Effective Teaching, Effective Living:

A Review of *Behavior Analysis for Effective Teaching* by Julie S. Vargas

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ABSTRACT

Elevated academic standards and expectations, along with competing contingencies outside the classroom, have given the teaching profession new and demanding challenges with which to contend. Although previous textbooks have addressed behavior analytic techniques specifically directed for the classroom environment, few have done so with comprehensive overviews of both instructional and basic behavioral strategies from a teacher's perspective. This review describes Julie Vargas' book in terms of its contribution to the educational field, as well as its impressive style for reaching its target audience.

Keywords: behavior analysis textbooks, education, instruction, classroom management

Addressing educational issues via the science and practice of behavior analysis has long been a topic of discussion and a source of great promise for school improvement (see Skinner, 1968). However, given the range of issues with which educators must deal, including improving academic achievement, teaching good social skills and citizenship, and preventing school violence, a question that often arises from such discussions is “Where do we begin?” Fortunately, our field has produced several excellent books to guide our efforts as we undertake the myriad of challenges that schools present to us, including instructional design (Greer, 2002; Johnson & Street, 2004; Moran & Malott, 2004), school, classroom and individual behavior management (Crone, Horner, & Hawken, 2003; Latham, 2002; Paine, Radicchi, Rosellini, Deutchman, & Darch, 1983; Rhode, Jenson, & Reavis, 1992), school violence (Walker, Ramsey, & Gresham, 2003), and school reform (Fredrick, Deitz, Bryceland, & Hummel, 2000). However, with regard to stand-alone textbooks that seek to simultaneously address pressing educational issues whilst comprehensively teaching behavior analysis basics, the marketplace has been relatively sparse. The notable exception is Alberto and

Troutman (2009), who are now in their 8th edition of *Applied Behavior Analysis for Teachers*. Fortunately, Vargas (2009) has provided *Behavior Analysis for Effective Teaching* as another essential text for those aiming to teach others about the potential of behavior analysis to improve education. In stark contrast to some textbooks which may appear to students as strings of tedious information or unrelated facts, Vargas speaks directly to her reader in a manner that is pertinent and personal. Her intimate style brings applicability far beyond the classroom and passion to her message: Behavior analysis is not just for effective teaching; it is for effective living.

In this review, we describe the organization of the book and discuss the content and unique contributions of each chapter to the practice of teaching and the field of education. Next, we suggest several potential audiences for the book, describe some areas that might be addressed more extensively in future editions, and point out additional important features that contribute to the book's utility and distinctiveness in the current textbook marketplace.

Overview of Book

Organized into four parts (*Science and the Art of Teaching, Planning for*

Improvement, The Design of Instruction, and Ethical Practices and Ultimate Goals), Vargas' book provides learning objectives at the beginning of each chapter with summaries and concept checks provided at each chapter's completion. In addition, a companion website offers sample projects with guidelines and task analyses ready for class distribution (<http://www.routledge.com/textbooks/9780415990080/>). Enhancements to the website are currently ongoing and include additional resources, such as supplementary concept checks and videos. These resources are currently available at www.ba4et.com.

Part I: Science and the Art of Teaching

If teaching, as Vargas so aptly defines it, “is the arrangement of contingencies that facilitate learning” (p. 9) and “must include the effect on student behavior” (p. 5), then she begins her lesson with Chapter 1 (“Adding Science to the Art of Teaching”). Without being overly technical, this chapter highlights how operant conditioning can be applied to educational settings, and is replete with engaging examples of how behavioral techniques can make not only our schools, but our world, more reinforcing places to be. Setting the tone for all 12 chapters, Vargas prompts her readers to

begin assessing the world around them: behaviors and contingencies at work. Perhaps more importantly, she turns the scope upon the readers themselves with the charge, “Whatever you do or fail to do affects student behavior” (p. 16). To better understand one’s impact or influence upon another’s behavior, the author states one must understand the science of and contingencies for behavior. Chapters 2 and 3 provide the information needed to undertake this challenge.

Chapter 2 (“Finding the ‘Causes’ of Behavior in Functional Relations”) addresses the importance of determining “real” (i.e., functional) causes for behavior. The author is quick to address the prevalent use of labels (e.g., Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), intelligence, laziness) or “mentalistic” constructs within the educational environment as faulty explanations for behavior. She further points out such labels are not only unproductive, but also detrimental to the development of effective interventions; that is, when prob-

allows the reader to get a firm handle on consequences prior to delving into the concept of antecedents. Given that it is difficult to understand the role of antecedents without understanding the effects of consequences, Vargas’ sequencing of topics may prove a useful teaching tool. Though the concepts presented in this chapter are standard fare for behavior analysis textbooks, a specific strength of Vargas’ approach is that each concept is presented with a solid example relevant to real-life problems teachers are likely to encounter. Further, she highlights how inappropriate use of consequences can potentially make things worse for a teacher (e.g., inadvertent reinforcement of problem behavior or negative side effects of aversive procedures).

Part II: Planning for Improvement

The second section of the textbook introduces the reader to more technical aspects of applied behavior analysis. Beginning with Chapter 4 (“Setting Goals to Improve Achievement”), the author explains the importance of goal selection and selecting an appropriate target behavior. Consistent with the book’s tone of “application beyond the classroom,” emphasis is placed upon selection of goals that will generalize and remain important for later life skills. A particular gem in Vargas’ recommendations regarding goal selection is that they be written such that their outcomes are clearly discernable to students. For example, a “time on task” goal would be more difficult to judge than one focusing on tasks completed correctly. Further, the latter would encourage students to “work smarter, not longer” (p. 67). The inclusion

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lematic behaviors are attributed to factors inside the person, they subsequently become out of the reach of the teacher. In contrast, when behavior is viewed as a product of the environment, the ability to control or affect needed change is placed back in the hands of the professional. These are important points for educators, who may be steeped in the tradition of looking for internal causes of behavior or lamenting the influence of more remote variables such as how a child is parented. Vargas’ points are made convincingly, in large part due to the number of real-world examples she provides of how a failure to identify environmental contingencies can prevent educators from effectively helping children.

With attention now directed toward the environment, Chapter 3 (“How We Learn”) includes descriptions of learning from both respondent and operant paradigms, with primary focus on the latter. Vargas begins with explaining the most basic learning unit, the two-term contingency (behavior-“postcedent” [i.e., consequence]). This is a departure from many behavior analytic texts in that the two-term contingency is often neglected in favor of describing the effects of both antecedents and consequences on behavior (i.e., the three-term contingency). However, Vargas’ focus the two-term contingency

of an entire chapter focusing on how to determine the right goals for a student, how to communicate those goals, and how to assess their attainment is an important topic that often is only cursorily addressed in behavior analytic texts (for some exceptions, see Alberto & Troutman, 2009; Sulzer-Azaroff & Mayer, 1991). In this day and age of individualized education plans and high-stakes testing, ensuring that teachers are well prepared to set appropriate goals (and support their students in reaching them) is critically important.

Chapter 5 (“Improving Sensitivity to Progress: Recording Methods”) presents a basic overview of some of the data collection methods available for monitoring student progress including frequency, rate, latency, duration, intensity, and permanent products. Again, the topics are not new for behavior analytic textbooks. However, Vargas manages to provide a context for the importance of measurement in the classroom that allows (indeed, compels) teachers to think of assessment beyond weekly tests and end-of-term exams. More importantly, she shows that frequent measurement of behavior (both academic and social) is not only important for adequate assessment but imperative for effective teaching. The author pointedly addresses the importance of using the most direct measure whenever possible,

and in doing so, provides an interesting discussion about direct versus indirect measures. She notes indirect measures, including standardized test scores and percentages (also used by behavior analysts), fail to provide sensitivity to changes in progress comparable to measures which include behavior as a function of time.

Whereas Chapter 5 tells readers how to collect data, Chapter 6 (“Making Progress Visible: Charting Methods”) shows how to properly display it. Although the introduction of precision teaching (PT), rate calculations, and celeration charting (Chapter 6) may appear slightly intimidating, Vargas does an admirable job of explaining the conventions of PT and convincing readers that standard celeration charts (SCCs) offer the most precise information regarding rate of student progress. However, teachers new to the concept may require additional shaping procedures to properly implement and analyze similar measures within their own classrooms. A potential obstacle in Vargas’ descriptions is the size of the sample figures. Given that the lines provided on a SCC appear to the untrained eye as somewhat small and difficult to see, the shrinking of these graphs may have inadvertently exacerbated its perceived difficulty of use (a downloadable version of the standard celebration chart is available at www.ba4et.com). However, the importance of assessing fluency as a measure of behavior across time is not lost. A particular strength of the discussion of charting is Vargas’ explanations of the shortcomings of conveying the occurrence of behavior as percentages. This brings new light to the analysis of data often presented in behavioral journals and calls into question whether such data are actually the most accurate representations of behavior.

Chapter 7 (“The Teacher as Researcher”) does more than provide a description of single-subject designs and brilliant tutorial on visual inspection; it emphasizes the importance of critical thinking and systematic evaluation of instruction. Given the recent requirement that schools use “evidence-based practices,” Vargas’ discussion could not be more timely or important. Compelling examples (including facilitated communication) convincingly illustrate the importance of scientific evaluation in identifying effective practices.

Part III: The Design of Instruction

In what could be described as the crux of the textbook, Chapters 8 (“Shaping Behavior: The Role of Postcedents”) and 9 (“Teaching Concepts and Understanding: The Role of Antecedents”) envisage the potential that behavior analytic strategies hold for improving education. Packed with information about practical, user-friendly strategies, Vargas imparts her reinforcing philosophy with every example. Chapter 8 introduces the concept of shaping with some of Skinner’s work with pigeons and dogs, but rapidly moves along to an impressive range of school-based examples. Especially worth noting, Vargas addresses the importance of timing not only in the shaping process, but with regard to reward dependency. The perceived bribing of students to behave as asked has always

been a highly debated topic within the school system and has often been used as a reason for abandoning reinforcement-based procedures (see Kohn, 1999). Vargas points out such issues are a problem of reinforcer delivery and do not represent appropriately applied positive reinforcement procedures. Vargas’ message is clear: If you’re using “lures” to get children to behave well, you are probably using reinforcement incorrectly. In addition to shaping, Vargas also provides a solid overview of prompting, including delivery methods, avoidance of prompt dependence, and the proper use of behavior chains.

Chapter 9 addresses antecedent-based strategies, with a specific focus on the format of academic instruction. Vargas concentrates particularly on the pitfalls of poorly designed instructional materials, which often allow students to get the right answers for the wrong reasons. She also provides straightforward and amazingly easy strategies for avoiding common instructional design errors. The second part of the chapter addresses necessary repertoires for “understanding” concepts, such as induction and discrimination. This part of the book is rather complex, as would be expected when one aims to provide a behavioral account of understanding.

Part III ends with Chapter 10 (“Verbal Behavior”), which focuses on communication and language skills. For the novice behavior analyst, some of the new vocabulary words such as mand, tact, and intraverbal may initially appear somewhat abstract. However, Vargas is quick to provide concrete examples of each and effectively transitions the focus back to applications within the classroom. Of the three types of verbal behavior, intraverbals are primarily highlighted due to the nature of most instruction methods. Unlike mands and tacts, intraverbals require no one-to-one correspondence (i.e., presence of the object being spoken of), which is consistent with the question and answer format frequently observed in classrooms. With regard to reading comprehension, reading fluency, and creative writing, Vargas suggests less emphasis be placed on the topography of the behavior (i.e., what it looks like) and more attention paid to the content of the behavior (i.e., meaning). Given that school teachers and administrators are often reinforced for focusing primarily on the outcomes of high-stakes tests, this advice might be difficult to heed. However, Vargas’ account provides practical recommendations that may perhaps get them glancing in a different direction.

Part IV: Ethical Practices and Ultimate Goals

The final two chapters of the book, Chapter 11 (“Punishment and Why to Avoid It”) and Chapter 12 (“Beyond Testing: Reaching the Ultimate Goals of Education”), solidify the author’s vision of the application and success of behavior analytic procedures beyond the classroom environment. Chapter 11 begins with an examination of why punishment procedures are so prevalent within our educational system, as well as society at large. Quite effectively, Vargas shows the reader that, “Punishment always reveals lack of control” (p. 290). Differential Reinforcement of Alternative Behavior

(DRA), Differential Reinforcement of Incompatible Behavior (DRI), Differential Reinforcement of Other Behavior (DRO), taking preventative action (e.g., positive statement of rules, using bonuses rather than fines), and the use of positive behavior support (PBS) are provided as alternatives that help avoid the dangers of an overreliance on punishment.

With the final chapter (“Beyond Testing: Reaching the Ultimate Goals of Education”), Vargas relates many of the concepts first introduced by Skinner (1971) in *Beyond Freedom and Dignity* to the classroom environment, but in a manner intended for teachers. One of her more notable points is that many student qualities attributed to intrinsic factors are really the result of environmental conditioning. For teachers who continue to wait for failing and poorly behaved students to “want” to do the right thing, Vargas’ discussion potentially could serve as a powerful wake-up call. However, Vargas is quick to emphasize the significance of using “natural” consequences to facilitate behavior maintenance (as opposed to teacher-provided consequences) which shows that she understands the prevalent belief in education that students need to be “responsible” for their own behavior. Further, such contingencies are essential if students are to develop skills that will be meaningful beyond those required solely for school-based testing. This, according to Vargas, should be the purpose of education. The responsibility for building these skills, however, inevitably falls on the teacher.

Who Should Read This Book?

University professors and behavior analytic trainers seeking a text that will teach basic behavior analytic principles within the context of addressing common concerns that inevitably arise in the classroom will find much to admire in Vargas’ book. Her use of extensive examples from both general and special education make concepts understandable, approachable, and highly relevant. Further, her underlying focus on the use of non-aversive procedures and teaching for generalization are indeed important messages for today’s educators.

For those experienced practitioners working in school settings, the book is likely to be an invaluable resource for refining and training education-specific skills in entry-level behavior analysts. Although some undergraduate and graduate programs teach behavior analysis skills within the context of specific settings or populations (e.g., organizational behavior management, early intervention for children with autism), other programs teach principles and skills within a more generalized context. Therefore, novice behavior analysts may have a solid knowledge of the science and technology of behavior, but have very little experience applying that knowledge in schools. Further, they might not have been exposed to strategies and interventions that are used almost exclusively in educational settings (e.g., precision teaching, guided notes, direct instruction). These practitioners will undoubtedly find Vargas’ book useful in illuminating important educational issues and how

behavior analysis can be used to effectively address them.

Although Vargas’ intended audience is clearly educators, her ability to present the science and practice of behavior analysis in a clear and user-friendly manner also renders the book useful to a range of other audiences. Practitioners across a variety of settings sometimes struggle with explaining behavioral principles without resorting to jargon or technical explanations. Further, they often need to “sell” their ideas to people who have very little understanding of our science or harbor misconceptions about behavior analysis as a form of bribery or aversive control (see Kohn, 1999). Using Vargas’ text as a model, practitioners can hone their public relations skills by imitating the author’s style of presenting complex topics in an approachable and positive style. Or better yet, they can recommend particular chapters to co-workers and/or employees, and will be guaranteed that the readings have been written in such a way as to be easily understandable and practical.

A Critical Look at the Content

Unlike Alberto and Troutman (2009), who have written a highly commendable book about applying behavior analysis to education, Vargas has written a book in which education is applied to behavior analysis. In other words, Vargas has taken her considerable experience as a teacher and written a book that shows how educational issues can be addressed via the science of human behavior. Therefore, her agenda appears not so much to teach every basic behavior analytic principle with educational examples, but rather to focus upon the most important behavior analytic principles needed to address the most pressing educational problems. Therefore, extensive explanations of some principles and procedures (e.g., differential reinforcement, schedules of reinforcement) are not as comprehensive as in other introductory behavior analysis texts. On the one hand, we see this not as a limitation, but rather as a difference in focus that will allow educators to concentrate on the concepts and skills most relevant to them. On the other hand, some of these topics are important to school-based practice, in addition to being commonly used in educational settings. Therefore, a more comprehensive review of some topics could strengthen the usefulness of the book. For example, functional behavior assessments have become more common in schools, particularly with regard to meeting the mandates of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). Although it is unlikely that teachers would be called upon to conduct such assessments independently, they might well be involved in the process (Moore et al., 2002; Sasso et al., 1992; Wallace, Doney, Mintz-Resudek, and Tarbox, 2004). Further, a sound understanding of the benefits of functional assessment prior to intervention, along with some practical strategies for conducting such assessments, would likely be helpful to teachers who must routinely devise strategies for dealing with challenging behaviors in their classrooms. Although Vargas addresses these issues, the book could be strengthened by a more

comprehensive review of the rationale and strategies associated with functional behavior assessments.

Another area that might benefit from additional coverage is self-management. In our experience, teachers often want interventions that put the “responsibility” of behavior change on the student. In these instances, self-management interventions often fare well with regard to treatment acceptability, and more importantly, can be highly effective strategies for changing behavior (Mithaug & Mithaug, 2003; Olympia, Sheridan, Jenson, & Andrews, 1994; Peterson, Young, Salzberg, West, & Hill, 2006). In a related vein, teachers often want to know how long they must “do” an intervention before the problem is fixed. These questions often can be at least partially answered by addressing the issues of fading and schedule thinning. Unfortunately, Vargas discusses fading only within the context of programmed instruction. The importance of thinning is presented in Vargas’ coverage of reinforcement schedules, but a more pointed discussion would perhaps better demonstrate the importance of this essential feature of intervention implementation and maintenance.

Throughout the book and particularly in Chapter 11, Vargas makes clear her stance that punishment should be avoided and that educators should place more focus on positive procedures. Most people who have worked in schools (or indeed, have been to school) have seen how aversive some classrooms can be. Shouting at students, threatening or embarrassing them, and removing privileges are tactics that we personally have seen used in many of the classrooms in which we have worked. Therefore, we agree wholeheartedly that students need less aversive contingencies and more positive ones. However, it is impossible to ignore the empirical evidence demonstrating that punishment procedures can sometimes enhance the effectiveness of other procedures, especially if problem behaviors are severe (e.g., Hagopian, Fisher, Sullivan, Acquistio, & LeBlanc, 1998). Given that it is unlikely that schools will (or should) abandon punishment altogether, it would be helpful to provide some guidelines for situations that might warrant punishment, as well as specific guidelines for its ethical use.

Additional Noteworthy Features

A notable feature of the book was the inclusion of a range of topics that might not typically appear in an introductory behavior analysis text, including precision teaching, teaching by acoustical guidance (TAG), equivalence relations, and verbal behavior, just to name a few. These topics are clearly relevant to educational improvement, and Vargas should be lauded for tackling them. As we indicated before, those knowledgeable about behavior analysis but new to both its established and cutting edge applications to

educational issues, would do well to read this book. However, with regard to those new to behavior analysis, which appear to be the book’s target audience, we wondered whether inclusion of some of the more complex topics might have affected the book’s value as a practical teaching and learning tool for these readers. Some chapters presented such a wealth of information that one might become overwhelmed rather than enlightened, particularly because it was not always immediately clear how certain topics fit with the overall objectives of the chapter.

One challenge Vargas must have faced when writing the book is balancing her expansive knowledge of the experimental analysis of behavior with her equally impressive repertoire of applying behavior analysis in the classroom. Further, it is understandable that Vargas would want to show the link between experimental and applied analyses, as this is a very *important* link. However, explanations of Skinner’s work with animals sometimes slowed the book’s momentum and detracted from its overall tone of action and practicality. Given the intended audience, Vargas is at her best when providing real world examples and linking these back to behavioral principles and everyday practice.

In addition to her conversational and engaging writing style, one factor that contributed to the ongoing flow of the book was the *exclusion* of APA-style citations. Rather, Vargas opted for end-notes for each chapter. Though not the typical format of behavior analytic texts, this approach to referencing is more likely to be viewed as user-friendly to pre-service teachers and practicing educators. However, in a time when “evidence-based practice” is an important educational buzzword, a list of recommended readings at the end of each chapter or on the companion website might prove helpful to educators. These need not be references from the text, but rather good, straightforward examples of research supporting the principles and procedures covered in each chapter.

Another helpful feature of the book was the inclusion of a comprehensive glossary of terms. As is the main text of the book, the glossary is written in easily understandable language and often includes examples to augment the definitions. Glossaries do not always appear in behavior analysis textbooks, but in our experience, students find them very useful. In addition, Vargas' glossary provides even more exemplars for explaining behavior analytic concepts in easily accessible terms.

Concluding Comments

At times, *Behavior Analysis for Effective Teaching* (2009) appears less like a textbook and more like a social commentary impelled to improve the instructional methods delivered within our educational systems. In a time when teachers may feel their behaviors are largely controlled by federal legislation and school policy, Vargas reminds them that they still wield an enormous amount of power to change students' lives. As she so aptly notes, "Whether planned or unplanned, whether beneficial or not, the way student behavior changes as a result of their time with you is what you have taught them" (p. 16). As a former elementary school teacher and university professor, Vargas knows that the majority of reinforcement for teaching is derived from observing one's students progress and succeed. Unfortunately, many teachers are unlikely to access these reinforcers because of their lack of understanding of human behavior and their reliance on faulty instructional strategies. However, using Vargas' book as a guide, educators will undoubtedly begin operating on denser schedules of reinforcement.

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Author Notes

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