

A coaching psychology perspective

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JOHN RADFORD's paper is timely. He considers 'what is or should be the 'place' of Psychology in education, more particularly Higher Education'. *Psychology Teaching Review* is probably one of the most relevant publications for this subject to be debated and discussed. I want to look specifically at the possible inclusion of coaching psychology within undergraduate psychology programmes.

So what is coaching psychology? Descriptions are provided by the BPS Special Group in Coaching Psychology (SGCP) and the Australian Psychological Society, Interest Group in Coaching Psychology (IGCP):

'Coaching Psychology, as an applied positive psychology, draws on and develops established psychological approaches, and can be understood as being the systematic application of behavioural science to the enhancement of life experience, work performance and wellbeing for individuals, groups and organisations who do not have clinically significant mental health issues or abnormal levels of distress.'

(IGCP, 2008).

'Coaching Psychology is for enhancing well-being and performance in personal life and work domains, underpinned by models of coaching grounded in established adult learning or psychological approaches.'

(SGCP, 2008 adapted from Grant & Palmer, 2002)

Coaching psychology as an applied area of psychology underpinned by a body of theory and research could have a positive impact upon individuals, organisations and society. It is a relatively new field although the first book to have coaching psychology in the title appeared over 40 years ago, *Modern Coaching Psychology* by Curtiss Gaylord (1967). However, this book focused more on sports psychology. Coaching psychology also has two peer reviewed publications, both now abstracted in psycINFO. *The Coaching Psychol-*

ogist, published by the SGCP has its focus on Europe and has a European Editorial Board with representatives from some European psychological bodies. The *International Coaching Psychology Review* is published by the SGCP in collaboration with the IGCP. It is interesting to note that the SGCP is currently the third largest Society member network with more than 2000 members, about 50 per cent of whom are already chartered. In 2006 the SGCP held the 1st International Coaching Psychology Conference and this December, 2008 it will be holding the 1st European Coaching Psychology Conference. Recently an international professional body called the Society for Coaching Psychology has been launched which has set up codes of ethics and practice, course recognition and accreditation of coaching psychologists. I will return to why I'm labouring these points nearer the end of this article.

Radford states, 'In the Higher Education context itself, Psychology continues to be in demand'. There is no refuting this statement, the facts speak for themselves. It is the third most popular discipline to be studied in higher education. Psychology has been unintentionally promoted by the media on television, radio, internet and the press. Also television 'forensic psychologists' appear to have exciting careers yet mixed up lives, but of course, it is only fiction. However, it still probably partially responsible for attracting young people and adults into higher education psychology programmes. In addition, whereas a few decades ago it was the psychiatrist being interviewed by the media on psychological issues, invariably nowadays it is a psychologist, or somebody who claims to be a psychologist. Many young people want to be where the action is and psychology is where it's happening. Or so it seems.

Radford states,

'But what is offered in first degrees is largely dictated by the requirements of the Graduate Basis for Registration of the British Psychological Society (BPS). These have been criticised both as not ideal as professional preparation, and as being unsuited to the large majority of students who will not enter the restricted psychological professions.'

This is an interesting perspective and it raises a number of issues. I'll use my personal experience as an illustration and apologise for the self-referential aspects of this article. Due to my professional experience and relevant qualifications I am also chartered by two other professional bodies outside the field of psychology. In both instances graduate degrees in these other fields relate more closely to the area of practice. For example, once a student has passed the first degree (or similar qualification) in biology, with relevant continuing professional development, they can progress towards becoming chartered. However, the difference is that the graduate biology degree is possibly more relevant for the career path than the psychology degree. Of course, the argument is that psychology requires a higher level of attainment and many of the other professions either do not need this for practice or do not see the benefits. But recently we have seen the push for psychologists to hold psychology doctorates. If we as psychologists take an evidence-based approach to our practice, where is the research evidence that psychologists and their respective client groups actually benefit from the psychologists holding doctorates? I can only assume that the evidence is overwhelming as, unless I'm mistaken, this seems to be the direction we have been moving towards. Apparently in some domains of psychology a BSc and MSc in the relevant subjects plus supervised practice are not necessarily sufficient although they may have been some years ago. Perhaps this reflects the unstoppable march of progress and advancement in psychology.

This brings us to another issue raised by Radford as he reminds us that the large majority of students who gain their psychology

degree, do not enter the restricted psychology professions. You may wonder what happens – were they scarred by the degree experience, become bored by the subject or perhaps never wanted to become a psychologist anyway? Why don't they rush to join the Society? From their perspective, which is the important one to take, joining or remaining in the Society may give them very little benefit unless they intend taking a traditional route to qualification leading to chartership. (This process may become redundant with the advent of Health Professions Council registration of psychologists.) Unlike many other professional bodies, just as graduate members they do not gain post-nominal letters from their professional body so their three years hard work studying for their degree culminates in starting their professional training or going down a different career path. If they are not following an established route to chartership they may see the main benefit of membership as receiving the monthly issue of *The Psychologist*. Hopefully they may see other advantages too such as joining Society member networks.

Radford states,

'In the context of other disciplines, psychology (with some exceptions) largely fails to draw on other sources of knowledge about human behaviour, such as History and Anthropology, although there is increasing awareness of the importance of non-Western cultures.'

Perhaps the psychology degree has become too inward looking. However, hopefully lecturers will include some of this additional material in their seminars.

Radford also states,

'In a personal context, standard psychology degrees include little on personal values and beliefs, or such approaches as community, transpersonal, or positive psychology. It is suggested that psychology could and should be of greater value to both intending professionals and others, and ideally should be a component of the education of most if not all students.'

And this may be the crux of the debate – developing a psychology degree to become more relevant to professional practice. Currently the degree may ground the graduate psychologist in a variety of theories and

research methodology skills but further postgraduate studies and supervised practice are still essential. Many psychology graduates progress or slip into other professions such as human resources, management, consultancy, health or banking. So what useful theoretical and applied topics could be included in the psychology degree that they could use? Positive psychology which focuses on strengths could be an asset for the future. Perhaps including coaching psychology theory and practice as a module in a psychology degree could assist in these diverse careers as well as subsequent postgraduate psychology training for the small percentage that want to become professional psychologists. In fact the introduction of a coaching psychology module has happened on at least one UK psychology degree course. Perhaps the introduction of more applied areas in the graduate degree programmes may help with retention rates in psychology and prepare

our graduates for their future careers in a variety of professional fields. As in Casablanca, Rick shares with Louie that now famous line at the end of the film, 'I think this is the beginning of a beautiful friendship'. Psychology degrees are not moribund – they will change.

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