

James Kalat:

Series of coincidences turns dream of writing books into reality for psychology professor

by Kim Seidel

Psychology Professor James Kalat fantasized about becoming an author as a child, although at that time he imagined novels. His dream continued at Duke University, as he began to further develop a keen interest in psychology and a curiosity about textbooks.

"When I was a freshman at Duke, I took introductory psychology under Gregory Kimble, who had written the textbook we were using," Kalat said. "It was the first time it had ever occurred to me that a person wrote a textbook. All the high school textbooks just listed the name of the publisher. And now here was a real-life person who wrote the book."

This jump-started Kalat's thinking about someday writing his own textbook. "Although it was very much in the back of my mind at that time, I did start collecting ideas about what I might do and what I might include," he said.

Kalat graduated summa cum laude with a degree in psychology from Duke University in 1968; he earned a master's degree and then a doctorate from the University of Pennsylvania in 1971.

Today, his childhood fantasies have become reality. He is the author of *Biological Psychology* (ninth edition, copyright 2007); *Introduction to Psychology* (eighth edition; copyright 2008); and co-author with Michelle N. Shiota of *Emotion* (copyright 2007), all published by Wadsworth. In addition, he has written journal articles on taste-aversion learning, the teaching of psychology and other topics. In 2007, Kalat received the McGuffey longevity award for *Biological Psychology*.

He immensely enjoys both writing and teaching, and they fit well together for him. Kalat is Professor of Psychology at North Carolina State University, where he has taught introduction to psychology and biological psychology since 1977. He's been writing textbooks for more than 34 years, and he continues working on new editions.

"I am fortunate to be in a department that considers textbook writing to be a scholarly contribution," he said. "For a few years, I tried to do lab work, as well as write and teach, until I asked myself, 'Who am I fooling?' Good lab work is a full-time job, and so is writing and so is teaching. I can do only two full-time jobs, not three."

His teaching and writing never conflict, except when he has a stack of term papers to grade. It also helps his cause for writing that the courses he teaches, introduction to psychology and biological psychology, are based on two of the three textbooks that he has written. "So, revising a textbook and preparing for class overlap completely," he said. "I do my teaching on Monday, Wednesday and Friday. I try to keep as much of Tuesday and Thursday as possible for reading and writing, and I usually get a lot more done on weekends."

Signing his first contracts

Kalat credits his office door being open by chance to signing his first textbook contract in about 1974. As a young faculty member, he was encouraged by a local Prentice-Hall representative to write a general textbook on biological psychology. At first, Kalat didn't think this was possible because he wasn't established as a famous researcher. "The rep told me that wasn't necessary, if the book was well-written," Kalat said. "So, I agreed to try writing a few chapters."

By the time he finished, the rep moved on to a different position, and Kalat couldn't find someone interested in those chapters. "Then one day, Ken King, who was the new psych editor at Wadsworth, wandered into my office for no particular reason," he said. "I think it was just because mine was the only open door he could find."

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They talked about psychology and books, and then King asked Kalat whether he had ever thought about writing. Kalat told him about the chapters he had written, which he had tucked away on an office shelf several months ago. "He read them while I was providing food and water to the rats in my lab," said Kalat. "When I got back, he said my drafts were a bit rough, but he liked what I was trying to do. He wondered whether there was any reason we couldn't sign a contract right now. I said, 'OK,' and signed it. He later told me that signing a contract was never that easy for him ever again."

It took Kalat about five years to write that first edition of Biological Psychology. When the textbook was going into production, King asked him to sign another contract for Introduction to Psychology. King was adamant that he sign a contract without Kalat reading it. King felt there was no time for that. (They had a dinner reservation and a meeting with the company's vice president.) "I kept protesting, until King said, 'Shut up and sign the [expletive deleted] contract!' So I did," he said. "To this day, I haven't read it. It's a true story. And Ken is still one of my closest friends today."

Completing the first edition of Introduction to Psychology also took about five years, and the second edition proved to be more work than the first as he needed to make major revisions. The Emotion textbook was a different story. Kalat had been revising his two textbooks through many different editions when he decided he was ready for a new challenge.

"The field of emotion had been stagnant for decades, until about the 1990s when both the quantity and quality of research had increased enormously," he said. "My hope was that a good textbook on the topic would prompt more colleges to start offering the course."

Kalat realized he could only undertake the project with a knowledgeable co-author. Another coincidence brought him together with Shiota. She had stood out to Kalat for offering the best suggestions and advice through a revision of Introduction to Psychology. He knew her only as reviewer "E." Through his editor, he learned her specialty was emotion - and she was still a graduate student.

"At first, she was hesitant to co-author the book, because she couldn't promise how much time she could devote to it," Kalat said. "As it turns out, she put in a great deal of work. In the final draft, about as many of the words are hers as mine. Incidentally, she and I have still never met face to face. We exchanged many, many e-mails, and every chapter was a dual effort. The final draft of Chapter One was 'version 13.'"

The Writing Life

Kalat does the majority of his textbook writing at his home office, where he has his computer and a file of 4 x 6 index cards. He takes notes on those cards of all the relevant articles he's read since the last edition. "My routine has changed greatly over the years," he said. "The first edition of bio psych was before the personal computer era. I wrote it out in longhand, with lots of scratch-outs, insertions and rearrangements, and then typed it on a manual typewriter. By the second edition, I moved up to an electric typewriter, and I thought it was wonderful."

To complete a textbook and its editions, Kalat depends on his judgment, his editors and his reviewers for assistance with the material. He also carefully listens to the fairly frequent, unsolicited comments from faculty and students at his university and at other colleges that are using his texts, he said: "I depend a great deal on reactions from my own students. When I'm revising a text, I try out some of the new material in my own classes, and I can tell from students' reactions whether it's clear and interesting to them."

The key to having numerous textbook editions is to start young and stay healthy and interested. "To me, a day of reading journal articles is about as good as it gets," he said. "I still love learning something new and then telling other people about it. I'm constantly at work revising one book or another. As soon as I'm done with one edition, I'm already behind schedule on the next one."

Another important key to longevity is to work with good people, he said: "I have worked with some great editors at Wadsworth, and with Biological Psychology, Elaine Hull has worked on the study guide through all nine editions."

Kalat offers his thoughts on the qualities a person needs to be a successful textbook writer:

Passion. "You have to enjoy what you're doing," he said. "If you want to be a textbook writer, you have to be eager to write and rewrite. You have to enjoy collecting information. You also have to enjoy proofreading and attempting to find the very best way to express some idea."

Self-confidence, humility. "You have to have enough self-confidence to think you can do this, and then enough humility to accept other people's advice," he said. "Sometimes, I write something that I really like, and then I find that reviewers and students don't like it. Oh, well."

Support. "It's important to be in a department that supports what you are doing and considers it a legitimate scholarly activity. Not all departments do," he said.

A remarried widower, Kalat has three children, two stepsons, and two grandchildren. When he's not working on something related to psychology, his hobby is bird watching.

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