Open Dialogue peer review:
A response to Hartley

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In responding to Hartley (2011), this paper considers his concluding remarks as recommendations for the future of teaching undergraduate psychology and challenges the position that the teaching of psychology hasn't altered vastly during the last 50 years. In doing so, it is acknowledged that the content and delivery of higher education psychology is externally constrained, but argues that departments have flexibility to innovate, excite and enthuse students whilst aligning teaching practices and assessment with employability skills. Further the article is positioned against the backdrop of rapid changes and challenges facing the sector.

IN CONCLUDING HIS REFLECTIONS on 50 years of teaching psychology, Hartley (2012), argues that the restrictive, albeit revised, curricula imposed by the British Psychological Society (BPS, 2010), the ever increasing materialistic and administrative culture permeating British Universities, and the popularity of undergraduate (60,500 university students studying psychology full- or part-time, HESA, 2010) and pre-tertiary psychology, when coupled with stagnated teaching methods has prevented the teaching of the discipline from fundamental advances ahead.

Further, Hartley (2012), suggests that whilst content has broadened, student cohorts have diversified and forums discussing best practice in teaching psychology (for example, *Psychology Teaching Review*) have emerged, little has changed with respect to the choices students have over what they study and how material is delivered. Further, Hartley (2012), suggests that upon entering teaching in higher education he had freedom to adopt his own teaching approach, content and assessment modes, and that whilst Keele's psychology department embellished an ethos of innovation, it struggled against 'traditional' Universities in attracting external funding, equipment and staff. In reflecting on some of Hartley's (2012), more pertinent observations this article, amongst other things, will challenge the notion that delivery modes and assessment are stagnated, and explore the issues facing 'new' lectures entering higher education, whilst aligning itself with the numerous calls for reform in terms of both what is taught and how it is delivered (e.g. Banyard, 2010; Radford, 2008).

The popularity of psychology has made the discipline a victim of its own success (Hartley, 2012), particularly with regard to large class sizes affording students little opportunity for small-scale tutorial interaction. This is an interesting and timely observation, particularly when the socio-political context and the stark challenges facing higher education in a post-Browne (Browne, 2010) era are taken into consideration. The dichotomatic relationship between intuitions seeking to recoup their operating costs, balance their budget sheets and remain competitive in a fierce open market, whilst providing a quality provision, excellent teaching and learning experience and high levels of graduate employability couldn't be more strained. Although large class sizes are alluring in reducing costs and providing quick financial fixes (Cuseo, 2007), students factor class size into their decision making process when choosing where to study, and negatively appraise courses where class sizes are large (Bedard & Kuhn, 2008; Westerlund, 2008). As the cap on student numbers is tipped to dissipate as 2012 looms, this provides an ever-increasing tension between students, who quite rightly,

demand quality of provision including small class sizes, and institutions desperately trying to remain financially solvent. Some 'core' psychology undergraduate modules, and often those directly mapped against Quality Assurance Agency benchmarking criteria (QAA, 2010) result in large class sizes of more than 150 students. Whilst all universities and psychology departments have to work within such tensions, not all offer students the opportunity for seminars and further tutorials to discuss work despite the educational limitations of learning in large class sizes being well documented (Dillon, Kokkelenberg & Christy, 2002).

Kember et al. (2005), caveat the unilateral detrimental effect of large class sizes *per se*, arguing that whilst large class sizes may promote surface rather than deep learning approaches (Entwistle, 2010), student attendance may actually increase since surface learning approaches require further lecturer interaction since 'the only guidance as to what to study comes from the lecturer' (p.339). Further, research has questioned whether student attainment is affected by a reduction in staff-student ratio afforded by large class sizes (Lopus & Maxwell, 1995; Kerr, 2001). The issue of large class sizes in psychology is particularly problematic when the teaching of research methods and statistics is taken into consideration. Such modules are either structured as distinct research methods-based, followed by a further statistics module, or in a more integrated approach. Either way, research methods and statistics continue to promote both anxiety and stress in students (Snelgar, Porter & Cartwright, 2005) underpinned by negative attitudes towards the subject (Ruggeri et al., 2008). Although many research methods-based modules involve a practical-based element delivered in small classes (frequently in computer laboratories), thus demonstrating some aspects of best-practice in enabling students to reflect upon and engage with material (Biggs, 2003; Race, 2001), they are often preceded by large class lectures or demonstrations. Jones (2009), in agreement with Hartley (2011), acknowledges the rigidity of approach adopted in such modules, which fails to excite and enthuse students in a traditionally difficult area to teach. The adoption of large lecture-based teaching support by smaller seminar groups is endemic of many psychology departments and is likely to continue at best, and increase at worst, within the current higher education climate.

In his reflection, Hartley (2011), suggests psychology students (and staff) were predominately male and very few were classed as 'mature' students. Through widening participation schemes and the popularity of psychology, this picture has changed dramatically, with many psychology cohorts dominated by females and containing a healthy number of students returning to education. Barlow and Antoniou (2007), suggest widening participation coupled with a reduction in the level of autonomy (in part as a result of increased institutional administrative duties) and a focus on teaching quality enhancement place ever-increasing pressures on new teaching staff. This was further exacerbated when students demonstrate an unwillingness to study, yet continually require support and guidance. Whilst many UK institutions require new teaching staff to either hold or complete a postgraduate certificate of higher education (PGCert) or equivalent, and provide some form of mentoring, it is widely acknowledged that the support mechanisms for new staff remain problematic and echo Hartley's (2011), suggestion that upon entering teaching he was told *'do what you think best'*. Where this has changed, however, is with regard to the content, delivery and assessment modes available to staff since these are often constrained by internal and external quality procedures (BPS, 2010; QAA, 2010). Yet, whilst acknowledging such constraints, (limited) flexibility remains, particularly in relation to teaching methods and assessment, and is an area highly favoured by new teaching staff (Barlow & Antoniou, 2007).

Hartley (2012), suggests research on the teaching of psychology can be broadly split into three groups; comparative studies on teaching in different ways, student and lecturer approaches to learning and student-centred versus topic-driven learning. Whilst Hartley (2012), touches on the role of modern technology in reflecting on comparative studies, where computer-based learning is pitted against traditional methods, the role of technology in teaching could arguably help to drive an increase in student-centred learning, and sit more holistically alongside other teaching methods.

The pervasive nature of technology further exploited by mobile devices offering fast mobile internet access akin to 'traditional' computers and the sheer ubiquity of the internet (70 per cent of UK households, ONS, 2009), has provided higher education with a unique opportunity and challenge. Student engagement in online activity has both increased and learners are more mobile in their approaches to accessing information (Catling & Mason, 2009), El-Hussein & Cronje, 2010). Furthermore the use of podcasts, 'the technology of distributing sound or video files to users' (Brown & Green, 2007) provides educators with an opportunity to provide news items, additional lecture material, course notices, guidelines on tutorials and updates on current issues (Rudel, 2006). Such use of podcast technology is likely to increase both with the further adoption of Internet use and as the number of digital MP3 players continues to expand (Ellis, 2006, as cited in Brown & Green, 2007). Podcasts, however, do not necessarily need to replace 'traditional' teaching approaches and whilst Hartley (2012), argues that their adoption and continued use is debated in a similar way to PowerPoint handouts, this perhaps misses the unique opportunities afforded by such technology. Podcasts have been used to alleviate student anxiety prior to assessment (Chan & Lee, 2005) and as a revision tool (Evans, 2008), thus supplementing lecture material. Whilst, it is also acknowledged that podcasts may reduce student attendance (Lane, 2006), such an issue is multi-faceted with podcasts not necessarily being the causal factor. Financial hardship and the demands of full- or part-time employment alongside studying have frequently been linked to attendance (Cooper et al., 2002; Little, 2002). In turn, podcasts may provide students with the flexibility to choose which aspects of their course they physically attend and which aspects are 'virtually' attended.

Where technology has been little utilised, however, is with regard to assessment. In reporting the use of podcasts as a mechanism for assessment, particularly with regard to generating content to be shared with a peer group, Dale and Povey (2009), suggest that students both engage with the process, enjoy creating material and that the activity develops a range of academic and practical skills aligned with employability. Other uses of technology in assessment include PebblePad (a web-based electronic portfolio system) and video-based diaries. Such mechanisms for assessment provide students with the opportunity for formative feedback ahead of summative assessment, which is important in affording educators with the opportunity to assess student performance (Boston, 2002), is linked to student retention (Yorke, 2001), and 'aids student learning through helping students to consolidate and reflect on their learning, identify gaps in their knowledge and encourages the identification of transferable skills' (Jones, 2009, p.76). The role of transferable skills and the alignment of assessment outcomes with employability remains of critical importance, and is one area where psychology departments should focus their attention. Despite the aspirations of many of the 11,290 psychology graduates in 2006 (HESA, 2006), wishing to pursue a career as a 'professional psychologist', 9032 progressed into other careers. Whilst, the proportion of students (20:80) is roughly the same each year, employability of psychology graduates declined by 25 per cent between 2007–2009 (HESA, 2009). Aligning assessments with

skills demanded by employers in a tough economic market, and making students accurately aware of the skills that they have, is an area where psychology can progress.

Whilst the taught content on psychology undergraduate programmes remains relatively constrained, despite repeated calls for change (Banyard, 2010; Radford, 2008), the adoption of more flexible and innovative assessment methods may also afford students with more control over the content. Hartley (2012), argues that prescriptive course-content prevents departments from teaching different psychological approaches and covering topics of interest to students. Whilst not in total disagreement with this sentiment, it could be argued that negotiated student-centred assessment approached through the perspective of action-research (Reason, 1994), and utilising an alternative format (podcasts or e-portfolio, for example) not only align with employability skills, but provide students with the opportunity to cover topics of interest to them within the remit of the prescriptive curriculum. Working with students in a more collaborative way further provides new lectures opportunities to reflect on their teaching practices, and to research teaching in psychology, helping to alleviate the role conflict centred around research and teaching (Barlow & Antoniou, 2007). Furthermore, carefully considering where accredited components are placed throughout the degree programme enables further flexibility in taught content.

Many of Hartley's (2012) reflections, and perhaps frustrations (course content, topic versus student centred teaching, large class sizes) remain pertinent to the teaching of psychology 50 years later, however, what has changed, and is in part reflective of the changing ways technology is used, is how material is delivered and assessed. Whilst Hartley (2012), suggests technology has been used comparatively with 'traditional' modes, it is argued that technology can be used in a more integrative way to help teach and assess psychology, but moreover it can afford students with the opportunities to be creative and flexible, whilst enabling formative feedback to be gained and aligning with employability skills. Arguably, this is where the key difference between the teaching of psychology now lies, particularly when graduate confidence employment is at a 15-year low (High Fliers Research, 2010).

Although calls for changes to the BPS curricula remain constant, this is unlikely to change in the short-term, and whilst restrictive, the curriculum does provide an aspect of quality and consistency across accredited programmes, which in turn may be beneficial to the on-going recruitment of students onto psychology undergraduate programmes. Likewise, student numbers are likely to increase in the 2011–2012 academic year placing further pressure on class sizes, and whilst a temporary decline may occur in 2012 due to increased tuition fees and the decline in the number of 18 to 19 years (QAA, 2010), this remains highly speculative. Higher education institutions, are likely to favour large class sizes and courses where combined teaching can occur to help reduce overheads, maximise resources and reduce the estate footprint, therefore increasing the number of variables psychology departments must factor into their decision making. The restructuring of the Higher Education Academy (HEA) further exacerbates such challenges, as does reduction in research funding. Whilst, the challenges highlighted in Hartley (2012), were largely operational (moving from a small course to a large-scale operation and increasing managerialism), placing the student at the centre of the university experience will predominate the new challenges facing the teaching of psychology. Arguably, the student should be in centre providing this is met with genuine commitment by institutions to provide adequate resources, reduce the level of managerialism and focus on a quality learning experience for all involved, whilst at the same time resisting the temptation to refer to students as customers, since this places a service expectation on institutions, departments and individuals which may be difficult to manage and ultimately achieve.

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