The many roles we play: Perceptions of the role of psychology lecturers according to staff and students.

Sarah M. Coyne

Abstract

Lecturers in psychology have many different roles that they must play. It is often very difficult to know what roles are the most important and which to focus on. This study assessed the perceived importance of seven different roles lecturers undertake according to psychology lecturers and students. Results indicated that assessor, course planner, and information provider were all rated as very important, while resource developer and researcher were rated as much less important. Staff and students generally agreed on their ratings of importance, however, students rated information provider, researcher, and resource developer as more important than staff did. These findings have implications for the way departments are structured and training opportunities for staff. They also have relevance to how staff can more effectively spend their time, and which roles they may wish to focus their time on.

'Teaching is the educational equivalent of white-water rafting'. (Brookfield, 1990)

AS THE ABOVE quote suggests, lecturers have many different tasks that they need to undertake as part of their occupation. A recent shift in educational practice now requires lecturers to further develop their skills in all walks of academic life (Brew & Boud, 1998). Whereas before, teachers were primarily responsible for teaching or research, the 21st century lecturer can now expect to engage in teaching, research, mentoring, assessment, curriculum planning, counselling, administrative duties, and more.

Like white-water rafting, teaching can be a fun and exhilarating ride; however, dangers often lurk around the bend. With so many increased responsibilities, more lecturers are becoming physically ill and overly stressed as a result of the pressure to successfully complete the many tasks facing them (Race, 2001). Murray and MacDonald (1997) found that many lecturers are confused about what their precise role as a teacher is, and find it difficult to balance their ever increasing responsibilities. Thus, it is important that lecturers are able the balance their many roles, so that the 'boat' does not tip and the rafter can ride out the waves without emotionally drowning.

A study by Harden and Crosby (2000) examined the many different roles that medical educators must undertake. They used questionnaires from medical teachers and detailed diaries kept by medical students to assess the major roles a medical educator is responsible for. They also examined medical research that identified the role of a teacher (Cox & Ewan, 1988; Newble & Cannon, 1995). By using these varying techniques, Harden and Crosby (2000) identified six major roles (split into 12 smaller roles) that a teacher must play. Because many of the 'smaller' roles identified in Harden and Croby's (2000) research are only relevant to clinical training, the current study will focus on the six major roles that apply to most academic fields.

The information provider

Common sense would suggest that teachers are primarily responsible for teaching, or providing information to their students. His-

torically, this has usually taken the shape of a formal lecture, where the teacher imparts his or her wisdom to students. The lecturer's knowledge and expertise are considered foremost, and the students are expected to glean the pertinent information from the lecture. In this case, when a student fails to learn the material, the lecturer views it as a failure of the student to catch the lecturer's vision (Ramsden, 1992).

The facilitator

Currently, the view of the 'all knowledgeable professor' is shifting (e.g. Race, 2001; Ramsden, 1992). Although lectures are still extremely common in universities across the world, recent studies have revealed that students actually gain little from lectures, and would profit from more student centred approaches (e.g. Sander *et al.*, 2000). These approaches can take the form of seminars, tutorials, discussion groups, practicals, etc. Instead of the teacher lecturing and the student listening, students are now expected to contribute more and more to class discussions. The lecturer is there to facilitate the infusion of knowledge by creating an open atmosphere where students can freely express their ideas and questions (Ramsden, 1992). As a facilitator, the lecturer's role is more of a mentor or a supervisory role, where they encourage students to be creative and think for themselves.

The role model

According to Harden and Crosby (2000), 'The teacher has a unique opportunity to share some of the magic of the subject with the students. He/she can kindle, in the students, a curiosity and quest for a better understanding . . . by his/her own personal example that is difficult to reproduce in an instructional text or computer program' (p. 339). Therefore, it is of utmost importance that teachers show kindness, compassion, flexibility and ethical principles when dealing with students or patients (Westberg & Jason, 1993). Students are constantly watching lecturers, even when they may not be aware they are being observed. They are learning how to be a professional in their chosen field by observing how their lecturers behave.

The assessor

Assessment is the primary way that students are judged by the outside world, including potential employers, graduate schools, patients, and colleagues. Therefore, it is very important that teachers can fairly and accurately assess a student's abilities. It is also important that teachers give detailed and constructive feedback on assessments, as this is one way that students will learn for future assignments (Race, 2001). Lecturers need to develop the skills that will enable them to assess students' work fairly and appropriately. After all, it is 'possible for students to walk away from bad teaching, but it nearly impossible for them to walk away from bad assessment' (Boud, 1990).

The planner

Lecturers are also responsible for planning interesting activities for students to undertake. These activities must be well organised, and the learning outcomes and expectations must be clear. Many lecturers are also involved with planning the outside curriculum and how each course will mesh with others. Both these activities can take up a great deal of time, and require an amount of expertise; however, they are both extremely important. Toohey (1999) suggests that 'Much of the creativity and power in teaching lies in the design of the curriculum', therefore it is very important that these are planned appropriately.

The resource developer

As the focus moves from the formal lecture to more interactive and facilitative activities, the teacher may be required to develop appropriate resources that will best meet students' needs. These can include traditional resources, such as worksheets, or the use of the internet or other technology that can increase the range of student accessibility. They may also include study guides that will help the student know what they are required to learn, and whether they have learned it by

allowing the students to assess their own knowledge. A range of technological activities have been shown to be effective in supplementing a student's classroom experience (e.g. Laurillard, 1993, O'Hagan, 1997).

The researcher

Although not identified in Harden and Crosby's (2000) roles, most lecturers are involved with academic research. In fact, research, and not teaching, is often the means by which lecturers are judged in academia. The number of publications and conference papers that an individual has often weigh very heavily on both appointments, and promotions in higher education. Professors, who engage primarily in research, and not in teaching, are typically paid the highest in any given university department. Therefore, it is apparent where the importance of research lies in academia. Although not always directly related to all the teaching a lecturer undertakes, academic research is very important, as new theories and techniques for explaining human behaviour are constantly being discovered.

Harden and Crosby (2000) revealed that medical teachers rated teaching in a clinical setting and on-the job role model as the most important roles that teachers have. Conversely, mentoring and advising students were rated as the least important. However, psychology (and many other disciplines) is not focussed in the clinical or the practical setting. Therefore, these individuals may place greater or lesser importance on other aspects of their roles. It is also important to discover how students rate the importance of these roles. Generally, students rate 'a good teacher' as being enthusiastic, sensitive, supportive, knowledgeable, and approachable (e.g. Forrester-Jones, 2003; Jules & Kutnick, 1997; Murray & MacDonald, 1997; Reid & Johnston, 1999; Sanders, 2002). However, it is important to examine how these perceptions compare with lecturers' views on their own teaching. By knowing which roles are perceived to be most important by teachers and students, lecturers can reflect on this information to prioritise their time better. When more important responsibilities are completed, the lecturer can then move on to less important roles that may influence the student to a lesser degree.

This study examines the importance of seven different roles according to psychology lecturers and students. Congruent with the shift in educational values (Ramsden, 1992), it is predicted that both students and teachers will place more importance on facilitative and role-model roles than on information provider and research responsibilities. Although teachers and students sometimes hold different views of teaching (e.g. Reid & Johnstone, 1999) by the time they finish secondary education, these discrepancies are small (e.g. Beishuizen *et al.* 2001).

Method

Participants

111 first-year psychology students (mean age =19.66, SD = 3.18; male = 21, female = 90) and 37 psychology lecturers (mean years lecturing = 8.32, SD = 9.06; male = 12, female = 25) at a university in the North West of England participated in the study. The gender distribution of the sample was fairly representative of the entire psychology department, as the majority of students and lecturers are female. For students, 91 per cent of the sample were within one year of leaving school, while 9 per cent were classified as mature students. The study took place at the end of the academic year when students would have more experience with the academic world. Ethical approval was obtained prior to data collection and the project was conducted according to the code of practice for conducting research set forth by the British Psychological Society (BPS, 2006).

Materials and procedure

An original questionnaire was created based on the six roles identified by Harden and Crosby (2000), combined with the additional role of a researcher. The questionnaire consisted of 44 questions, each

detailing a specific characteristic that a lecturer may or may not hold. These characteristics were based around the seven roles identified in the previous sections. Participants were asked to consider each item and circle on a 1 (NOT important at all) to a 5 (Extremely important) Likert scale how important they thought it was that lecturers take the time and effort to develop each characteristic. Participants were reminded that lecturers have many responsibilities and to remember all of these when making their ratings. Therefore, ratings were based on the importance of each role in *general*, rather than to be specific to any aspects of a lecturer's job (i.e., teaching, research, administration, etc).

There were seven questions concerning the information provider (e.g. 'Transmits knowledge to students' 'Conveys basic subject information'), seven concerning the role model (e.g. 'Is a moral and trustworthy person', 'Is ethical'), eight concerning the facilitator (e.g. 'Uses small-group sessions where discussion is encouraged', 'Facilitates students knowledge, instead of lectures'), six concerning the assessor (e.g. 'Assesses student's work fairly', 'Gives positive and supportive feedback on assignments'), five concerning the planner, (e.g. 'Module overall is well-planned and organized', 'Learning outcomes are clear for each class'), six concerning the resource developer, (e.g. 'Handouts are extensive and very detailed', Creates appropriate study guides for students'), and five concerning the researcher (e.g. 'Undertakes important research in psychology', 'Has many publications'). Cronbach's α for each category were: information-provider (.57), role-model (.80), facilitator (.70), assessor (.62), course planner (.68), resource developer (.74) and researcher (.76). Reliability was acceptable for each scale, except for information provider, therefore, these results should be viewed with caution. Assessor and course planner also only approached acceptability, so again these results should be interpreted with caution. However, the total reliability for the questions as a whole was very high (.92). Participants were also asked their gender and age. Students were invited to complete the questionnaire during a workshop break. Lecturers were first contacted by email and then sent a paper copy of the questionnaire to be handed in to a box in the faculty office.

Results

A factor analysis with varimax rotation was done on all 44 items of the questionnaire. The scree plot confirmed the presence of seven factors. The data was suitable for factor analysis as the majority of the items had a coefficient exceeding .30, a Kaiser-Meyer-Oklin value of .78 and a significant Bartlett's test of sphericity, χ^2 (820) = 2420.76, $p < .001$). The total model accounted for 54.45 per cent of the variance. Many items loaded on more than one factor, however, items generally seemed to fit within their relevant categories. A list of the subscale names, sample items, and variance accounted for are included in Table 1.

The questions under each group were collated and an overall mean for each category was calculated for each participant. Table 2 shows the means and standard deviations for each category for lecturers and students.

A two-way (lecturer or student) mixed ANOVA was completed on perceptions of importance for the seven categories described previously. Mauchley's test of sphericity was significant, χ^2 (20) = 131.30, $p < .001$, therefore, the more conservative Greenhouse-Geisser statistics will be reported. A significant overall difference was found between perceptions of importance for the categories, F (4.65, 679.48) = 285.82, $p < .001$. A series of post hoc t-tests were conducted to assess the differences between the perceived importance of the categories. An adjusted significance value of $p = .001$ was used to control for Type I error. These analyses revealed that participants rated the roles of assessor and course planner as being equally the most important roles that lecturers fulfil ($p < 001$

Factor name	Sample items	Variance accounted for
1. Information provider	Transmits knowledge to students	23.70%
	Uses examples freely	
	Imparts wisdom to students	
2. Role model	Is a good role model	8.41%
	Is a good example to students	
	Is a moral and trustworthy person	
3. Resource developer	Creates appropriate study guides	5.93%
	Puts extra information on the Web	
	Uses computer-based learning	
4. Facilitator	Encourages students to learn for themselves	4.52%
	Encourages creativity and originality	
	Uses small group sessions where discussion is encouraged	
5. Assessor	Assess student's work fairly	4.38%
	Administers hard, but fair tests	
	Explains assignments carefully	
6. Course planner	Learning outcomes are clear for each class	4.26%
	Makes clear the content of the course	
	Module overall is well-planned and organized	
7. Researcher	Receives many grants for the University	3.24%
	Has many publications	
	Undertakes important research in psychology	

Table 1: Factor names, sample items, and variance accounted for.

	Lecturers		Students		Overall	
	M	*SD*	*M*	*SD*	*M*	*SD*
Assessor	4.08	.42	4.11	.44	4.10	.44
Course Planner	4.11	.53	4.07	.50	4.08	.50
Information provider*	3.80	.45	4.01	.41	3.95	.43
Role-model	3.91	.64	3.84	.62	3.86	.62
Facilitator	3.97	.42	3.80	.47	3.84	.46
Resource developer*	2.91	.65	3.63	.52	3.45	.64
Researcher*	2.21	.76	2.55	.63	2.47	.68

**Significant difference between lecturers and students ($p < .01$)*

Table 2: Means and standard deviations for all categories for lecturers and students

for each comparison with other roles). Information provider was rated as the second most important role, while role-model and facilitator were both rated equally as third most important. Resource developer was rated as the fourth most important role, while a researcher was rated as the least important role that a lecturer performs. Table 2 illustrates the importance rating of each role.

A significant between subjects effect was also found between lecturers and students, $F(1,146) = 3.92$, $p < .05$. Again, a series of post hoc t-tests were conducted to assess where these differences occurred, and an alpha level of $p = .01$ was used to compensate for multiple comparisons. Generally, students and lecturers rated the importance of the categories as very similar. However, students did rate the categories of information processor, $t(146) = 2.59$, $p < .01$, resource developer, $t(146) = 6.81$, $p < .001$, and researcher, $t(146) = 2.84$, $p < .01$, as more important than lecturers did. These comparisons can also be seen in Table 2.

A significant interaction between condition (lecturer and student) and importance of categories was also revealed, $F(4.65, 679.48) = 17.67$, $p < .001$. A series of post hoc paired samples t-tests were conducted to interpret the interaction. Again, the alpha level was reduced to $p = .001$ to control for multiple comparisons. Essentially, the ratings of roles were very similar for both lecturers and students, with both rating resource developer and research as the least important roles, facilitator and role model as moderately important, and assessor and course planner as most important (all comparisons $p < .001$). However, compared to other roles, lecturers and students seemed to place different importance on the information provider role. For lecturers, information provider was low in importance compared to other roles, while for students, information provider was rated one of the most important roles.

Discussion

It was predicted that both lecturers and students would place greater importance on facilitative and role-model roles than on information provider and research responsibilities. This was partially confirmed, as participants rated research responsibilities as the least important role compared to all others. This finding is not congruent with the way that departments currently hire individuals. An academic is usually judged by their quality of research publications, not their teaching abilities. Departments are rated higher in league tables and are given more funding by the government and other funding agencies based on their research output. Recently, in psychology, the formal assessment of teaching (QAA) has been given much less importance while the research exercise (RAE) has become the focus of the department. Although research is very important to advancing knowledge and securing funding, it appears less important to lecturers and students in psychology, when determining what a good lecturer is. Other roles, such as assessor, information provider, and course planner are seen as much more important to staff and students.

Interestingly, information provider was rated much higher than facilitator and role model. This was actually opposite to what was predicted, as it was thought that students would place less importance of having an 'all knowledgeable professor' (Ramsden, 1992). These results suggest that lecturers should spend a fair amount of time becoming experts in the field, and developing their skills to more effectively impart the information to students. After all, if the students do not have the basic information for the course, then they will not be able to discuss this information in a more facilitative setting. Although facilitative roles were rated as moderately important, without the basic knowledge of the subject, these sessions would become worthless.

Contradictory to Harden and Crosby (2000), the importance of being a good role model to students was also rated as less important than several other roles for both lecturers and students. As psychology is less

clinical and hands-on than medicine, perhaps students are not concerned with what kind of individuals their lecturers are, as long as they are receiving the information they need to graduate. The majority of University psychology departments are not required to offer even one course on clinical or counselling psychology, whereas many psychology graduates have the expectation that they will advance to a career where they will be helping or working with people. Because of this, psychology departments may want to consider offering courses on counselling and clinical skills as a core subject. Departments may also want to consider giving students more work placement opportunities that would allow them to work with individuals in therapeutic and clinical settings. Such experiences with positive role models in the workplace may help students want to develop these qualities in themselves and allow them to become more honest, ethical, caring people in whatever job they pursue.

Based on previous research, it was predicted that lecturers and students would rate the different roles similarly (e.g. Beishuizen *et al.* 2001), however, there were several categories where students placed more importance than lecturers did. For example, students rated information provider as more important than lecturers and also as more important compared to the other roles. Students are ultimately in higher education for the degree and to learn more about their chosen subject. They are hoping to develop a career from their studies. If they do not receive the pertinent information, then they will be more likely to become confused, fail exams, and leave the University with a lack of understanding about their chosen field. If a lecturer does not properly teach a lecture, it is unlikely to have life altering consequences for them. However, if a student does not learn the information, then this could potentially damage their future career life, thus, one can see why a student would feel this role of a lecturer was more important than a lecturer would.

Another difference between lecturers and students was between a resource developer and a researcher, although both of these roles were rated as relatively unimportant as a whole. Again, the resources (e.g. study guides, WebCT) lecturers create can be a considerable help to many students. However, some lecturers feel antagonism toward web based resources as they may feel they are being 'replaced' by the computer (Bashir, 1998). Knowles (2001) found that 73 per cent of students in his sample stated they would enrol on a course taught entirely online. Statistics such as these may increase the animosity that lecturers may feel toward computer and distance based learning, as their role could potentially become redundant in the future.

The finding that students rated research activity as more important than lecturers did is very puzzling. Again, this highlights the fact that university lecturers feel their research is less of a priority than other activities, as even their students rated it as more important than they did. However, it should be considered that lecturer's responses to the questionnaire may reflect what they believe to be the current constraints of their role, rather than what they think is actually important. A lecturer who is given a high number of teaching responsibilities, leaving little time for research would probably respond differently if they were given the freedom (and money) to research whatever they wished. The current study took place at a teaching university, where most lecturers are given a high number of teaching hours. Therefore, the apparent lack of enthusiasm concerning research may not be reflective of lecturers' true opinions of research, rather it may be frustration expressed over the constraints of their current situation.

The results as a whole suggest that lecturers and students have a solid understanding of what roles a lecturer should be concentrating on. Generally, these roles were similar between staff and students, although there were exceptions. Overall, the role of an assessor was rated as most important. This

is extremely important, as unfair assessment could negatively impact on a student for the rest of their working life. Perhaps more resources should be given to teach new lecturers how to be better assessors. This could be in the form of workshops given by experts in the field (e.g. Brown, & Smith, 1997), or practice assessments where new teachers can get help from seasoned colleagues to ensure they are marking appropriately. Feedback forms could be created that specifically tap attitudes concerning assessment, and whether students feel that lecturers are fair and are giving them sufficient levels of feedback.

The most intriguing finding is that research is rated as the least important role by staff and students alike. Perhaps, universities may consider giving staff more time to focus on improving their teaching abilities and should receive more support from department to attend relevant teaching conferences. Individuals who are expert teachers should also be recognised for their efforts in similar ways that expert researchers are rewarded.

It should be considered that the student's view may be somewhat limited when considering their own pedagogical interests. For example, students may enjoy a teacher who lets them play video games all day for an easy grade, but this may be of little use for their future degree and career. Therefore, the student view as expressed in this study may be limited as they may not understand what they personally need in their education. The student view is also likely to change as time goes on. This study consisted exclusively of first year undergraduate students. Although these students were tested at the end of their first year, the expectations of final year or postgraduate students will likely be different. One avenue of useful research would be to assess how a student's view of lecturers changes as they themselves progress through their education.

Another limitation of the study was that participants rated each role for importance, but they were not given a choice of priorities. This may be why several roles were rated as equally important. A forced choice rating system may be useful in the future to determine where the importance of different roles lies. It also should be noted that other areas of academia may give different importance to the various roles. For example, those with an emphasis on clinical or 'hands on' training (e.g. nursing, midwifery) may rate role model roles as more important than other areas of academia. Another limitation was that the questionnaire was not exhaustive, and may not apply to all departments.

Obviously, lecturers have many roles to fulfil, and if they don't balance these roles than their lives can rock and tip and eventually they may drown in the wake. A careful consideration of the importance of each role they undertake may help lecturers to more effectively prioritise their time and help their professional lives to become one of tranquillity.

Corresponding author

Sarah M. Coyne, Department of Psychology, University of Central Lancashire, Preston, PR1 2 HE, Lancashire, United Kingdom. E-mail: smcoyne@uclan.ac.uk

References

Bashir, T.H. (1998). Dangerous liaison: academics' attitudes towards open learning in higher education. *Open Learning, 13*, 43–45.

Beishuizen, J.J., Hof, E., van Putten, C.M., Bouwmeester, S., & Asscher, J.J. (2001). Students' and teachers' cognitions about good teachers. *British Journal of Educational Psychology, 71*, 185–201.

Boud, D. (1990). Assessment and the promotion of academic values, *Studies in Higher Education, 15*, 101–111.

Brew, A., & Boud, D. (1998). Preparing for new academic role: an holistic approach to development, *International Journal of Academic Development, 1*, 17–25.

Brookfield, S. (1990). *The skilful teacher*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Brown, S., & Smith, B. (1997). Getting to grips with assessment. *SEDA induction pack*. UK: Staff and Educational Development Association.

British Psychological Society, The (2006).*Code of Ethics and Conduct*. Leicester: Author.

Cox, K.R., & Ewan, C.E. (1988). *The Medical Teacher*. London: Churchill Livingstone.

Forrester-Jones, R. (2003). Students' perceptions of teaching: The research is alive and well. *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education, 28*, 59–69.

Harden, R.M., & Crosby, J. (2000). AMEE Guide No 20: The good teacher is more than a lecturer – the twelve roles of the teacher. *Medical Teacher, 22*, 334–347.

Jules, V., & Kutnick, P. (1997). Student perceptions of a good teacher: the gender perspective. *British Journal of Educational Psychology. 67*, 497–511.

Knowles, A.J. (2001). Implementing web-based learning: Evaluation results from a mental health course. *Journal of Technology in Human Services, 18*, 171–187.

Laurillard, D. (1993). *Rethinking university teaching: A framework for the effective use of educational technology*. London: Routledge.

Murray, K., & MacDonald, R. (1997). The disjunction between lecturers' conceptions of teaching and their claimed educational practice. *Higher Education, 33*, 331–349.

Newble, D., & Cannon, R. (1995). *A handbook for teaching in universities and colleges*. London: Kogan Page.

O'Hagan, C. (1997). *Using educational media to improve communication and learning*. SEDA Special No. 4, SEDA: Birmingham.

Race, P. (2001). *The lecturer's toolkit: A practical guide to learning, teaching and assessment*. Kogan Page Ltd, UK.

Ramsden, P. (1992). *Learning to teach in higher rducation*. London: Routledge.

Reid, D.J., & Johnston, M. (1999). Improving teaching in higher education: Student and teacher perspectives. *Educational Studies, 25*, 269–281.

Sander, P., Stevenson, K., King, M., & Coates, D. (2000). University students' expectations of teaching. *Studies in Higher Education, 25*, 309–323.

Sanders, S. E. (2002). What do schools think makes a good mathematics teacher? *Educational Studies. 28*, 181–191.

Toohey, S. (1999). *Designing courses for higher education*. Milton Keyes, UK: Society for Research into Higher Education & Open University Press.

Westberg, J., & Jason, H. (1993). *Collaborative clinical education: The foundation of effective health care*. New York: Springer.