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## Mistakes Were Made - But Not By Me!: Sobering Self-Realizations About Self-Justification

John Bird

Winthrop University, [birdj@winthrop.edu](mailto:birdj@winthrop.edu)

Teaching and Learning Center

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# The Weekly Reader

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Dr. John Bird  
Professor,  
Department of  
English  
Bancroft Hall 260  
(803) 323-3679

Director, Teaching &  
Learning Center  
Dinkins Hall 233  
(803) 323-2447

EMAIL:  
[birdj@winthrop.edu](mailto:birdj@winthrop.edu)

Winthrop University

## Mistakes Were Made—But Not By Me!: Sobering Self-Realizations About Self-Justification

We choose our textbooks for the students to learn, but sometimes we are the ones who do the learning. That happened to me this week. What I learned was something about myself, and it was not a happy lesson.

In my critical thinking course, CRTW 201, I chose as a non-fiction text *Mistakes Were Made (but not by me): Why We Justify Foolish Beliefs, Bad Decisions, and Hurtful Acts*, by Carol Tavris and Elliot Aronson. I know some of you met Carol Tavris when she was on campus last month to deliver the annual MLA Lectures. I chose their book because of the chance for my students to hear the author in person.

I adopted *Mistakes Were Made* without reading it all the way through; I trusted the judgment of Amanda Hiner and other CRTW colleagues. I wanted to experience the book along with my students. I knew after the first few pages that the decision to use this book for the course was a wise one: it challenges assumptions, deals with implications, is filled with concepts, and addresses impediments like egocentrism and stereotyping and us vs. them thinking, all of which are concepts central to our

course in critical thinking.

In the introduction, noted social psychologists Tavris and Aronson discuss self-justification and its relation to cognitive dissonance. To lessen the effects of cognitive dissonance, we all resort to self-justification, they argue, which can have the benefit of allowing us to sleep at night, but the list of negative implications is a long one.

As they state, “Yet mindless self-justification, like quicksand, can draw us deeper into disaster. It blocks our ability to even see our errors, let alone correct them. It distorts reality, keeping us from getting all the information we need and assessing issues clearly. It prolongs and widens rifts between lovers, friends, and nations. It keeps us from letting go of unhealthy habits. It permits the guilty to avoid taking responsibility for their deeds. And it keeps many professionals from changing outdated attitudes and procedures that can be harmful to the public” (Tavris and Aronson 9-10).

Two weeks ago, my CRTW students turned in their biggest assignment of the semester: a formal report in

which they observe a class they are in, preferably in their major, then write up the observations, analyze the class, and finally, analyze the logic of the larger discipline. The purpose of the assignment gets at the heart of this required course: to help students learn how to think critically in all their courses, but especially in their majors.

The syllabus specifies this assignment as a 10-12 page paper, but in reality, most students find they need to write a longer paper, more in the range of 15+ pages. These papers are often very impressive, and most students learn a great deal about their courses and about the logic of their disciplines.

The papers are also impressive in their bulk, especially from the viewpoint of the person who has to read and evaluate them: me. Actually, “impressive” is not the first word that comes to mind. Daunting. Imposing. Scary. Haunting. From previous experience, I know that I will need to spend 30-45 minutes grading each paper, meaning that a set of these papers from a class of 20 will take 10 to 15 hours. And that does not factor in my fatigue as I tackle them.

*"I learned long ago that I will do almost anything to avoid grading papers. Suddenly I feel an urge to climb a stepstool and clean the top of the refrigerator. Yard work suddenly beckons as an exciting and fulfilling activity. Hey, that spare bedroom sure does need straightening up!"*



## Continued from page 1

I have often said that the worst two things about my job are grading papers and attending meetings—and even the most mind-numbing meeting pales in comparison to grading papers. Sometimes during the summer, I have nightmares about grading papers. I wake up in a cold sweat, knowing what is coming when the fall semester starts.

I learned long ago that I will do almost anything to avoid grading papers. Suddenly I feel an urge to climb a stepstool and clean the top of the refrigerator. Yard work suddenly beckons as an exciting and fulfilling activity. Hey, that spare bedroom sure does need straightening up!

I also learned that if I do not set some self-imposed guidelines, I will never face the dreaded task. I do not tell my students about this deadline for fear of not meeting it, but I vow that I will return papers by the second class meeting after my students have turned a paper in. I usually find that I can motivate myself to start and finish the job, and that students are happy with this kind of turnaround time.

• But this particular assignment always challenges my resolve.

And then this semester, grading them went beyond challenging. Instead of two class meetings after the students turned the papers in, they were all graded two *weeks* after they turned them in.

I realized while reading Tavis and Aronson that I was engaging in severe bouts of self-justification over my failure to tackle these papers in a more timely fashion. I had to finish a paper for an academic conference, then I had to go to Atlanta for a weekend to present that paper. I had to spend a day off campus on business for Winthrop. I should not begin to grade these papers until I have a large block of time—and since they would take so long, what large block of time could I possibly find?

These kinds of self-justification seemed so rational to me that I did not recognize the depths to which I was fooling myself, lying to myself. When I started reading *Mistakes Were Made*, I realized that I was engaging in the same kind of harmful psychological behavior they were talking about.

And then I thought about some of my other self-justifications. My students had a whole month to write this paper; they can

surely allow me a few days to read them and grade them. I asked them to send me a draft, but only about a third of them did. Why should I invest so much time if they were not willing to do their part?

I experienced a jolt when I realized that in my avoidance of my own work, I had begun shifting blame onto my students, the very people I am trying to help by having them write this extensive, valuable paper. Self-justification had indeed blocked my ability to see my errors, it distorted my reality, it prolonged and widened rifts, it confirmed me in unhealthy habits, and it let me avoid taking responsibility for my deeds.

I shared this realization with my students, and apologized for my deeds and misdeeds. As students usually are, they were forgiving and understanding. And they realized that they indulged in the same kind of self-justification when they were *writing* those papers.

I love it when my teaching teaches me, even when, especially when, what I learn is painful but necessary and valuable.



## Thanks For Helping Make the Teaching and Learning Center Work!

Winthrop's Teaching and Learning Center offers a wide variety of sessions each year for faculty and staff, on teaching, technology, professional development, and personal development. From leading class discussion to mastering the Smart podium to tenure and promotion to cooking soufflés, the TLC tries to make sure that all faculty and staff receive

the kinds of professional and personal development that will make them better teachers, administrators, and employees.

To offer this programming, the TLC depends on the talent, expertise, and generosity of our faculty and staff. We do not have a big budget to bring in outside speakers and experts. Even so, we are able to offer engaging,

timely, and valuable sessions every year on a variety of topics. We thank those who have offered their time and talent in past years.

We also thank those of you who have attended TLC sessions. Your time is valuable, and we appreciate you taking some of it to enrich yourself through professional and personal development.

## A Service From the TLC: Teaching Consultation

The TLC for several years has been offering a service: teaching consultation. At the instructor's request, I (or another agreed-upon person) will visit your class to observe and consult with you afterwards about your successes and challenges. This consultation has nothing to do with the tenure and

promotion process, and no reports will be made to department chairs or deans (unless you so request). The invitation to the consultant can only come from the instructor, not from a dean or chair or any other person. All conversations will be private and confidential. If you don't want me to visit your class and observe your teaching, we could

just meet and talk about your teaching. If I am not available to visit your class because of my schedule, I will find a qualified person to do the consulting. So please let me know if you would like to invite me into your class or for a consultation. Call or email me (803) 323-3679 or [birdj@winthrop.edu](mailto:birdj@winthrop.edu).

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People often tell the TLC that they would like to go to sessions, but they don't have the time or they can't

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## The 2<sup>nd</sup> Annual Winthrop Conference on Teaching and Learning

The call for papers and presentations for our Second Conference on Teaching and Learning, Saturday, January 31, 2015 is posted on the TLC webpage. Deadline for proposals is December 1, 2014. Come join us for a great day of teaching and learning!

<http://www.winthrop.edu/tlc/>

## Thought For the Week

"Thanksgiving Day. Let all give humble, hearty, and sincere thanks now, but the turkeys. In the island of Fiji they do not use turkeys; they use plumbers. It does not become you and me to sneer at Fiji."  
--Mark Twain