Describing the Development of a Developmental Psychologist: An Alternative Term Paper Assignment

Kathleen M. Galotti
Carleton College

Each student taking a sophomore/junior level course in developmental psychology is asked to choose a different developmental psychologist and to read as much of that person's published work as is feasible. Students are encouraged to select articles that range over different research areas and different years of publication. They then write a paper describing the target psychologist's work, focusing on the question, "How has this person's work developed?" The assignment is intended to address a number of goals, including the following: (a) to acquaint students with primary literature in developmental psychology, (b) to provoke critical thinking about the concept of development, and (c) to recognize that the progress of an academic career is seldom linear or preordained. Student reaction and implementation suggestions are discussed.

A sophomore/junior level course in psychology typically attracts some students who have little background in psychology beyond the introductory course or sequence. The assignment described in this article grew out of my experience in developmental psychology with freshman and sophomore students who lacked the skills necessary to circumscribe a workable topic when asked to "write a term paper on any topic of your choosing." In addition, I wanted students to define and refine their own conceptions of development and see that entities other than infants and children (e.g., careers) also undergo development.

Introductory psychology is a prerequisite for the course for which this project was designed. It covers development from the prenatal period through adolescence. The assignment is made the first week of a 10-week term and is due during the eighth week. The initial assignment sheet includes some suggestions for psychologists whose work would be appropriate, with the suggestions grouped by the general area (social or cognitive) and the period of development (infancy, preschool, middle childhood, or adolescence) with which the psychologist is typically associated. Students are invited to consider other psychologists not on the list, but to check on the local availability of appropriate published work.

Students prepare a paper based on the work of a recently or currently active developmental psychologist. The "development" that students need to come to terms with is twofold: (a) some aspect of development, as their target psychologist describes it; and (b) the development of their target psychologist's ideas and research program. Students are also required to assess the reaction of other psychologists to the work of their target person. From their exploration of their target person's work and other's reactions,

students evaluate their target person's contribution to the field. Hence, the assignment forces students to move beyond a simple enumeration of publications to a more reflective evaluation of what constitutes development and how to assess a contributor's impact on the field.

Students have 1 week from the time the assignment is given to submit requests for a target developmental psychologist. During the second week, each student is assigned a different target. I make sure that all targets are reasonable ones and that each student has a different target. Students are then directed to *Psychological Abstracts* to prepare a list of their target psychologist's published journal articles. By the third week, students submit a bibliography of their target person's published journal articles together with a list of books, chapters in edited volumes, or other materials, if they plan to include them. Students select 7 to 12 published works, covering a range of years and topics, which are available in our library or a neighboring one. Students indicate in their bibliographies which sources will contribute to the final paper and provide some justification for the selection. This bibliography encourages students to begin working early in the term and to make some organizational decisions. It also provides me with information to make recommendations and suggest supplementary material.

After reading the collection of articles by the target person, students are asked to find two or three reaction pieces to their person's work. Students are advised to use the *Science Citation Index* and *Social Science Citation Index* to locate sources. In the ideal case, these reaction pieces consist of published replies directly addressing some aspect of the target person's work. Often no such pieces exist or are readily available. In those cases, students are advised to choose articles written by other psychologists working in the same area, to compare the approaches adopted by the other psychologists to that of the target psychologist, and to evaluate the work's standing in the field.

This assignment was developed to meet several goals. Listed from specific to general, these are: (a) to teach beginning psychology majors to use bibliographic resources, such as *Psychological Abstracts* and the *Science* or *Social Science Citation Index*, and to offer students practice in conducting literature searches; (b) to introduce students to primary literature in the field; (c) to have students gain knowledge of an area of developmental psychology of their choosing; (d) to offer students practice in recognizing and reconciling different points of view within an area of research; (e) to provoke students to think critically as they construct definitions of *development*, distinguishing between this concept and related ones, such as change, growth, expansion, or focusing; and (f) to demonstrate that the progress of an academic career is seldom linear or inevitable.

The assignment's relation to the first four goals is self-evident, so I discuss the latter two. Students start to find the assignment a real challenge after they complete the reading and begin organizing their papers. Many confront a stumbling block at this point: There is much more than one could say than will fit into a paper of reasonable length. Thus, some organizing principles must be discovered or invented. My suggestion to students undergoing this uncertainty is to question their own definitions of development and to sketch out ways in which their definitions apply to

the work of their target psychologist. Those sketches often precipitate a redefinition of development; they also help guide the student in deciding what material to highlight and what themes to use in organizing the other material.

The last goal, demonstrating the nonlinearity of most careers, has apparently struck an important chord for some students, especially those seeking academic careers. They report finding it both liberating and exhilarating to find that some prominent developmental psychologist started a career in an area of research often very different from the one in which prominence was eventually achieved. This finding, students suggested, makes it easier to contemplate one's own prospective career: If renowned Psychologist X had no well-marked road map to begin a career, maybe the student, lacking a detailed plan for the next 20 years, could also someday establish a significant research program.

Student reaction to the assignment has been positive since its inception 4 years ago. One hundred eighteen students took the course during those years, and 84 of those returned course evaluations asking them to assess the value of the assignment on a scale ranging from *outstanding* (6) to *very poor* (1). The modal rating was 4, with 77% of the students rating the assignment a 4, 5, or 6. Some students complained about the constraints of the assignment, stating a preference for a topic-based rather than person-based assignment. My informal assessment is that this assignment works best for talented and/or diligent students; procrastinators of average ability encounter difficulty and express less enjoyment of the assignment (and less comprehension of the goals).

I look forward to receiving this set of papers every year. Usually, two or three students choose target psychologists with whom I am not familiar, and their papers help broaden my knowledge. Students who write about people more familiar to me often uncover less well-known papers and make interesting inferences about how that work has fit in with or shaped other and better known work. Some students have shown a remarkable level of energy; some wrote to (and one student arranged for a telephone interview with) their target person. (In every case, the psychologists have been gracious, often flattered, and always helpful.) Finally, some students have found this exercise to be extremely valuable when thinking about graduate work and in targeting potential graduate advisers. Being very familiar with a developmental psychologist's work, students are able to make more informed decisions about whether that person would be someone with whom they would like to work.

Several implementation details of the assignment have evolved over the years. None is intrinsic to the assignment, but all have proven useful. First, I require each student in the class to choose a different target psychologist. This procedure promotes quick selection of targets by everyone (all the good targets are perceived to be taken early) and enhances my willingness to encourage collaboration among students working on psychologists from similar areas. Second, I limit papers to 20 pages of double-spaced text, not including title page, abstract, references, or tables and figures. The papers could become quite long (in earlier years, when I did not impose limits, papers of 35 to 40 pages were not uncommon), with much unnecessary prose. I have tried different limits and found 20 pages to be

stringent but manageable. Third, because the paper is challenging to organize and write, I keep copies of successful papers. Once all targets are assigned, I choose from my files a few papers about psychologists who are not current targets and place those papers on closed reserve. I always put more than one example on reserve to illustrate that there is no single recipe for organizing the material. Fourth, I try to organize voluntary working groups for students to share ideas about defining development, applying definitions to published works, planning possible modes of organization, and other common concerns. These working groups meet informally outside of class, and I try to include at least one advanced psychology major in each group. Fifth, I encourage all students, but particularly those who have not taken courses in data analysis and research methods, to consult with me in office hours if they encounter problems comprehending the methods and results sections of journal articles. Sixth, I arrange with the Carleton College library staff to provide appropriate bibliographic instruction to students who need it. If most students in the class have never conducted literature searches, I invite the librarians to class to describe skills and strategies of searches.

Students have chosen a variety of target psychologists over the years. Some examples of the most popular targets are: Diana Baumrind, Jay Belsky, Jeanne Block, Micki Chi, Carol Dweck, David Elkind, Rochel Gelman, Carol Gilligan, Susan Harter, Martin Hoffman, James Marcia, Robert Selman, and Eliot Turiel. Some especially prolific psychologists (e.g., Jean Piaget) have proven much more challenging, and I generally steer students to other targets.

I am pleased with the way this assignment meets my goals. The assignment is a very demanding one. At the same time, if given the appropriate levels of structure and support, students generally find it a rewarding one. From my perspective as an instructor, it is gratifying to see that an assignment to consider the development of a developmental psychologist sometimes promotes students' own intellectual and career development.

Notes