Open Dialogue peer review:
A response to Hartley

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In responding to Jim Hartley, with whom I very largely agree, I first reflect on my own experience of teaching Psychology in an institution which was successively college of technology, polytechnic and university. In the second a new and fruitful method of assessing higher education essentially by peer review was developed, only to be destroyed in the third. Psychology teaching has been affected by factors common to the whole system such as increase in numbers particularly of women, enormously greater bureaucracy and control, and changes in funding. This leads me to question the nature and purpose of degrees in Psychology, and to suggest the possibility of radical changes in higher education, not so much to prescribe a realistic solution as to demonstrate the possibility of thinking 'outside the box'.
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Physician, heal thyself.

TEACHING, and education in general, would seem to depend upon, among other things, learning, memory, perception, thinking, motivation, individual differences, social factors, motivation and many more terms that feature in basic textbooks of Psychology. Psychologists ought, therefore, to know a great deal about the basics of teaching. Hence my title.

James Hartley begins with some reminiscences of his early days teaching Psychology, and I will accordingly indulge myself similarly. In passing, I adopt Graham Richards' useful distinction of upper case – Psychology – for the discipline, and lower – psychology – for the subject matter of that discipline. I further distinguish the *discipline*, the body of problems, methods and knowledge, from the *subject*, a selection of material and resources for purposes of dissemination, teaching, examining and so on, and from the *profession*, those who practice, both academically and otherwise. If this is familiar I apologise. But to resume. My first lecturing post, in 1964–1965, was at Enfield College of Technology (now the University of Middlesex). Such colleges offered a range of courses, often up to degree level and occasionally above.) The main work was to prepare students for the external BA General of the University of London, in which three subjects were taken for three years. The very specific syllabus and examinations were the responsibility of the London Board of Studies in Psychology, which then covered, and was constituted from, the internal schools. At Enfield we had absolutely no input, it was like doing an A-level. I and two colleagues shared a room with a technician, where planning, seminars and instrument repairs went on together or in turn. To equip us for our duties we were each supplied with one ring binder and two ball pens. As a matter of fact, this situation was rather a good introduction to teaching. The objective was clear, the students keen, syllabus and timetables provided, and there was little or no academic administration to bother with, nor interference in what we actually taught. The way we did it was, more or less, the way we ourselves had been taught. There were many other problems, too bizarre to recount here. I have told the story for the British Psychological Society Oral History project, and a written version is also available.

As a result of them, however, I soon moved to West Ham College of Technology, which, like other such colleges, became a Polytechnic in 1970 and a University in 1992. There I was fortunate enough to lead what became a very substantial Department. Each of these three phases is relevant to Hartley's question as to whether Psychology is dealing adequately with changing circumstances. The first was much like Enfield, we did external London degrees, with the difference that the Board of Studies drew some of us into the job of examining. The main additional administrative burden, one we took on voluntarily, was selection of students. They had to have two A-level passes to qualify for funding and admission to the degree course (though we spent quite a lot of time trying to find loopholes, especially for mature students). But we did not select on that basis. Instead we saw all serious candidates for two individual interviews, gave them an intelligence test, and rated their all-round performance, not just academic, from whatever information we had – the interviews, school or other reports, etc. It was very time consuming but it seemed to work. A small bit of research later indicated that the best predictor of degree success was the interview, but only when done by experienced interviewers with good agreement on criteria. Of course, this would be impossible now, but it does point to the inadequacy of A-levels as the main or only basis of selection.

The creation of Polytechnics, and the development of the Council for National Academic Awards (CNAA) which approved their courses and awarded their degrees, marked a substantial if short-lived revolution in higher education. The essence of the CNAA's approach was peer review, which despite all its difficulties has served us pretty well since it emerged with the Royal Society from around 1660 (although it can be seen in essence in the mediaeval *ius ubique docendi*, the right of graduates of one university to teach in others). For the first time academics had to think out, and justify to other experienced colleagues, what they were doing. It meant a very large increase in non-academic work, but on the whole I think it worked well. Internally, as far as my institution was concerned, the status of Polytechnic led to an increase of some 10 per cent in students and academic staff, and 100 per cent in administrators. I don't have figures for the next change, to a University. But Peter Oppenheimer, Emeritus Fellow of Christ Church, Oxford, wrote in the *Times Higher Education* for 6 January 2011, that administrative staff rose at Oxford from about 200 in the 1980s to 600 by 2000 to 1100 now. The CNAA was replaced in 1992, tragically in my view, by an outdated and discredited inspectorial system. I took part in the first assessment of Psychology under this system, and it was no doubt indicative that whereas with the CNAA I had chaired such assessments, having a background of developing new courses, and research and writing on teaching, the chair now was taken by an accountant. I don't think this is sour grapes. This system has of course gone through many further changes since then.

As for teaching Psychology, through all this we did not, in some ways, change very much. At the start we worked out a traditional programme of lectures, seminars (no more than five per group) and laboratory work. The content changed with new work published, some of the old divisions went ('thinking', 'perception', etc., became 'cognitive', and so on) and practical work was transformed by computers. The major changes have been as elsewhere. Electronic communication, a very large increase in intake, predominantly female, and a perceived heavy increase in workload. This last was examined by Malcolm Tight recently (2009). Collating the 10 major surveys of academic work load 1961 to 2004, he shows that the average hours reportedly worked increased significantly during the 1960s, but not greatly since then (as he points out, they could hardly do so as they were then 48 to 55 per week). What has increased, it will be no surprise to learn, is the administrative load, thus changing the balance of activities, with

teaching and research losing out. I now have no direct experience, but at least one colleague has told me that administration is her largest single activity. Of course, in many ways one cannot make a sharp division between the three. All lectures now must have PowerPoint versions, which must be available to students. Is this teaching or administration? And is it desirable, or more desirable than spending the time chatting to students? Forty years ago we did a lot of that, and many have said how valuable they felt it to be. Observation suggests there is less now. 'Office hours' are the order of the day.

With all this, Hartley's major point is that the teaching of Psychology has not changed all that much. He suggests three main reasons. I think these are all valid, but that there is more to it (as I am sure he would agree). His first point is the constraints of the British Psychological Society. These have, in fact, been a bone of contention for longer than I can remember, which is back to the famous meeting at Brown's Hotel in 1970 (I think) between the British Psychological Society and Heads of Psychology Departments. The formal constraint now is, of course, the Graduate Basis for Registration (GBR). I have argued before (e.g. Radford, 2008a) that this has various shortcomings. One is that it is not appropriate for the large majority of graduates in Psychology, who will not enter one of the restricted professional areas. Certainly a problem here is that it is not possible to tell in advance which students these will be, while most, probably, want the cachet of British Psychological Society approval. I also argue that the GBR applies professional constraints to what should be a matter of the discipline or the subject. The standards of a profession are not maintained by restrictions on entry to its training courses, but by what the graduates of those courses are certified to be competent to do, and by the understanding and acceptance of professional principles (Radford, 2003). Nor am I convinced how exactly the GBR actually matches the requirements of training courses. I think that should be investigated in detail. At the least, I think the British Psychological Society should consider the inclusion of some contextual material in its requirements, even at the cost of less 'core' Psychology (Radford, 2008a, 2008b).

Hartley's second reason is that Psychology has been 'a victim of its own success'. Certainly it has become one of the most popular subjects at both degree and GCE A-levels. As again I have said before, I think it is a matter of concern that this attraction has overwhelmingly been female. I do think that the study of human behaviour needs a balance. However, the increase in numbers is only part of the generally increasing demand for higher education, which is still continuing. It is a matter of speculation how students will respond to the increasing costs of it, with a likely emphasis on degrees that lead to jobs. We might recall that at Bologna, generally recognised as the first Western university, students paid lecturers to teach them, and could withhold the cash if they did not get what they wanted, which was in general a useful qualification, mostly in law. Data summarised in *Yahoo! Finance* (accessed 15 January 2011) showed the average rate of return on investment in taking a degree in various subjects. Top was Law at 17.2 per cent (higher than Medicine because of the great length of medical courses), the average was 12.1 per cent, and Psychology came in at 10.1 per cent. In other words, from a financial point of view, other subjects are on average a better bet than Psychology (of course this was only a sample of subjects, and there are many other factors). On the other hand Furnham and Pertrides (2010), found that in a list of 20 subjects Psychology came fourth in terms of likelihood to ensure employment, after Law, Maths and English. However, Law was the only mainly professional subject included.

The third reason is the increase in managerialism. Malcolm Tight suggests this 'reflects the decreasing trust in academics on the part of their key funder, the state; yet, paradoxically, the increasing amount of time spent on it threatens the quality of the teach-

ing and research it is meant to protect'. No doubt this is true, but it is not the only factor. For one thing, as Northcote Parkinson showed wittily back in 1958, there is a more or less unstoppable tendency for administration to increase, regardless of what is being administered. He would not be surprised to learn that the Royal Navy now has, it seems, more admirals than ships (letter, *The Times*, 14 May 2008). There is also a 'mind your backs' tendency. Once a new regulation or routine is introduced, no one dare suggest its removal. A particularly clear example was the Health and Safety at Work Act of 1974. Universities and colleges immediately acquired armies of safety experts, and endless fire doors, etc., which they had apparently managed without for the previous eight centuries. But more drastically, there has been a clear growth of central governmental control at least since 1945, and not least in education (see Salter & Tapper, 1994, among others). Cynically one feels that control is valued for its own sake. The Polytechnics were created, it can be suggested, largely because Government did not control the universities. They were destroyed when they became bigger than the universities (although it is also true that many polys were pressing hard for the higher status), and the CNAA became too independent. Sir Toby Weaver, the civil servant involved in setting that up, told me in conversation that he never intended it to be so powerful.

We could add a couple more factors that militate against the reform or advancement of teaching. One is, of course, the dominance of research. This is a relatively recent development, especially in England (rather different in Scotland). Research only came to be regarded as a, perhaps the, prime function of universities in the later 19th century. It is often the major factor in appointments and promotion, as in other countries (Backes-Gellner & Schlinghoff, 2010). Parker (2008), however, found that post-1992 universities were much more likely to recognise research and teaching equally for promotion. The league tables of universities published by the *Times Higher Education*, recently re-thought to great fanfare, remain very largely based on research. On questioning this with the Deputy Editor, I was told that quantitative measures of research are easier to obtain. However, this may be, the result is a very biased picture. It has long been pointed out, for example, Trow (1989), that a mass system of higher education simply cannot be research-based. My own view (which I tried to promote within the CNAA) is that a unit offering degree level teaching should be undertaking a significant amount of high level activity in the relevant disciplines. This might be research in the narrow sense, consultancy, professional practice, writing and other media work, and so on. But at the same time teaching should be the, or at least a, major basis for promotion or other reward. (Even in my Polytechnic days, I was repeatedly told by the Director that promotion could not be for teaching: 'You don't reward someone for what they are paid to do anyway!' His view, however, was that the criterion should be administration.)

Another factor is a traditional lack of professionalism. Academics provide the basis for entry to most professions, but they have never become established, at least in this country, as a profession themselves. Most, probably, feel dual, perhaps incompatible, affiliations, to their institution and to their discipline. I have discussed this at some length elsewhere, for example, Radford (2003). One step towards it is qualification, and universities now have formal training for new academic staff. How effective this is, I am not in a position to say. What I think is crucial to a profession is what I term *responsible autonomy*, by which I mean the ability to take better informed, one hopes wiser, decisions and actions, while having regard to the interests of others. This I think should characterise universities themselves, their staff, and the graduates they produce. I apologise again for repeating what I have published before. For academics, this means not only learning the techniques of teaching, and of

all the other tasks they have to carry out, but understanding the principles and development of education, so as to be able to stand apart from the daily stress of a demanding job, and consider what it is for and how it may really best be carried out. Academics are usually responsible, I think, but it seems they have decreasing autonomy.

Hartley describes three particular lines of research into improving teaching. One is into better ways of doing things, for example, taking notes, one is into approaches to study, for example, 'deep' versus 'surface', and one into student-centred versus topic-centred methods. Personally I have never been very convinced by the second of these, but more generally I feel that the basic principles of good teaching have probably not changed much since the activity itself became established, no doubt with the first cities and the invention of writing. I have not seen much to change what I summarised 20 years ago (Raaheim, Wankowski & Radford, 1991). Essentially, good teaching depends upon good teachers. There is no one best way of teaching, and some exceptional teachers are highly idiosyncratic. But in general, good teachers are those who know and are committed to their subject/discipline, are clear, well-prepared and open to questions and comment, relate their material to practical or personal issues, and are concerned about each student and have time to interact with them, informally as well as formally. All this requires skills, hard work, and persistence in the face of obstacles of all kinds and little material reward compared to many other professions. Good teaching is inevitably, in my view, labour intensive, though there are ways of offsetting this. In the same volume Kjell Raaheim described how he had successfully tackled the problem of large numbers, in a system in which virtually anyone could enrol on the first year of a degree course, but faced a very selective examination for admission to the second.

My fantasy is not for particular techniques to deal with trying to cram more and more into an existing system, while simultaneously reducing resources. I think there are fundamental questions about what higher education is or should be for, and how it should be structured and paid for. What I do think is clear is that the existing system and assumptions are not working very well. Some of these assumptions in particular are that all universities should be basically the same and try to do the same job (and, as above, be rated on the same criterion, research), all should be financed in the same way, and all students should end up with an equivalent degree (usually in one subject). In practice, a hierarchical system persists. Williams and Filippakou (2010) analysed all 120,000 entries in *Who's Who* born in the 20th century. Oxbridge remained the dominant route to elite status, though its share fell from one third to one quarter, mainly due to the rise of the Russell group. Many other countries, perhaps all, do not subscribe to this (see the *International Journal for Academic Development*, vol. 15, issue 1, 2010). Many have a flourishing private sector. Many European nations have some form of binary system, which appears to work well at least in terms of employability (Kivinen & Nurmi, 2010, a study of German, Dutch, Finnish and Swiss graduates). As is well known, the state of California established in the 1920s a successful three-tier higher education system, further developed in the 1960s. In this country, one of the ultimate political horrors is a 'two-tier system' in anything. That was one of the reasons for the Polytechnics wishing to become universities, though not, as I have suggested, the main cause of their doing so.

Many other systems are conceivable. I can, for example, envisage a system in which a first degree consisted of three terminal years, such that a student could leave at the end of each with an award. Courses could be modular, meaning free-standing units which could be taken at any university and accepted at any other. Every university would offer a broadly equivalent Foundation Course in the first year, and some or all would offer a selection of more advanced

courses in the second and third. The first year would seek to be a preparation for other courses or for a career. (A function comparable to the mediaeval Arts course, the 'trivium and quadrivium'. Interestingly enough, the University of Winchester is reported in the *Times Higher Education*, 25 December 2010, to be developing a modern equivalent.) For example, say eight modules, to be taken over four terms of 11 weeks, two per term. One week vacation between terms, five weeks in the summer. The present academic year, with breaks for two Christian festivals and a longer one to bring in the harvest, now overlaid with an inappropriate semester system, is simply absurd. With free-standing modules, a student might only ever take one, or a few, by day or evening study. But to progress to a second year, all would be required. Students would need to be more mobile and flexible than at present. They would probably mix living at home with away, and study with employment (it is reported that currently graduates without work experience have little chance of a job – www.management-issues.com, accessed 18 January 2011). Admission to the first year would be by valid psychological methods, but the criteria would not be too stringent. Some institutions might offer pre-Foundation courses as preparation for study.

First year modules could be something like this. 1. Health and Domestic Science – healthy life styles, nutrition, basic cookery, home economics. 2. Philosophy, belief systems, logic and scientific method. 3. Physical sciences, with emphasis on methods of enquiry. 4. Human sciences – biology, psychology, anthropology. 5. Society – politics, economics, history. 6. The arts and sport – one option from a range, which might be theory or practice or both. 7. Mathematics, statistics, finance. 8. Communication – use of English language, and of various media. This looks an enormous load but with selection, and emphasis on method rather than a mass of facts, I think the principles could be taught. The teaching week could be of three sessions of three hours per day, morning, afternoon and evening. Students would take two on each day, thus six hours a day, 30 hours per week. They might be made up thus. Lectures, with subsequent discussion, two of two hours each (lectures are a poor learning medium compared to supported self-study (see Cord & Clements, 2010; and Schmidt et al., 2010). Seminars in groups of four to six, two of one hour each. 'Assisted study', i.e. with a member of staff available, six hours (two sessions), say in groups of 25. Practicals (as appropriate to the subject), similarly six. Private study, 10 hours. This is a much more prescriptive timetable than at present, but still leaves ample time for recreation.

Assuming a staff-student ration of 1:25 (higher than the ideal), staff might work say 35 hours per week (in practice they would no doubt do much more voluntarily, as now). A pattern something like this. Lecture/discussion, one of two hours. Seminar, five of one hour. Supervision of practicals and study, 12 hours. Preparation, marking, private study, unavoidable meetings, fifteen hours. Open door office hour, one. Individuals would vary the last two items. This assumes that staff on first-year courses, and perhaps mostly on second and third years, would be primarily teachers, not researchers. This in turn assumes that teaching would be accepted as equally valuable with research for rewards and promotion. In practice, a given academic might offer only one or two Foundation modules, and also teach more advanced courses. Those teaching graduate courses would do more research. Lectures are greatly overused at present. I think one or two good ones a week quite sufficient. Personal contact in contrast is much more valuable but is currently increasingly difficult. On the basis I have assumed, one member of staff could have tutorial responsibility for 25 students, whom he or she would meet in seminars and/or in supervised study. I also assume optimistically that administration, much reduced in quantity from the present, would be mainly done by administrators.

Second and third years would be similar but with larger modules, perhaps four in the second year and two in the third. By choosing related modules students could 'major' in particular disciplines, while others could opt for a more varied course. Universities would not seek to offer the whole range of more advanced courses, but would specialise, the more so at Master's and Doctoral levels. Most if not all would offer some such courses, and likewise would specialise in research in the same areas. Universities would be in a sense pyramid-shaped, with, ideally, all achieving high levels in some area or areas.

Standards would be overseen by something along the lines of the CNAA, which worked through a system of Subject Boards, with a rolling membership of academics and others (importantly not under contract, thus independent), who built up a body of expertise, and knowledge of the institutions they were assessing, and with whom they interacted. Such a body (call it the Higher Education Council) would need a wider remit, to achieve a degree of compatibility between the modules of different universities so that students could transfer, particularly on progressing to higher stages. It would, of course, be independent of Government, but have an external 'watchdog'. Self-regulation is always better than imposed, but there must also be an independent mechanism of monitoring. *Responsible autonomy* again.

Government funding necessarily depends on the economic situation. There would be freedom to charge fees, and to create new institutions of university status, subject to the HEC. There could be a correlation between fees charged and bursaries offered: the greater the income, the larger the proportion available to support poorer students. This would involve some form of means testing. I envisage two forms of Government funding, directed and non-directed. The latter would be a subvention to all public universities, administered rather like the old University Grants Committee, an arms-length body, ideally with a rolling programme so that universities could plan ahead (e.g. grants for five or six years, but reviewed after every year or two years). The allocation would be based on a tariff system for different disciplines, to reflect their actual cost. This does assume economic stability – the old quinquennial system collapsed under the impact of inflation in the 1970s. Directed funds would go to individual universities or units, to support work the government considered of national importance.

I have given a good deal of detail not as a prescription – no one is going to take it, so please don't quibble over figures – but to show that alternatives to the present system are conceivable and workable. There are many other desiderata, such as physical conditions conducive to study and to informal contact of staff and students. There are also doubtless innumerable objections to such a programme apart from sheer inertia (a very major one is the effect of the Bologna Declaration of 1999 – Schriewer, 2009). But Psychology could take its place within it, both as a component of general education and as preparation for a specialised career. I have strayed very far from Hartley's (2012) more practical issues, but perhaps there is here some food for thought.

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