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ABSTRACT

The utility of behavior management in a college English course designed to repair or develop the student's skills in the written language is studied. The subjects were community college students who had demonstrated rhetorical or mechanical weaknesses in the use of the written language. The students were told they would have to complete all of the required tasks to a minimum standard of achievement, as judged by the instructor. Each would be awarded a minimum number of points for each step so completed; he could revise as often as he wished until he had gained the maximum number of points designated for that task. The effects of this approach are: (1) The teacher read the students' work with great care; (2) The student modelled upon the teacher's own style, thereby improving his own prose style. Post-testing revealed a meaningful increase in recognition of sentence and paragraph patterns well beyond the .01 level of significance. (CK)

A BEHAVIOR MANAGEMENT APPROACH TO TEACHING INTRODUCTION TO COMPOSITION

A Research Project

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at

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by

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A Behavior Management Approach to Teaching Introduction to Composition[1]

Introduction

In the past, courses in introductory psychology, behavior analysis, and college study skills have been offered at the university or college level according to the principles of behavioral psychology. Keller (9) reported that teachers may be more effective if they employ contingency management in their courses. McMichael and Corey (11) demonstrated that contingency management in an introductory psychology course produced better learning. A self-paced and programmed course in behavior analysis, designed by Lloyd and Knutsen (10), illustrated that strategically applied reinforcement within a curriculum of small, clear-cut sequential steps can elicit "independent work" of high quality from university students. Hornstein (8) has demonstrated that college study skills

[1]This study was undertaken at Mount Royal College, Calgary, Canada. It was continued after my moving to Edmonds Community College, Lynnwood, Washington. It could not have been undertaken without the expert advice of Professor L. A. Hamerlynck, University of Calgary. It could not have been completed without the assistance of Professor Barbara Morgridge, Edmonds Community College.

and time management can be taught in a sequential manner, with student para-professionals systematically reinforcing appropriate study behaviors in students.

These experiments lead to the question of whether behavior management can be employed in a college English course designed to "repair" or "develop" the student's skills in the written language. Such courses should enjoy great success; yet, according to a survey of two-year college English teachers in 1965 (14, p. 53) 35-40 percent of the respondents were pessimistic about whether remedial English could help students in general. Furthermore, in about 75 percent of the reporting colleges, the grammar that is presented in the remedial English course does not differ from that in the regular English course. In the other 25 percent of the cases, one encounters such comments as "more basic," "high school level," "more time devoted," "more drill." Only 3 percent indicate that some special approach, such as an application of structural linguistics, is being tried. (14, P. 52)

Although this survey is some six years old, the indication is that innovation is in order. My own bias is not in the direction of linguistics but of rhetoric. Hence, a writing course was designed to improve the student's writing skills by means of a structured curriculum containing sequential writing tasks. Academic reward was contingent upon successful completion of these skill-steps; reinforcement came in the form of points (a "token economy") and from social reinforcement from instructor and peers. By using behavior management tactics, a course in introduction to composition was implemented.

Method

To teach is to structure situations so that the student discovers his environment within or outside himself. The teacher, then, shapes behaviors, or in the words of B. F. Skinner (13, pp. 66-7):

> By selecting responses to be reinforced he improvises a program of contingencies, at each stage of which a response is reinforced which makes it possible to move on to a more demanding stage. The contingencies gradually approach those which generate the final specified response.

Another way of saying this is that the student exerts "trial-and error" behavior which tends to be shaped by the teacher's rewards (2, p. 32). While it is relatively easy for teachers to control such contingencies in the classroom, it is difficult to research them because of the free-wheeling setting and the inexactness of measurement. One cannot, therefore, class such studies as "behavior modification," which, in the words of Risley (7, p. 104), plays to two audiences, " . . . . the therapist's audience which requires pragmatic results, [sic] and the researcher's audience which requires quality research." Behavior management, as it is applied to this project, is more a teaching than a research term: it means amplifying desired behaviors by structuring curriculum and reinforcing appropriate responses by students.

According to the course text, Casty's (3, pp. 1-4) A Mixed Bag, the student is to become aware of the parts of the whole, the details that account for the effect first; then he is to learn to order parts or details; and finally, he is to come to conclusions or make judgments by manipulating parts, details, and methods of development. As the course

was taught, rhetorical proficiency was staged in small steps leading from the what and how of mediating experience through when, where, why, and how much of organizing thoughts to a hopefully self-rewarding complex of behaviors which Fantini and Weinstein (5, pp. 50-55) call the avenue of expression for the student's own thoughts, feelings, and attitudes.

The subjects were community college students who had been advised, but not coerced to enroll in Introduction to Composition. They had demonstrated rhetorical or mechanical weaknesses in the use of the written language, having taken an essay style placement examination. The students knew that the course bore credit, was transferrable, but did not meet any portion of the English requirement for graduation.

On the first day of class, students received the following materials: a manila envelope containing a course explanation, a syllabus which was quite specific, a contract, a mimeoed sheet for recording points, fifteen tag-board tickets, a file folder containing a check list for required writing tasks, and a sheet of graph paper for charting progress. The instructor then asked the students to write certain information in the file folder, peruse the check list, and notice the achievement chart, which could accomodate more than 4000 points over a ten-week period.

Next, the class read the course explanation together in order to discover the rationale of the course, its objectives, and requirements. The course was to be offered according to proven principles of behavior; the student could predict his own grade; he would not be required to attend class but would be awarded points for doing so (the tag-board tickets were for his admission). Furthermore, he was informed of a sequence of structured assignments ranging from simple to complex.

Besides these required tasks, there would be an assortment of bonus activities which were less directly related to writing fluency, yet which would be worth points. The student could complete any or all of them and could contract to complete other work which would strengthen special weaknesses.

The explanation stated that the student would have to complete all of the required tasks to a minimum standard of achievement, as judged by the instructor and that he would be awarded a minimum number of points for each step so completed. But the student could revise as often and as extensively as he deemed profitable, until he had gained the maximum number of points designated for that task. He had to abide by deadlines for first drafts, but beyond that, he could work pretty much at his own pace. He had to complete all required tasks to a minimum standard; then he could revise in order to reach the maximum. He could also do bonus activities. Depending on his motivation he could acquire 3000 points for a "C," 3500 points for a "B," and 4000 for an "A." If at any time during the quarter he wished to do so, he could challenge the course for a grade of "C." Finally, if at the end of the quarter he thought he could still improve his performance, he could opt for an incomplete grade and have 30 days in which to revise required tasks in order to raise his point total.

He had to agree to the following terms:

CONTRACT

> English 10^ is designed to assist the student in reaching rhetorical fluency. While the brunt of the course involves writing expository prose, some bonus suggestions are only indirectly related to writing. This program, based on sound behavioral theory, will assist you by structuring the learning situation and by reinforcing your appropriate writing and study behaviors.

The major goal of English 100 C, then, is this: GIVEN A STUDENT WHO HAS DEMONSTRATED SOME DEGREE OF DEFICIENCY IN THE CONVENTIONS OF WRITTEN ENGLISH, THAT STUDENT WILL BE ABLE TO COMPOSE A THREE TO FIVE HUNDRED WORD ESSAY, REASONABLY FREE OF MECHANICAL ERRORS, WHICH EMPLOYS VARYING METHODS OF RHETORICAL DEVELOPMENT.

We, the undersigned, agree to the following terms and conditions:

1. That, in order to have completed this course, I will write a standardized test, pre-test and post-test forms.

2. That I will complete all ten writing tasks to a minimum standard of acceptance, in the opinion of my instructor.

3. That I will fill out a class evaluation at the end of the term.

4. That I may earn additional points, or bonus points, by completing tasks suggested by the syllabus or by the instructor.

5. That I may earn bonus points for depositing attendance chips.

6. That all of my writing assignments must conform to "Form for Papers."

7. That I am responsible for charting my progress and keeping track of cumulative points.

8. That all my writing assignments must be in my class folder before I get my grade.

9. That I may earn a grade of "C" by getting 3000 points, "B" by getting 3500, and "A" by getting 4000.

10. That, if I am dissatisfied at any time during the course, I can challenge the course; if successful, my challenge will result in a grade of "C" without further class attendance or assignments.

Signed, _____

_____

As has been mentioned, the required writing tasks were sequenced in three broad steps: noticing details and transferring them into compositions with perceptible beginnings, bodies, and outcomes; using methods of

development to fulfill writing purposes such as giving directions, explaining a phenomenon, and reacting to an argument; and relating ideas according to various modes of discourse such as analysis, classification, persuasion, and definition. Insofar as it was possible, each assignment was structured to engage the student's own background of experience, assist the student in building meanings and relationships, and promote the student's extension of skills, abilities, and interests, as described by Hafner (6, p. 29).

Two important facets still need to be described, reinforcement tactics and reinforcement of "progressive approximations" (13, p. 16). The business of attendance may serve to describe how reinforcement, at first as constant as possible, was faded to intermittency. For the first two weeks, approximately, the student exchanged a tag-board ticket for points which were immediately added to his point total. Then, the tickets became extraneous and the student merely credited himself with the correct number of points each time he attended. Finally, points were calculated by the week. Also, at first, all tasks bore points: writing the standardized tests, keeping the file folder up-to-date, etc. These points were totalled up daily. Later the points were saved for a week at a time; toward the end of the term, points became a mere formality, most students having already accrued the number desired. Although a sort of "token economy" seemed to reign, the intent was to evoke "independent" work of high quality.

Requiring the student to complete each assignment to a minimum standard of achievement, but making it profitable for him to revise as extensively and frequently had important effects: the instructor found

himself reading students' work with great care (which is only right!): the student, by means of successive revision, "modelled" (13, pp. 208-9) upon the teacher's own style, thereby improving his own prose style: and the student (and instructor) "overlearned" rhetorical and grammatical principles.

In The Technology of Teaching, Skinner (13 p. 19) says:

> Education is perhaps the most important branch of scientific technology. It deeply affects the lives of all of us. We can no longer allow the exigencies of a practical situation to suppress the tremendous improvements which are in reach. The practical situation must be changed.

The program under examination did change the practical situation, if only because it attempted both to take into account just how organisms learn and to capitalize upon that process. It tried to respond to Skinner's own questions:

1. What behavior is to be set up?
2. What reinforcers are at hand?
3. What responses are available in embarking upon a program of progressive approximations which will lead to the final form of the behavior?
4. How can reinforcements be most effectively scheduled to maintain the behavior in strength?

Results

Of 31 registrants, two never came to class, and three withdrew during the first week because of the course format. One other student stopped attending in the sixth week, probably because of illness in the

family. The remaining twenty-five completed the course: 13 received "A," 3 received "B," 1 received a grade of "C." 7 students elected to take "I." There were seven "W's," and here it must be mentioned that the college has dispenced with "F's."

Student course evaluations were almost unanimously favorable. One student objected to the point system, another disliked what he called the "so-called bonus activities," but another student suggested that the instructor get a pay raise, become head of the department, and have fewer classes to teach.

The standardized test which students took at the beginning and end of the course was the McGraw-Hill Basic Skills Writing Test. Since at the end of the quarter no alternate form of the test was available, students took the same form of the test at the beginning and at the end of the quarter. There are three parts: language mechanics (30 items), sentence patterns (26 items), and paragraph patterns (15 items). Whether an ability to recognize errors in composition can be equated withwriting proficiency itself is debatable. However, among twenty students who were tested and retested, there was no statistically significant mean increase in recognition of errors in language mechanics, but there was a mean increase in recognition of sentence patterns and paragraph patterns well beyond the .01 level of significance. Of interest is the fact that of those who attended regularly throughout the term, eighteen students were directly engaged in the BRIDGE, the developmental reading, writing, and study skills center.

Discussion

The behavior management program seemingly was a success: it is obviously difficult to establish that the treatment alone elicited the success. Measurement is indeed a problem with any classroom project, as Baer (1, p. 92) indicates:

> . . . . the evaluation of a study which purports to be an applied behavior analysis is somewhat different than the evaluation of a similar laboratory analysis. Obviously, the study must be applied, behavioral, and analytic; in addition, it should be technological, conceptually systematic, and effective, and it should display fome generality.

Insofar as the course did meet these criteria, it was successful; if I were to repeat the project, I would attempt to make the curriculum even more systematic, employ students to check exercises, and develop some five two-week "mini-courses," each worth one credit. The student then would not have to wait for ten weeks for academic reward as he does in the traditional class; he would have a great deal of individual attention; he could take any or all of the sub-courses even if he weren't interested in the regular composition sequence: and he could pace himself to better advantage. Ultimately, an almost infinite number of packaged courses could be made up for more relevant, effective classwork for students of remedial or developmental English.

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The study, begun at a college in Canada and continued at a community college in the U. S., concerned the efficacy of teaching a remedial English class according to the principles of behavioral psychology. Rhetorical proficiency was programmed into skill-steps, each of which the student had to complete to a minimum standard of achievement. The curriculum was governed by a point system, which afforded the student a minimum number of points for each skill-step completed, but allowed him to revise frequently in order to earn up to a maximum number of points for each task. Bonus activities augmented the point total. Students predicted their own grades, kept track of their own points, and charted their own progress. Behavior management proved effective.