

Special issue: Innovative Teaching Personal Essays

Academic Footprints in the Sand

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Many may be familiar with the poem, “Footprints in the Sand”. In this poem, the narrator looks back at his life and sees two sets of footprints in the sand, except during his most difficult times when there is only one set of footprints. The poem explains that the person was not walking alone, left by his Savior during these times. Instead, the Savior was carrying the person. As I reflected upon this poem, I visualized an “Academic Footprints in the Sand” related to my own experiences. Initially, there appear to be two sets of footprints, but one of the individuals is stepping heavily and appears to be dragging the other along the seashore. That is how it begins, and I have reflected upon this many times in my 27 years in the classroom.

You may assume the person being dragged is a reluctant student, with the instructor attempting to bring the student to new understanding. This isn’t always the case. As a young assistant professor (28-yrs-old) I was dragged into the complexities of online courses. I had heard horror stories from students regarding their frustrations with some of our online courses. The quality seemed sketchy, and the platform was limited. However, our college president at the time viewed online courses as the solution for financial growth. He wanted every course to be developed for online delivery and wanted our BS Social Psychology degree to be one of the first complete majors available online. I felt like a villager under siege from a conqueror like Hannibal or Napoleon Bonaparte. I organized our two-person department to defend our

curriculum and had two motions accepted that blocked two counseling-related psychology courses from online development. Needless to say, the president was very upset that I initiated these motions. I explained to him that my actions were driven by a concern for course quality. He responded by effectively “dropping me in the sand” to resolve these issues on my own. There was one set of footprints in the sand for a couple of years.

Years later I entered the online classroom reluctantly in Spring 2005, skeptical of the quality and merit of online learning. Our institution had just switched Learning Management Systems, and all courses needed to be redeveloped. I accepted the task of attempting to redevelop our PS101 Intro to Psychology course beyond (what appeared to me) a correspondence course. My personal desire was to remove as many courses as I could from online delivery, but I couldn’t do that without making an attempt to improve them first. I started with our foundation course – PS101. My goal changed. I wanted to make the Intro to Psychology course one that would be compelling enough to make a non-psychology major love the discipline and become a major. As an undergraduate myself, I was dissatisfied with merely discussing topics. In my four years as an undergraduate, my favorite class was Experimental Psychology because I got to do and thus create new knowledge.

In the redesigning of this course, I developed an innovation called Report Back. This activity is a discussion in which students are given a topic and questions and asked to collect anonymous responses from volunteers (within their social circles or strangers). In the discussion thread, the students report the volunteers’ responses, provide a summary and application back to the topic, and interact with other students. In essence, I have turned my students into psychological scientists, and they love it! Of course I didn’t tell them that they were conducting a research analog because “doing research” is scary, intimidating, and boring. Time after time,

when students are asked about their favorite part of the course, the majority choose the Report Back as their favorite. Why? The Report Back activity shifts the role of the student from observer to actor. They are placed in charge, and they run the show. They interact with volunteers, record responses, and sometimes have to negotiate challenging participants. They then report the responses of “their” participants. This activity gives them ownership and the opportunity to create new knowledge (albeit in a much scaled down way, but analogous to how psychological scientists conduct research).

I’ve observed that there are more peer responses in the Report Back discussion thread than in the other weekly discussion thread. Students state that they can’t wait to see the new Report Back topics each week. Some students even use the same group of volunteers so that they can explore possible trends across the course. This is thinking like a psychological scientist. Perhaps the most rewarding feedback is when students say the volunteers approach them on Monday asking about the Report Back topic for the week. That is the ultimate measure of success – psychology has left the classroom and has been shared with others. This leads to an infectious excitement that energizes students and instructors, and the students take the lead.

This exemplifies the exhortation of past presidents of the American Psychological Association – George Miller - and the Association for Psychological Science – Robert Bjork - to “Give Psychology Away”. The Report Back with its inherent uncertainty and interactive nature brings some of the top strategies for successful learning - namely generation, reflection, and elaboration (Brown, Roediger, & McDaniels, 2016), self-referencing (Rogers, Kuiper, & Kirker, 1977), and deep-processing (Craik & Lockhart, 1972).

As I look back at my initial footprints in the sand, I suppose I failed and succeeded at the same time. I failed to remove Intro to Psychology away from online delivery but succeeded in

identifying an activity that engaged student learning. My (albeit reluctant) willingness to enter the world of online instruction taught me that there are merits to online courses and that there is a population of students who fit well with these courses. In fact, since redeveloping Intro to Psychology in 2005, I've developed or redeveloped seven other courses. One of these, a senior-level course – Cognitive Psychology, uses the Report Back structure with a more sophisticated requirement to link the activity to peer-reviewed research. Not surprisingly, the students also value this activity.

As I reflect upon the “Academic Footprints in the Sand”, I see the transition where I was no longer being dragged along. Through this experience, I developed my own unique footprints along the shore - tentative at first and then stronger and deeper with greater strides. Soon, other footprints appeared alongside of me as my students joined me along the path of active learning and knowledge creation. Eventually, their own footprints went forward beyond mine. Then something most wonderful appeared – the footprints of multiple people coming from all directions to each student until it appeared as if there had been a beach party in the sand. It's truly rewarding to see how the joy of learning invites so many to add their footsteps along the shore.

I am so thankful that a simple innovation can bring so many people together resulting in the myriad of “Academic Footprints in the Sand.”

References

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