Some Thoughts on Shaping Future Behavior Analysts: a Call to Stay True to Our Roots

Carol Pilgrim¹

Published online: 26 February 2018

© Association for Behavior Analysis International 2018

I applaud *Behavior Analysis in Practice* for targeting such a significant topic in this special issue, and at such a critical juncture. Indeed, in addition to the baseline and ongoing factors that make planning for our future essential, a number of variables have coalesced to make consideration of educating behavior analysts especially relevant today. Among them, new programs in behavior analysis are on the rise nationally and internationally, especially at the master's level, even while some storied training sites are disappearing, especially at the Ph.D. level, all while the demand for well-trained practitioners of behavior analysts is greater than ever. Pressures to produce practitioners quickly to meet these demands sometimes seem at odds with those from accreditation requirements (both for individuals and for programs) to encompass more in our training, which can also be at odds with pressure from our universities to limit hours, increase curriculum flexibility, and accommodate larger numbers of students. Competing contingencies are also in effect for the relative emphases placed on establishing specific job-relevant technological skills versus a broader conceptual sophistication in behavior analysis. At the risk of sounding overly dramatic, it might be argued that there has never been a more opportune or a more pressing set of circumstances in which to focus the field's attentions on training in behavior analysis. We are currently at a crossroads with our training programs as we seek to serve many masters, and the directions we take will undoubtedly have a profound impact on ways in which the discipline of behavior analysis develops over the next generations. But no pressure!

In this brief commentary, I will outline my own guiding principle when it comes to educating behavior analysts—the

outcome, to be sure, of my personal experiences as an undergraduate and graduate student, and now as a teacher for many years at both the undergraduate and graduate levels. It is not a new principle, and it is most definitely not original with me but, for me, it provides a cohesive approach to all levels of behavior-analytic training, from mentoring an individual student, to teaching a course, to planning a curriculum, to designing a program. The principle stems from the fact that “to be” a behavior analyst entails a complex and inter-related repertoire sometimes described as a “world view”—one that is brought to bear continuously, not just when performing specific employment responsibilities. This repertoire necessarily includes verbal and nonverbal skills in basic or experimental behavior analysis, applied behavior analysis, and conceptual behavior analysis—skills at a level of proficiency that can only be created by direct interaction with the relevant contingencies supplied by the subject matter, as opposed to those engendered through rule-governance alone. My guiding principle then is to strive to arrange the conditions that can best shape a complete and life-long behavior analyst, a radical behaviorist in the true sense of thoroughgoing (as opposed to, for example, a situation-specific purveyor of behavioral techniques). Whether the student's stated goals are to become an applied behavior analyst, a practicing BCBA, a research scientist, a scholar, or simply to pick up an undergraduate minor, my goal is to shape a behavior analyst—period, no qualifiers—to the fullest extent possible, in the time that I have with that student.

There is a role for specialized training, to be sure, in any of the domains outlined above. The present point, however, is that specialization is of limited benefit, to either the student or the field, in the absence of a well-established foundational repertoire. The conceptual and philosophical groundings of behavior analysis and their development, the practices and findings of the experimental laboratory analysis of both animal and human behavior, and the approaches and lessons learned from the applied analysis of behavior—none can receive short shrift in our training efforts. Mastery in each of

✉ Carol Pilgrim
pilgrimc@uncw.edu

¹ Department of Psychology, University of North Carolina
Wilmington, 601 S. College Rd., Wilmington, NC 28403, USA

these domains is best shaped by bona fide content experts and includes skills well beyond those necessary to pass a multiple-choice exam. Effective training provides students with repeated experience in addressing thorny conceptual issues, both in writing and orally, in posing research questions based on literature review, in planning and implementing experimental procedures and designs in lab and in field settings, in collecting data and interpreting them with respect to practical and theoretical matters, all within a behavior-analytic framework.

Further, and possibly most important as a shaping target, integration across conceptual, experimental, and applied domains must be consistently emphasized, modeled, and reinforced. Again, for the future of our students and our field, the component domains cannot be taught optimally, nor can their contributions be maximized, as isolated enterprises. The philosophical tenets of behaviorism are operationalized in the topics and approaches of our laboratory-, applied-, and practice-efforts, and in how we talk about them and the data they generate. These efforts, in turn, inform subsequent conceptual treatments. Functional relations uncovered in the lab give rise to increasingly effective applied and practice procedures, even as applied work provides a rich source of important new questions and directions in need of investigation under careful experimental control. Sound training in behavior analysis should produce students who can identify these symbiotic inter-relationships, expand on them, and go on to develop

new ones, no matter the employment context. Indeed, issues of practical control have long served as the bottom line in behavior analysis, across our various domains. To borrow from our conceptual canon: “What we call the scientific conception of a thing is not passive contemplation. When we have discovered the laws which govern a part of the world about us, we are then ready to deal effectively with that part of the world.” (Skinner, 1953; p 13).

I’d like to be clear on this point. My argument is not intended as just another pitch for “translational” behavior analysis. Rather, it is the combination of domains at issue here and the essential interplay between them that defines behavior analysis. This powerful mix is the very source of strength behind what we do (or at least that which we do effectively). It follows then that educating our students would necessarily require a commitment of time and resources sufficient to shape a full behavior-analytic repertoire. To the extent that we allow or even encourage specialization at the expense of training fundamentals, we will undermine that strength, fail to serve our students well, and miss this critical opportunity to further the health and longevity of behavior analysis.

Reference

- Skinner, B. F. (1953). *Science and human behavior*. New York: The Macmillan Company.