True Confessions of a Narrator: Using Narrative in Textbook Writing, or It's Gotta Be Fun or Else It Won't Be Fun

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Narrative? What is that? According to Google, this is just a ritzy-titzy word for *story*. I checked my favorite dictionary and found a similar definition. What I didn't find was any indication that *narrative* could be fun. Yet this is precisely what I have learned over the course of some 50 years of presenting behavior analysis to students.

Flashback to 1967: Appleton-Century-Crofts asked Don Whaley and me to write a follow up on Keller and Schoenfeld's *Principles of Psychology* (1950; aka *K&S*). That was a monstrously big-honor deal for me because *K&S* was the book that, back in 1955, had completely turned my life around, turning me on to psychology and behavior analysis, when I was just a little sophomore at Indiana University, in the Introductory Psychology class of Jim Dinsmoor (who had been a protégé of Keller and Schoenfeld's.) And it was also a big deal because Appleton-Century-Crofts was the prestigious publisher of most of the few behavior analysis books existing at that time, mainly Skinner's.

The book was called *Elementary Principles of Behavior*, and over the years, due to turbulence in the publishing industry, various editions of the book (now called simply *Principles of Behavior*, and featuring several different coauthors) came out under the respective banners of Prentice-Hall, Pearson, and finally Psychology Press/Routledge/Taylor & Francis publishers. There are now seven editions, going on eight. What follows are some recollections and observations prompted by the book.

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Background for *Principles of Behavior*

In retrospect, across those many editions, and other publications that I'll mention, it turns out I've been storytelling, I mean writing narratives. I don't know of any previous psychology books before then that had used a narrative format. I certainly hadn't done narrating before then, and I'm not sure how we got started with it, but Don had double majored in English and psychology as an undergrad at Indiana University; so, he's probably the one who got us heading down the story-telling path.

What Don and I were trying to do with our storytelling was to attract young students to behavior analysis, and that's what I've been trying to do for the last 50 years. Of course, I'm happy to get sophisticated, older students turned on to our field as well. We need as many as we can get, if we're going to make even a dent in saving the world with behavior analysis.

Don and I wanted to make learning about behavior analysis as fun (i.e., reinforcing) and as easy (i.e., as low-response cost) as possible, which is quite a challenge given that every textbook has multiple audiences. In particular, the needs and interests of instructors who adopt books don't always align with those of students who read them. For example, when Maria Malott and I started working on the second edition, for of student reading we used the word *reward* rather than *reinforcer*. When we sent an opening chapter to a few colleagues for feedback, they were outraged. They'd refuse to adopt our book, they said, if we used *reward*. We recognized that books that go unadopted by instructors are books that students don't read, and what good is a book unread? So, we stuck with *reinforcer*.

But the lure of reducing reader response cost is a strong one, and in recent editions, my coauthors and I have explored such contrivances as using *escape* in lieu of the oxymoronic *negative reinforcement* (a nomenclature even Skinner later regretted) and simply *punishment/penalty* instead of *positive punishment/negative punishment*. This has worked well, up to a point. Our students master the vocabulary easily, enjoy the learning process, and show evidence of being able to apply the relevant concepts. But when they move on to settings where more conventional jargon is employed (e.g., graduate programs or jobs) they are understandably confused about what *negative reinforcement* and *positive punishment* mean. Moreover, reviewers have continued to tell us they would not use the book if we didn't revert back to standard jargon. And what good is a book unread? So now, for the upcoming edition, Kelly Kohler and I are trying to figure out how to introduce key concepts using both obvious English and our field's beloved jargon, and then fade out the obvious English. The details of this process are daunting, though, because our students need to be bilingual. They need to be able to discuss behavior analysis effectively with both experts and consumers, and it's unlikely that a single vocabulary will serve both purposes.

Another reviewer-driven challenge concerns research methodology. This isn't terribly popular with students, who typically come to our field driven to help people, but reviewers see research as the backbone of the field and insist on covering it. Understanding that students who are turned off by a too-early immersion in that stuff, we tried to gradually fade in research methods across our storytelling chapters. Once we'd convinced students that behavior analysis was the coolest thing going, we'd hit them with a heavy methodology chapter. But, again,

our reviewers saw it differently: Several wanted research methods early on, so their students could start little research projects near the beginning of their introduction to behavior analysis. And what good is a book unread? So, we're including methods foundations early in the book.

In short, we'll slightly compromise the nature and structure of our book, if that will increase its adoptions and allow more students to read the book, and, therefore, find behavior analysis reinforcing. But what we don't compromise is a rigorous, intellectually consistent presentation of the concepts and principles of behavior analysis. Heart-warming narrative is not the book's purpose; it is a means to an end.

In the Beginning: The *Orange Book*

The preceding brings you up to the present. Now let me tell you a bit more about where we've been. Long before there the famous “White Book” (Cooper, Heron, & Heward, 2007), there was the infamous “Orange Book” (Whaley & Malott, 1968). The *Orange Book* was a preliminary edition of *Elementary Principles of Behavior*. Back then, Roger Ulrich had set up the Introductory Psychology course at Western Michigan's University (WMU) to be an introduction to behavior analysis. Don and I wanted to use our book in that course, both to pilot test it and to start getting the word out about behavior analysis to 1,000 freshmen a semester. To produce our book for the course we created a publishing company, BehaviorDelia—a play on “psychedelic,” which was a fashionable word of that era. Faithful to our psychedelic pretensions, WMU artists Patience Vaughan and Shirley Bale did excellent psychedelic lettering for the cover (first cover

Fig. 1 Covers of the first seven “editions” of (*Elementary*) *Principles of Behavior* and its precursor edition (the “Orange Book,” top, left)

Fig. 2 Example "behaviordelic" chapter titles by Patience Vaughan and Shirley Bale in the preliminary edition of *Elementary Principles of Behavior* ("Orange Book")

in Fig. 1) and chapter titles (e.g., Fig. 2). (I miss those good old days with their good old psychedelic ambience.) An orange cover gave the book its nickname.

Word of the *Orange Book* spread quickly beyond WMU; and during the three years of its production, the book was used across the United States. And still occasionally today an old colleague will hobble up to me and say, "Remember the *Orange Book*? That's the book that turned me on to behavior analysis!" And I hobble away with a warmed heart.

A psychedelic vibe was only part of our attempt to make the book connect with students. We included a few cool cartoons by Dave Thorne (e.g., Fig. 3), a former colleague at Denison University; a bunch of wonderful photos¹ of Marion and Keller Breland working with their animals at Animal Behavior Enterprises; and some topical poems by Ernie Ponicki, a psychology undergraduate and brilliant hippie. All of this was to make reading or even just looking at our book as visually, humorously, and poetically reinforcing as possible.

By the time we got around to the second edition of *Elementary Principles of Behavior*, psychedelia had gone out of style, so our then-publisher, Prentice Hall, blanded down our cover and graphics (Fig. 1). Subsequent editions used somewhat more interesting art (Fig. 1), but our seventh edition features an extra-bland schematic of a rat (Fig. 1). Oh, how I miss the good old days! But a critical point is that the marketing folks at publishing houses know what they are doing. Most of today's

¹ An aside about textbook photos. The norm is for books to feature gratuitous, boring, stock photos, perhaps as a condescension to those dumb students who are forced to read the book. Such books are part of what drove me away from traditional psychology courses in my youth, and they continue to do nothing to make a subject reinforcing. Photos, if they are included at all, should advance or complement the book's narrative, not simply break up large blocks of text. My examination of recent textbooks suggests that photos are becoming less gratuitous, but most still feel mildly irritating.

Fig. 3 Sample of the Dave Thomes cartoons in the preliminary and first editions of *Elementary Principles of Behavior*

students prefer the bland rat schematic to the previous pieces of art. And if the book is for students, it should connect with their tastes and interests, not those of their aging professor.

BehaviorDelia

Our company, BehaviorDelia, did much more than get out the *Orange Book*. Soon after came *Contingency Management in Education & Other Equally Exciting Places* (Malott, 1971), produced with artistic and literary help from Pat Hartlep, Stuart Hartlep, Patience Vaughan, and Jim Smith. This was the world's first behavior-analytic comic book, and to my knowledge still the only one. It features Captain Contingency Management (Con Man), BehaviorMan, and of course, BehaviorWoman (Figs. 4 and 5). In 1973, BehaviorDelia came out with a little book of narratives called *Humanistic*

Behaviorism and Social Psychology (Fig. 4). Featuring weirdly cool art by Terry Boothman, the book was, consistent with its era, full of stories of drugs, booze, sex, love, marriage conflicts, and the search for Walden Two. These volumes were quite popular with students.²

Because of this student enthusiasm, BehaviorDelia was successful enough to spawn other writing opportunities. As I have noted, *Elementary Principles* has been carried by mainstream publishers for decades now, and in the early 1970s, the publishing company Harper & Row gave Don and me a wonderful opportunity: They asked us to write a general psychology text, with standard topics, but from a behavior-analytic perspective. Better yet, they wanted our narrative style and hired my favorite underground comic artist, Ed Badajos, to move from California to Kalamazoo and spend a year lavishly illustrating our book with the best underground comics ever to be found in an intro text! (Fig. 4). In this book, we became even more narrative-driven; we integrated a set of fictional college students throughout the text. And in my opinion, it really worked. The fiction, art, narration, and behavior-analytic view of mainstream psychology topics—it all came together beautifully. *Psychology* (Malott & Whaley, 1976) may be the accomplishment of which I'm most proud. But it was a commercial flop, which I think says more about instructors' interest in adopting a nontraditional text than it does about how students reacted to our book.

Whatever its accomplishments, BehaviorDelia never made any money. We always spent more on production and publishing than we made through sales, but for a time sales of *Elementary Principles* subsidized our other projects. Eventually the used textbook market swallowed up our profit and we closed Behaviordelia down. Fun while it lasted.

One moral of Behaviordelia is that if you're not really a business person, stick with the university. To really have impact in the publishing world you need a professional sales force like the big publishers have. No matter how well you tell a story, a book that no one sees is a book that no one reads. And Behaviordelia showed that story telling works with the readers you do have. And there is a positive postscript. In 2012, graduate student and tech junkie Erick Marmolejo convinced me that with the digital revolution and print-on-demand publishing we could help BehaviorDelia rise from the ashes. Although there have been no new projects, you can now get several BehaviorDelia reprints (including *Psychology*, whose copyright was returned to Behaviordelia; see Fig. 4) at <http://www.lulu.com/spotlight/dickmalott>.

Other Media

Way back before PowerPoints were a glimmer in Bill Gates's eye, there was a thing called a *Kodak Carousel slide projector*. Back in the very early 1970s, when *digital* was an esoteric word that probably had something to do with fingers, I started taking the narrative spirit on the road with BehaviorDelia-inspired slide shows. I had seven slide

² Action Editor's note: This is likely not an exaggeration. At a recent convention poster session, I let slip that I had copies of these volumes with which I was willing to part. I instantly understood how a lactating dog with too many puppies feels. Many people left that session disappointed.

Fig. 4 Covers of three BehaviorDelia publications

projectors, projecting images on five surfaces (rarely actually screens, usually just bare walls), accompanied by rock and roll or jazz and blues. As technology has evolved so have the shows, and today I use just a single PowerPoint projector and a single screen. WMU's Jim Smith helped with some of the early photography, and a long-ago undergraduate by the name of Jerry Shook used his considerable, incipient behavior-systems-analysis skills to produce one of our first slide shows. Most recently, doctoral student Jason Otto created several workshows consisting of PowerPoints merged with music and Skinner's approach to programmed instruction. In teaching, we use them to supplement some of the more difficult *Principles of Behavior* chapters. Several of those Workshows are available for viewing on DickMalott.com.

Fig. 5 Excerpt from *Captain Contingency Management* (Episode #1, *I've Got Blisters on My Soul & Other Equally Exciting Places*)

Scientific Proof that Narrative's Cool

Anonymous social validity data play a major role in our design of all components of our instructional system (i.e., courses), including our textbooks, including *Principles of Behavior* as we evolve from edition to edition. Overall, we get positive evaluations (Table 1). For example, 70% students said that they had read nearly all of the book. Is that good or bad? I'm not sure, but what I find shocking is that, in open-ended comments, several students said that this was the *only* college textbook they'd read from cover to cover. And even more shocking, in nonanonymous discussions with graduate students, almost all said they read the whole thing and that it was also the only course where they'd ever read the whole text. Now, in all cases students suggested that the reason for their devotion to *Principles of Behavior* was because of how engaging it was, how reinforcing it was to read—in essence, a testimony to narrative. Interpreting these comments is tricky because there is a confound: In most cases this was the only course students had ever had where a chapter was assigned for each class meeting, a quiz was given over that chapter, and the cumulative quiz scores determined their course grade. Perhaps these factors alone account for student engagement, but I'm not going to run a control condition with a course that lacks these features (I'm pretty sure I know what the grim results would be).

What we do know is that when asked directly students indicated, in various ways, that they found the book to provide a good experience (Table 1). When asked in open-ended questions about the best features of the book, students most commonly mentioned the examples, the stories, the real-life people, the humor, and the entertainment. Rarely did they mention features, like definitions and diagrams, that dominate most textbooks. Overall, more than three-quarters of the students said they found the book more engaging and informative than others college textbooks they had been assigned.

Concerning our major goal—attracting bright students into behavior analysis—we found that the majority of students were already committed to psychology as a major or minor when enrolling in the course. Of the remainder, we succeeded in converting about a third, and we apparently drove away a few students as well. In coming semesters, we'll dig deeper into why we turned off a few, because even a few good minds are too precious to waste. The impressions of one student may be instructive: "Also thought that the book belittled other psychology fields. This was annoying, and took away from the class. . . . I feel all the slander should be taken out of the book. Dr. Malott has a vendetta; his students do not." So, should we look for ways to continue the "vendetta" (the argument that behavior analysis is better) without angering a few students? Perhaps delete the offending content? Or simply get comfortable with sacrificing a few precious minds in order to get the message across to the majority? One way or another, a story is for its listeners, and its success is measured in how they are changed by it. Feedback like this shows that no story is ever quite in final form.

Conclusions

As a teacher and author, I have found narrative (storytelling) to be fun to do. More important, I have found that it makes behavior analysis fun for students, both experienced graduate students and beginning undergraduate students, when they are most

Table 1. Anonymous responses of 157 students to a survey about Principles of Behavior. Due to rounding, totals for a given item may not be exactly 100%

Item	%
What percentage of the book did you read?	
0–25	6
26–50	6
51–75	16
76–100	68
more than 100%	4
How entertaining was the book?	
Love it; really fun	30
Moderately entertaining	59
Put me to sleep	6
Never read it	5
How much did you enjoy the humor in the book?	
Loved it; really fun	44
Moderately fun	46
What humor?	8
The humor was offensive and condescending	3
How hokey and/or inappropriate are the book's expressions like "dumbass award," and "I'm also a very cool behavior analyst?"	
Love them; really fun	53
Moderately fun	42
The writer's attempt to be cool is a complete failure and abuses the intelligence of us students	6
Did you like the use of different characters throughout the book?	
Yes	70
No	4
No opinion	26
How does this textbook compare to other textbooks that you have read?	
Much less engaging/informative	2
Somewhat less engaging/informative	6
About as engaging/informative	14
Somewhat more engaging/informative	20
Much more engaging/informative	58
Did this book influence you to become a psychology major or minor?	
Yes	12
No	20
It convinced me NOT to be a psychology major or minor	4
I was already a psychology major or minor	63

likely to make decisions about whether or not to learn more about our field. When presented in a way that is fun to digest, behavior analysis can significantly contribute to saving the world. When presented in a way that is uninteresting or unpleasant, it

becomes, metaphorically speaking, a book that nobody reads. Hineline (2018) is right to suggest that story telling can advance the status of behavior analysis with the general public. But in textbook authoring, I've found that telling an effective story is hard work that unfolds across time and iterations; and given the importance of communicating effectively with students, I encourage others to consider a narrative approach in writing textbooks.

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