

Michael P. Ryan, Ph.D.

Associate Professor Emeritus

Department of Psychology

Research area: Individual Differences in comprehension and learning

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Bio

I received my Ph.D. in psychology from Stanford University in 1975. Initially, my research area was Personality and Psychopathology, and I worked with Walter Mischel and Albert Bandura. However, the emerging information-processing models of mind soon began to fascinate me, and I began working with Richard Atkinson, Gordon Bower, and Roger Shepard. Working in addition with Albert Hastorf, I also developed an enduring interest in the history of psychological thought. Under the direction of Albert Hastorf and Gordon Bower, I completed my dissertation on the control processes governing retrieval efforts in long-term memory.

During a subsequent two-year postdoctoral fellowship at the Educational Testing Service in Princeton, New Jersey, I worked with Roy Freedle and Richard Hurtig at ETS and with Tom Trabasso at Princeton University. These partnerships introduced me to newly emerging paradigms for studying discourse comprehension and production. It was there too that I became intrigued with diagnostic program evaluation, as artfully demonstrated in the well-known ETS analysis of the impact of Sesame Street viewing on the development of cognitive skills in young children.

Accepting an appointment as an Assistant Professor in the Division of Social Sciences at the University of Texas at San Antonio in the Fall of 1976, I found myself in the company of a young and energetic group of anthropologists, geographers, historians, political scientists, psychologists, and sociologists. I expanded my dissertation work on memory control processes to explore the controlling role of naïve beliefs about knowledge and learning in the development of reading and writing strategies among adult learners. Upon earning tenure and the rank of Associate Professor in 1984, my general interest in self-regulatory processes led me to spend several years working with a litigation consultant on the design and evaluation of warning labels in consumer products.

My work in program evaluation and learning strategies led me in the early 1990s to conduct research on academic socialization as a factor in college-student retention and graduation rates. Working with academic support components in student services, I helped develop and evaluate a number of interventions to support the academic socialization of first-generation college students. This work led to recognize the need for a Teaching and Learning Center to aid faculty in improving their teaching by helping them understand the cognitive processes that underlie active learning in the classroom. I became the Founding Director for the Teaching and Learning Center in 1997 and served in that role until 2000, when I had an opportunity to spend a

sabbatical year at the United States Military Academy at West Point. There I worked with the Center for Teaching Excellence and with Department Chairs to foster the development of collaborative-learning strategies.

With the creation of a Department of Psychology and the development of graduate programs in psychology, I have been focusing for the past five years on two research programs in which I help undergraduate and graduate students develop and expand their conceptual, methodological, and analytical skills. The first research program involves an analysis of the degree to which cognitive factors limit the ability of individuals to develop adequate mental representations of problem-based group discussions. I have been collecting data using a paradigm in which I focus simply on the degree to which individuals can successfully construct a dynamic mental representation—a situation model—of the scripted contributions that four actor-discussants make to a pre-recorded conversation. The second research program involves a cognitive analysis of the basis for the antidepressant benefits of physical activity. Currently, I am using Social Cognitive Theory as a framework to examine two interrelated issues: the determinants of ethnic and gender differences in the physical activity levels of young adults and the contribution that psychosocial factors (such as self-esteem and self-efficacy) make to the mental-health benefits of physical exercise.

Degrees

- Ph.D. in Cognitive Psychology, Stanford University, Stanford, CA
- B. A. in Psychology, Pomona College, Claremont, CA

Recent Courses

- 2573 *Psychology of Thought*
- 3103 *Cognition*

Research in Progress

- Knowledge-updating and health literacy
- The effects of prior knowledge on the comprehension and recall of health-protective information.
- The effects of text structure on the comprehension and recall of health-protective information.
- The impact of psychosocial variables on the comprehension and recall of health-protective information.

Recent Publications

- Ryan, M. P. (October 2010). Using Product-Label Information To Correct Pre-Conceptions About The Safe And Effective Use Of Over-The-Counter Analgesics. Health Literacy Annual Research Conference: Bethesda MD.
- Ryan, M. P. (2010). Psychocultural differences in physical activity-based antidepressant effects. *Mental Health and Physical Activity*, 3(1), 5-15.

- Ryan, M. P. (2008). The antidepressant effects of physical activity: Mediating self-esteem and self-efficacy variables. *Psychology and Health*, 23(3), 279-307.
- Ryan, M. P. (2005). Physical activity levels in young adult Hispanics and Whites: Social cognitive theory determinants. *Psychology and Health*, 20(6), 709-727.
- Ryan, M. P. (2004). What do first-year students need most: Learning strategies instruction or academic socialization? *Journal of College Reading and Learning*, 34, 4-28.
- Ryan, M. P., & Glenn, P. A. (2002). Increasing one-year retention rates by focusing on academic competence: An empirical odyssey. *Journal of College Student Retention*, 4, 297-324.
- Ryan, M. P. (2001). Conceptual models of lecture learning: Guiding metaphors and model-appropriate notetaking practices. *Reading Psychology*, 22, 289-248.

Additional Information

Honors and Awards

- U.S. Public Health Service Postdoctoral Fellow, 1974-1976. Educational Testing Service, Princeton, N.J.
- Sabbatical Grant from the United States Military Academy at West Point, 2000-2001.
- Appointment with the Center for Teaching Excellence in the Office of the Dean.

Academic and Professional Activities

- Health and Research
- Division of Health Psychology, British Psychological Society
- Founding Director of the Teaching and Learning Center, University of Texas at San Antonio