband access. That, in turn, would require equipping new labs with sufficient computer stations to allow students to be scheduled for sufficient online study time and with an available teaching/tech assistant. To be a satisfying experience for students, the university computer lab would also need to have or to acquire sufficient bandwidth to accommodate students who are simultaneously online.

Might there be funding for the needed additional bandwidth, computers, and local training and content development? A Rockefeller/Carnegie/Ford/MacArthur collaboration is advancing educational equity and Internet access in Africa. Thus, funding might be possible, especially given publishers willing to contribute (or make available at cost) their educational media for test projects and given colleagues interested in collaborating on a test demonstration, with assessments of students’ attitudes and learning.

I have broached the idea of using the Internet to deliver state-of-the-art, interactive, low-cost, locally adapted content to students who cannot afford books with our colleagues in South Africa, with my introductory text publisher, with my fellow committee members on the International Science Committee of the Association for Psychological Science’s new Fund for the Advancement of Psychological Science, and with the Rockefeller Foundation’s program officer for educational information technology. There may be roadblocks to come, but so far there is enthusiasm all around. My southern African colleagues declare themselves “very excited” and propose to implement test projects at the University of Free State Qwaqwa Campus and at the University of Pretoria’s Vista Campus, both of which are in historically black and disadvantaged regions in South Africa.

Will interactive pedagogy for introductory psychology prove both cost effective and educationally effective? If it does, that will pave the way for wider applications with other courses, by other departments through distance learning via dispersed computer labs, and in many countries, including those of North America, many of whose students also feel burdened by the cost of today’s texts.