Open Dialogue:

Reflections on 50 years of teaching psychology

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There have been great changes in the numbers of students studying psychology at degree level in the UK since 1961 – the year I graduated. And, similarly there have been great changes in what is taught – with an ever-widening set of theoretical developments and practical applications. Nonetheless, despite these developments, I argue that the teaching of psychology has not altered very much in its approach during the last 50 years. Lectures, tutorials, lab classes and essay-type examinations still dominate the timetable.

The early years

IN 1964, when I arrived as assistant lecturer in the Department of Psychology at Keele University, I was one of a team comprising one Professor (the department head) and five other lecturers/assistant lecturers[1]. The students were about to start on their second-year of a new course that had been established in psychology the year before. There were about 20 of them. I tried in vain to obtain from Prof. Hunter what he would like me to do – and after explicitly asking twice and being told – 'do what you think best' – I developed a lecture/tutorial and lab course on the psychology of learning. In those days there were no notions of module- and course-requirements, teaching committees, groups of departments in discipline-based schools, central or even departmental quality control. Prof. Hunter, appointed Head of the Department until he retired (early) in 1982, took responsibility supported by external examiners. There was a great sense of innovation but, as in 1964 there was no research money and no equipment (or even technical staff) at this then 'new' university, I began my research on university teaching methods to accompany my interests in learning and new technology.

In those days the teaching psychology was confined to a small number of universities and one or two polytechnics[2], and there were no school A-levels[3] in psychology. Most staff and students were male, and there were few mature students. Student numbers were small (there were only eight of us in 1958–1961 – my years as an undergraduate psychologist). It was not until the mid 1960s that more and more universities began to introduce psychology courses.

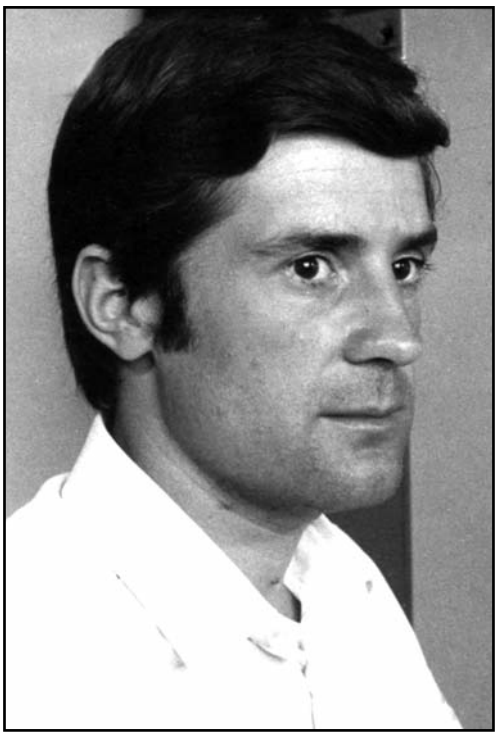
Growing numbers

The major changes in teaching psychology have come from coping with its growth in schools and universities. As noted, the number of universities expanded in the 1960s and then enormously so in 1992 when 43 Polytechnics became universities at the stroke of a pen. A-level psychology was introduced in 1970. Today there are over 60,500 university students studying psychology (full- and part-time) per year at degree level (HESA, 2010) and about 60,000 students studying it per year at A-level. Indeed, A-level

[1] At that time most university departments in the UK had a single Professor who was appointed head 'for life' or until retirement. Then there might be a Senior Lecture, Lecturers, and Assistant Lecturers.

[2] Polytechnics provided practical/less academic qualifications for school-leavers.

[3] A-level stands for 'Advanced' for 16- to 18-year-olds as opposed to O-level which stands for 'Ordinary' level for 15-year-olds. O-level psychology (mainly child development) was introduced in the 1980s in some schools, but disappeared with the advent of the National Curriculum [see [9]].



James Hartley (1965)
(Photo courtesy Harry Birchall)

psychology is currently the fourth highest A-level in the country in terms of popularity (Walker, 2010). Today more women than men study psychology at university (roughly 70:30) and over half of the students are 'mature' ones – if you define students starting over the age of 21 as 'mature'. Similar increases have also occurred in the number of postgraduates studying for PhDs in psychology, and recently in the number of master's students wishing to enter psychology professions. A further development is that large numbers of undergraduates and postgraduates now work part-time to help them pay for their degree courses – with consequent effects for undergraduates on their exam performance (Callender, 2008).

Responses to growth

How far has the teaching of psychology changed to meet these developments? Quite a lot, but not always for the best, I am tempted to reply. (In reading the following personal account the reader has to bear in mind that at Keele psychology comprises *one-half* of a dual-honours degree[4] – with over 30 subject combinations possible: see Keele's heritage webpage for details.) In 1964 we taught by lectures and tutorials[5], and there was a weekly lab class. There were three or four students in each tutorial group, and they each wrote one or two essays and lab reports a term (but then there were three terms per year rather than two semesters[6]). Few, if any of these students, worked part-time to fund their study. There were few, if any, student presentations. Achievement was assessed at the end of the winter and summer terms by essay-type examinations. In 'finals'[7] students were typically expected to answer three or four questions out of 10 on five three-hour papers (typically nine or 10 papers in single-honours departments – see Warr, 2001, for actual examples) and to write up their individual final-year projects. Course-work assessment was not initially included in these early summative assessments.

New ways of organising the course came and went. In 1971 one of our finals papers was a 'seen' paper, given out several months in advance. This consisted of a list of some 15 or so psychology books, one of which had to be chosen for review, and a similar list of some 15 or so single word or short phrase titles, one of which to be chosen for an essay (Hunter & Muir, 1978). For a period students were allowed to choose in their second year one out of three possible courses in each of the three terms, and for a period we toyed with Part I and II examina-

[4] At that time there were few universities in the UK that offered joint or dual honours degrees.

[5] A 'tutorial' was where three or four students met with a tutor to discuss some specified reading. Tutorials at Oxford or Cambridge would consist of a single student writing and reading out his/her essay once a week to a tutor.

[6] Most universities began the change from a three-term system to a two-semester modular system in about 1993.

[7] 'Finals' was the name given to the final year exams.

tions at the ends of Years 2 and 3. For a time too we had a small animal laboratory – the *sine qua non* of psychology departments at that time – (although ours had gerbils rather than rats or monkeys). This disappeared too as we progressed into the 1980s.

But essentially the structure (at Keele) has not changed much over 50 years. We still use lectures and (on some courses fortnightly) tutorials, and we still have lab classes, statistics and research classes. Our tutorials are larger (with about 15 students in each) and our lab classes are repeated to confine the numbers to about 50 per session (split into to smaller groups). Sometimes only parts of the lab work are written up (e.g. the method) and only one essay is required per semester. Students have little choice over what they study, except in the final year. Some new additions to teaching and assessment, however, include second-year student mentors for first-year students, work placements for some students, students giving presentations in tutorials and all designing posters. There is now more variation in assessment methods (although the book review paper has long since gone). Multiple-choice tests (unheard of, or frowned upon in the 1960s as a method for assessing undergraduates) are now used in addition to essay-type examinations. Marks on second-year modules contribute 50 per cent toward the final grade in psychology (when before they did not), and marks on contributions in the final year (based on coursework and two-hour examinations) contribute 100 per cent each, as does the final-year project. The 'formula' for combining the different sets of marks from the two different disciplines that students study at Keele to arrive at their overall joint degree-class has been simplified (leading to higher results, of course). Finally, I note that there is little self- and peer-assessment, if any, and PhD and Masters theses are still submitted in the standard formats.

What has also changed, of course, is the size of the operation (there are now about 200 students per year rather than 20) and the administrative specifications and record-keeping – designed to ensure parity between courses, procedures, and assessments within psychology and the other subjects that are combined with it. Dodson (2010) provides a useful description of the complexities of administrating the UK modular system – where marks on modules are combined with different weightings over the years to create a final degree classification – compared with the relative simplicity of that in the US where most modules are marked independently (although some are pre-requisites for others) and students receive a final transcript listing the modules taken with their grades, together with an overall 'grade-point average'.

In addition, the technology used to assist with this heavy load of management, teaching, learning and assessment has changed. The 'net-generation' of students and staff now communicate by email, Facebook and podcasts. Lectures are mainly driven by PowerPoint slides. Lecture notes and materials, and relevant journal articles are posted on the web. Essays and reports are submitted electronically and anti-plagiarism software is used. Multiple-choice tests can now be taken electronically, and no doubt this will apply one day to conventional written exams (Mogey et al., 2010). Thus teaching methods have changed a bit – sometimes for the better and sometimes less so. Some methods are less didactic, some more so. But – at Keele at least – it is hard not to think that newer technologies are being used more to replace what was done before, and to do it more efficiently with larger numbers, rather than change the nature or the philosophy of the teaching.

Research on the teaching of psychology

Research on the teaching of psychology during this 50-year period has fallen into different camps, only three of which I will outline here. First there have been comparison studies between different ways of doing things and studies of ways of doing something better (such as taking notes and writing essays). Second there has been a great

deal of interest in teachers' and students' approaches to study and their implications for teaching. And third, there have been related arguments for developing student-centred as opposed to topic-driven learning – encapsulated by the lecture method.

Some current examples of studies of ways of doing something different – or better – can be found in studies of podcasting and aspects of using the learning platform WebCT (for example, Daniel & Woody, 2010; Marsh & Sink, 2010; Sambrook & Rowley, 2010). These debates about the value of podcasts and the use of handouts from PowerPoint slides reflect those of earlier studies on the use of audiotapes and printed handouts in lectures. But most of these modern studies typically proceed with no reference to this earlier work, and still take an 'either/or' approach to determining 'which is best' – when clearly what is needed are studies of the relative strengths and weaknesses of different methods in different contexts (for example, van Zanten, Somogyi & Curro, 2012).

Research on students' approaches to learning have taken place in the context of: (i) the hotly contested issue of whether or not there are 'learning styles' (e.g. Pashler et al., 2008); and (ii) whether or not students can be categorised as preferring 'surface', 'deep', and/or 'strategic' approaches to study (Entwistle, 2010; Richardson, 2005). These issues have also been explored with teachers as well as students, and what teachers and students might do to make teaching more effective (Entwistle, 2009). Generally speaking, faculty believe, in principle, that they should teach for deep learning but in practice they unwittingly do the opposite through their use of didactic methods and inauthentic assessment methods (Knapper, 2010). At the time of writing there is great interest in the data to be gained from the latest UK national undergraduate and postgraduate student experience questionnaires, and how these might be used to help make teaching more effective.

Examples of calls for reform in how and what we teach in psychology have no doubt been made since the teaching of psychology began, and a paper by Warr (1973) is a typical example of one on these from the 1970s. Several other papers in *Psychology Teaching Review* are of interest in this respect (e.g. Banyard, 2010; Brown, 1977; Radford, 2008; Richards, 1994; and the follow-up papers to these articles in the same or subsequent issues). Calls for reform of course are easy to make: implementing them in large departments delivering professional qualifications at the behest of the British Psychological Society[8] is, of course, a different matter.

Nonetheless, different departments do different things differently, and these different activities do get reported. In 1973, for example, I summarised the new approaches to teaching psychology that were being tried out at that time in the UK (Hartley, 1973). Clearly many individual members of staff were trying to make their lectures, approaches and content more relevant for their students. No doubt similar replies would be obtained today if I asked again. Likewise, if Radford, van Laar and Rose were to publish a second edition of their 1998 text on innovations in psychology teaching, similar results would be found, but perhaps with a greater emphasis on new technology. Other small-scale research activities on the teaching of psychology are reported regularly in the publications *Psychology Teaching Review*, *Psychology Learning and Teaching*, and *Teaching of Psychology* and in the Higher Education Academy Psychology Network's *Newsletter*.

These studies of changes and innovations suggest that much is going on, but in my judgement it is piecemeal, and it requires charismatic teachers to make it work. Indeed, in the past, such charismatic teachers became so successful that they had their new methods named after then – for example, the 'Keller plan' or 'personalised instruction' (Keller, 1968). However, the

[8] The British Psychological Society (BPS) is the professional body for psychologists in the UK.

Keller plan did not take off in the UK, perhaps because it was too behavioural for us, or it did not fit in with how we taught at that time, and Keller's views of personalised instruction have now virtually disappeared – even in the US and Canada.

Learning how students learn

It is now 20 years or so since the start of the National Curriculum in the UK[9]. This means that our current students have been taught in school from prescribed sets of notes, regularly assessed, and know how many marks each question on an exam paper is 'worth'. Today's students expect university teaching and learning to follow the same path. Many think that if a topic is not going to be on the exam it should not be taught or studied. And, as students now have to pay for their university education, many are more instrumental than before, and (with some wonderful exceptions), more afraid of following their own paths. And, to crown it all, from 2010, there will be no compulsory assessment for laboratory-type coursework at A-level – so this crucial feature of psychology will no doubt disappear when it is most required.

In addition, our newest lecturers in psychology in the UK, just beginning their first appointments, will also have experienced the National Curriculum and its approaches to learning. Quite what effect this will have on their attitudes to teaching and researching in psychology remains to be seen…

On a more positive note, one difference, compared with the 1960s, is that new lecturers today are now required to undertake training in teaching and learning and in how to evaluate both. Gosling (2009) provides an interesting account of these developments. The gains might be modest from such training, but at least it will alert our new lecturers to issues that they may have not thought much about before, particularly about how different and weaker students learn. Indeed, there is some indication that such staff development courses do have significant effects on teaching (e.g. Brew & Ginns, 2008; Cilliers & Herman, 2010; Gibbs & Coffey, 2004, Knapper, 2010) although not always (e.g. van Keulen, 2009). Today effective teaching is higher on the agenda and it is recognised by both staff and students, and the British Psychological Society (with its teaching award). Keele, for example, (and no doubt other universities) has recently implemented student-nominated awards for effective teaching (and psychology has won three so far)! Furthermore, four psychology teachers were among the 50 lecturers and learning support staff awarded UK National Teaching Fellowships in 2010.

In addition there is now a steady stream of textbooks related to aspects of teaching relevant to psychology, as well as the journals mentioned above (e.g. Buskist & Davis, 2006; Upton & Trapp, 2010). It is perhaps invidious not to mention all of them, but ones that I find particularly useful are those by Christensen Hughes and Mighty (2010), Entwistle (2009) and McKeachie and Svinicki (2006).

Concluding remarks

Why then, despite all of the above, do I think that not much has fundamentally changed in our approaches to the *teaching* of psychology? We appear to use much the same methods but in different circumstances: lecturing to large classes is more efficient than lecturing to small ones, but this is not true for tutorial and lab type teaching. The content of what we teach has changed – and broadened – for the better, and the students are much more diverse, but we still seem to teach in much the same way. There appear to be three inter-related reasons for this:

1. The British Psychological Society has always had a firm grip over the curriculum, and the methods used to teach and assess it. Although thankfully

[9] The National Curriculum, introduced in 1988, specifies what should be taught and how it should be taught and assessed in primary and secondary schools.

recently modified (see BPS, 2010) departments offering dual-honours degrees, such as Keele, are particularly restricted by the need to cover the basic topics required if their students are to obtain the recognition required to qualify as an accredited psychologist. This does not leave these departments with much space to teach different psychological approaches and to cover all the many topics of current interest to students.

2. We are the victims of our own success. The vast increase in student numbers, and the (relative) reductions in staff sizes and resources over the last 50 years has meant that it is not possible to teach psychology in ways that are always desirable. Students cannot discuss their individual work with tutors in classes of 15 or so. Staff-student 'contact-hours' seem to be limited to one or two a week, and not many students can avail themselves of this luxury. And it is virtually impossible, except perhaps in 'special options' in the third year, for students to work together with tutors on topics of their own choosing. Large numbers prevent individual tuition.
3. Managerialism has prevailed in British universities. 'Administration' can now take up several hours a week (Dodson, 2010), and it is instructive to note that the proportion of administrators to academics at the University of Keele in 2010 is 52:48. Thus there is massive control over what teachers do in the interests of fairness to all students. In addition managerialism leads to gobbledygook like this:

   The importance of developing capability and capacity in the next cohort of leaders working with professional groups is key to Keele's vision of flexible and adaptable staff able to engage with and respond to, the significant changes which all Higher Education organisations will be facing in the future. In support of this vision and following extensive consultation with members of the Senior Management team, Directors of Support Directorates, Faculty and School Business Managers and Senior School Managers, the Centre for Professional Development has developed an innovative development programme for professional managers with a practical interest in further developing their skills in leadership and management…'

All of this seems a far cry from when, in 1964, I was told to do whatever I thought best.

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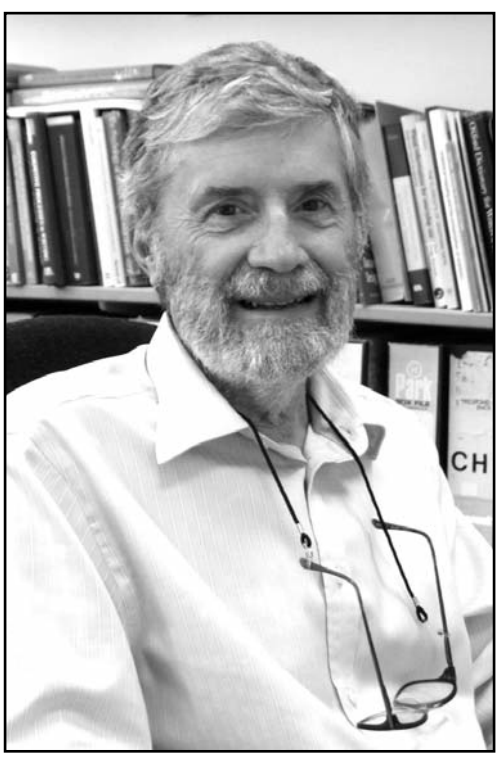

James Hartley (2008)
(Photo courtesy John Coleman)

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