It is not what we teach but the way that we teach it

Annie Trapp

JOHN RADFORD's article *Psychology in its place* makes some keen observations around the current status of psychology education. The opportunity to respond is welcome. For my part, I will focus on undergraduate psychology education and the 'responsible autonomy' of psychology educators.

Few would argue with Radford that psychology as a discipline involves a need for a scientific approach to investigating 'a set of problems that appear to be related' and therein lies a responsibility for Higher Education to offer psychology programmes that are fit for purpose in providing the next generation of research psychologists. In this respect, a strength of the current Graduate Basis for Registration for accredited undergraduate degrees is the requirement to include a strong element of practical work, a research project work and training in different methodologies thus providing a good basis for the development of the academic skills required to analyse and problem-solve in order to undertake research within the discipline.

Similarly, we can agree that psychology can never be wholly represented in textbooks and course curricula. We expect psychology undergraduates to learn a body of knowledge but not as an end in itself. It is the ability to understand, extend or apply their knowledge that will be most useful to themselves in a personal context and in their role in society. Again, the ability to analyse and problem-solve are core desired skills.

Radford is right to be concerned about the employability of psychology graduates. Psychology educators have a responsibility to help potential and current students understand what is involved in studying psychology, to prepare them to 'think psychologically' and to develop skills that can be applied in the real world. But students also need to learn how to articulate their skill-set in a way that is meaningful to future employers. Designing a viable educational framework to acquire, develop and practise these skills is, in my view, every bit as important as determining the finer details of course content.

Radford considers the fractionation of psychology, giving credence to those who consider that psychology should not be viewed as a single and coherent discipline (Koch,1993); that psychological studies or psychological sciences are more appropriate terms. From this perspective, the appropriate core domains to be covered by an undergraduate studying should surely depend on the purpose of the particular undergraduate programme. Encouraging variation, it can be argued, has more integrity for students and employers alike as it allows for programme leaders to develop learning outcomes that relate to particular needs of society and, build on departmental strengths that are determined by the professional and research interests of its teaching staff. With innovation comes risk but with appropriate quality enhancement and assurance mechanisms in place such risk can be evaluated and managed.

Of course, as many readers are aware, this process has already begun and is likely to increase rapidly. In the UK the number of unaccredited courses with a major or minor psychology component is increasing. Psychology is widely taught to other professions, often by non-psychologists, not only at HE level but also in a plethora of FE courses

related to childcare and healthcare and, if current plans proceed, in the new 14-19 Diplomas for Science and the Humanities and Social Science Diploma. Similarly, courses that cross subject boundaries are available although few manage to achieve true interdisciplinary. The government, through the sector skills councils, actively encourages the development of competency-based shorter courses in conjunction with local employers or national service providers such as the National Health Service; the training of low-intensity cognitive behavioural therapists being one example. Here we have the content of psychology education being commissioned by a variety of sources driven by the particular social needs and aspirations of individuals, society and government.

My point is that there is already considerable variation in the content of psychology education driven by market forces but, provided quality mechanisms are in place, this should not be the main focus of concern. Far more important is the need to provide undergraduate psychology students with an appropriate learning environment. Radford's definition for a desired graduate outcome of responsible autonomy as 'the ability to make and carry out one's own decisions, always having regard to the welfare of others' is equally relevant for psychology educators.

We can apply our own psychological knowledge to addressing some of the problems raised by Radford, through the application of the cognitive, metacognitive and motivational skills necessary for problem-solving (Mayer, 1998). His article sets out the declarative knowledge for us to consider but as psychologists we also possess procedural knowledge, for example understanding how we learn, that can be applied to the way in which we set-up the learning experience for undergraduate students. Yet many lecturers are: content to deliver curricula through lectures that require little or no interaction from students; quick to bemoan students' lack of interest or motivation in seminars without building in active learning tasks that would achieve the required learning outcomes; and are content to assess performance rather than learning. Whilst Radford's article is an exemplary example of metacognitive processes at work, how often do we ourselves reflect on our performance as psychology educators or indeed carry out research to evidence our self-beliefs? Perhaps it is the motivational aspect of problem-solving that is lacking; the motivation to use our psychological understanding to challenge existing norms within psychology education or to debate Higher Education practices such as modularisation, assessment methods and student satisfaction surveys.

Radford is not alone in questioning the purpose of psychology at this time. There is growing international debate, albeit with an aspirational flavour of what psychology education should be about. At both the International Conference on the Teaching of Psychology and the International Congress of Psychology in 2008, a number of papers addressed issues around the social responsibility of psychologists, the relativity of Western psychology and the role of professional psychologists. In June 2008, American Psychological Association's (APA) *National Conference on Undergraduate Education in Psychology*, took place at the University of Puget Sound. This week-long conference with around 90 psychologists from around the world were charged with rewriting the way the psychology discipline is taught at all levels in colleges and universities, seeking answers to the critical questions that will decide the future of their discipline, and exploring how to best arrange learning activities so students of Psychology will have the knowledge and skills to deal effectively and ethically with a host of complex issues. The outcomes of the nine working groups will form *Undergraduate Education in Psychology: A Blueprint for the Future of the Discipline*, to be published by the American Psychological Association.

As the popularity of psychology, in many guises, continues to increase it is not impossible to imagine a time when the majority of graduates, and maybe even school-leavers,

will have taken at least one module in psychology. Let us keep in mind that they are likely to remember more about how they learnt than what they learnt.

Address for correspondence
Annie Trapp, Director, The Higher Education, Academy Psychology Network, University of York, York YO10 5NH.
E-mail: a.trapp@psych.york.ac.uk

References

Koch, S. (1993). 'Psychology' or the 'psychological studies'. *American Psychologist, 48*, 902–904.

Mayer, R.E. (1998). Cognitive, metacognitive, and motivational aspects of problem-solving. *Instructional Science, 26*, 49–63.