

'By the end of the course all students should know...': Setting coherent aims for the teaching of psychology in school, college and university

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AS RADFORD (2008) points out in *Psychology in its place*, the question of what role psychology should play in Higher Education is merely a subsection of the question, what is (Higher) Education for? In light of the large number of psychology undergraduates who do not go on to pursue careers in psychology, he argues cogently for a re-evaluation of the content and purpose of the psychology degree. This brief response goes further, however, to examine the coherence of the current provision for studying psychology in post-compulsory education in the UK, and to ask whether the time has come to think more widely about the role psychology could play in the education of all children in the UK, through its inclusion in the compulsory school curriculum.

Currently, the relationship between pre-university and undergraduate psychology in the UK is a peculiar one. A-level psychology is by far the most popular pre-university psychology course taken by students in England and Wales (arrangements are different in Scotland) and in 2004 around 55 per cent of first-year psychology undergraduates had passed psychology at A-level (Trapp, 2006). However, there are several A-level awarding bodies and each of them has its own psychology specification. This can make it difficult for university teachers of psychology to judge the knowledge and skills of students who arrive at university with the A-level qualification (Green, 2007). Furthermore, recent surveys carried out with first- and second-year

psychology undergraduates (Rowley, Hartley & Larkin, 2008; Rowley, Larkin & Hartley, 2008) suggest that many of those who have taken A-level psychology are surprised by specific aspects of their university course, in particular research methods and statistics and the emphasis on psychology as science. Recent changes to the A-level syllabus to introduce a 'How science works' strand in 2008 may help by identifying psychology more clearly as a science. However, much depends on how this is taught in schools and colleges, and currently there is a paucity of information available about the pre-university teaching of psychology and the people who teach it. Another, perhaps less positive, change means that there is no longer a requirement for A-level students to produce a piece of assessed coursework. Often this is the best opportunity they have of engaging actively with the process of psychological research, and this is something they will be expected to do a lot of at university.

Many undergraduate students also report difficulty with general university study issues such as managing workload and carrying out independent reading (Yorke & Longden, 2007). If A-level really is intended to be a good preparation for university study, there seems to be a good case for introducing a module to all A-level courses which demands that students' engage in some independent work, especially reading, around the subject. Whether their teachers would approve of this is open to question as, in a results-driven business, giving more

independence to students might not necessarily be seen as a positive move.

Of course, these comments assume that it is desirable to align students' experience of A-level psychology more closely with that of the degree. However, Radford's argument that degree content should be designed in order to be of 'greatest use' to students' potential careers and lives is equally relevant to the A-level. Just as most undergraduate psychology students do not eventually go into employment in the psychological professions, many 'A' level psychology students do not go on to study psychology at university. And some do not go on to university at all. This means that the A-level, as well as preparing budding psychology undergraduates, has to be of interest and utility for those who do not wish to study psychology further.

Finally, adjustments made to standardise psychology A-level across awarding bodies, or to help make it a firmer stepping-stone into university study, will not help the many students who are accepted onto psychology degree courses having taken other pre-university qualifications (e.g. Access) or who have A-levels, but not in psychology. As long as such students are enrolled on psychology degree courses, university teachers will still be faced with first-year cohorts in possession of a perplexing mixture of expectations and experiences. One way around this would be to make psychology A-level a prerequisite for studying psychology at university (Toal, 2008). However, this would not fit with the UK Government's existing widening participation agenda as it would exclude students with atypical entrance qualifications from psychology courses. Furthermore, it would also have a detrimental effect upon the number of students applying to university to study psychology. This would be unpopular generally with universities and psychology departments and particularly with departments whose intake is made up largely of 'atypical' students without the A-level.

At this point we seem to have reached an impasse. The current system dictates that

university psychology departments accept students onto their course who have different levels of pre-university experience of (and presumably different expectations about) the subject. In response, psychology departments recognise this and many operate on the basis of taking little note of these prior experiences in attempting to bring everyone up to speed by the end of the first year. Recent research suggests that this might be a reasonably successful strategy. A-level psychology entry qualifications appear to predict success during the first-year of university psychology but prior experience of psychology is a poor predictor of overall degree performance (Betts et al., in press). Therefore, while the interface between A-level and degree level study isn't perfect, it seems to be working at the moment and, as many will say, 'If it ain't broke, why fix it?'

There are good grounds, however, to take stock of the current situation and to reshape it into something more coherent within a wider framework that sets out how the subject of psychology should be taught in tertiary, secondary and possibly even primary education. As many of the most intractable problems faced by society have behavioural implications (e.g. inter-group conflict, anti-social behaviour, health-related behaviour, environmental issues) there is a strong argument that psychology should be seen as a vital element in the education of all our children. Furthermore, the inclusion of psychology as part of the science curriculum will provide science teachers with an important medium through which the process of science can be introduced in schools. It has been suggested that psychology as science is too young, with too many questions yet to be answered (or even thought of). However, psychology offers fertile ground for the presentation of science as a process of theory development and testing, and it can provide a useful antidote to students who think that science is solely about finding out the facts.

There are practical problems involved with introducing psychology into the compulsory school curriculum and, justifiably, teachers

will say that the curriculum is already too crowded. As has been suggested in the US, however, a realistic short-term solution would be to introduce psychology into the curriculum at points where, implicitly, it already exists: in areas such as personal and social education or literature, and by expanding science education to include a psychological context. An example they provide is to relate the physics of light to the human visual system. (APA, 2001). In the UK this could be done prior to Key Stage 4, following which 14- to 16-year-old students could opt to take psychology at GCSE level.

Although GCSE psychology has been in existence for a number of years now few schools currently include it in their syllabus. As a GCSE science subject, psychology would undoubtedly be a popular choice amongst students. It is possible, therefore, that greater integration of psychology into the school curriculum could have the effect of reducing the gender imbalance (currently standing at approximately four females to every male) in the take-up of 'A'- and degree-level courses. Furthermore, its inclusion as a school subject would probably lead to the resolution of the sticky issue relating to the training of psychology teachers. As psychology is not currently part of the compulsory school curriculum, this has led to problems for psychology graduates wishing to teach in schools. Many are only qualified to teach post-16 students, while teacher training for schools is focused upon core curriculum subjects. The removal of this anomaly would be a welcome step towards acknowledging psychology as a key subject and standardising

the teaching of psychology in UK schools. GCSE psychology would then provide the basic grounding for students wishing to move on to A-level and, possibly, to degree-level study.

In Radford's terms, our challenge is to decide how the discipline of psychology should be presented by psychology the subject at each educational level, taking into account the aims of the course, the aspirations of the students and, at higher levels, the requirements of professional bodies. In doing so, we should be able to specify the knowledge and skills students should possess on successful completion of each of their psychology courses. We should also be clear about why these outcomes are important: whether they provide a foundation for future study, furnish individuals with skills required for employment or simply enhance their ability to understand and interact more successfully with their environment. Finally, in presenting a coherent picture of the discipline of psychology to our students we should ensure that, even at more basic levels, the subject of psychology emphasises the scientific nature of psychology the discipline. This will help to set appropriate expectations for those who wish to continue with their studies at a higher level and can help to provide all psychology students with important insights into the nature of science.

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