

The cookbook approach

A recipe for disaster?

FROM small beginnings in the 1970s, A-level psychology developed gradually during the 1980s and 90s, and then took off dramatically with Curriculum 2000, which split A-levels into an AS year and an A2 year, separately assessed and then combined for the A-level award. This also effectively increased the AS requirement for students from three subjects to five, meaning that many were searching around for an extra ‘interesting’ looking subject, and of course psychology fits that bill.

In 2006 one awarding body had over 50,000 AS candidates and over 20,000 A2 candidates, and in total well over 140,000 candidates would have been involved in A-level psychology examinations. These are impressive numbers and should represent an ideal opportunity for the dissemination of contemporary psychological knowledge to a pre-HE audience. However the picture is far from perfect, and I want to focus on what is right and what is wrong with the current situation in terms of subject content and the student experience.

Teachers can choose from five different specifications offered by four different awarding bodies. All specifications must adhere to the subject criteria for AS and A2 laid down by the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA). These deliberately lacked detailed content, but referred to key areas (social, physiological, cognitive, etc.). These areas had to be introduced in the AS year, but an enormous amount of choice was left as to specific content in the AS year (which topic best exemplifies physiological psychology?), and which areas were followed up in the A2 year. Although awarding bodies are charities they still have to follow market forces, and each specification developed its particular characteristics in order to attract candidates. These might be in terms of specific content, method of delivery (e.g. use of key papers versus more text-based material), assessment and question-setting, teaching of research methods, and so on.



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While making for an open market this variability makes it difficult to decide what it is that candidates from different boards eventually have in common, apart from some competence in research methods and an awareness of the different core areas of psychology. Some will have covered more contemporary topics, such as health and forensic psychology. Others will have a deeper knowledge of broad approaches in psychology. Some boards emphasise assessment through more traditional essay-based examinations, while others prefer short-answer and variations on multiple choice. This clearly makes for problems for HE if it wishes to accommodate A-level psychology into entry requirements, or to allow it to influence introductory psychology programmes, an issue discussed by Martin Conway and Peter Banister in the previous article.

I wish to pursue a different problem. The enormous success of A-level psychology has made it eminently marketable and a huge attraction to publishing companies. One or two A-level texts have actually made it into the bestseller lists, and they do this by providing what teachers and students want – the information necessary to pass the examination. This sounds obvious, but has actually involved a downgrading of the skills most valued in academic study.

Assessment in the A-level is divided into two skill areas separately assessed. Briefly, AO1 skills involve knowledge and understanding of psychological theories, studies and methods. AO2 skills cover analysis and evaluation of theories, studies and methods. (Research methods

themselves are assessed as Skill Domain AO3.) Classic and even contemporary degree-level texts in psychology are not divided in this way, instead presenting AO1 and AO2 material as integrated facets of any psychological theory, study, or approach. In contrast, AS and A2 level texts focus specifically on each skill area in turn, providing precise examples of each for each topic area, and in reasonable balance as the authors know that they are equally weighted in assessment.

Candidates understandably pick up the idea that if they make enough AO2 points they will earn lots of AO2 marks – they go for quantity rather than quality. The better candidates know that depth and understanding are critical, but lower down the scale they seek assurance in simply listing what they think are evaluative comments. Classically they home in on ecological validity, androcentrism, cultural specificity, determinism, reductionism, and ethical issues with particular studies. Often there is no attempt to contextualise their material or to demonstrate any true understanding of the words and phrases they are using.

This cookbook approach to learning does make life easier for inexperienced teachers and weaker candidates. It provides a basic level of knowledge and evaluative skills, and also segments the syllabus into bite-sized chunks. What it doesn't do is provide the higher level evaluative and analytical skills that are necessary for success in HE. It can be depressing to read a sequence of essays from otherwise good centres with only occasional attempts at overall synthesis and commentary. At least

there is usually some awareness that the purpose of research findings is to support theoretical positions and discriminate opposing viewpoints. Lower down the scale this is largely absent and the focus is on a rote-learned list of AO2 phrases applied indiscriminately to studies and theories.

The QCA and awarding bodies are not necessarily innocent bystanders in these developments. An unforeseen consequence of making specifications more explicit in terms of assessment requirements, and of making the rules of question-setting absolutely explicit, was to make some papers increasingly predictable. Again, it would be counter-productive and unprofessional of teachers not to prepare their students for predictable questions, which then elicit increasingly standard answers.

There are other reasons for this trend beyond textbooks and assessment procedures. Interlocked with available support materials are the pressures on teachers to cope with increasing numbers of psychology students and to maintain and improve examination performance. Later in this special issue, Matt Jarvis considers the large numbers of psychology teachers without degree-level training in the area; suffice to say that such teachers are bound to choose one of the many cookbook textbooks, confident that it will provide the basic skills and knowledge sufficient to pass the examination. In many other centres committed teachers would love to have the time and resources to develop a deeper understanding of psychology in their students, but do not have the time or support.

Of course it would be timely at this stage to emphasise that some A-level candidates are absolutely brilliant, producing scripts that would match any at first- or even second-year degree level. These scripts reflect highly effective teaching and learning, and an awareness that material does not just need to be learnt, but understood; more importantly, the crucial feature of hypothesis and theory testing through data collection is seen as central to evaluation and not just as an optional extra. Interestingly, the recently

introduced Advanced Extension Award (AEA), open to candidates from all specifications, shows the same trends outlined above. This examination is intended to stretch the most able candidates. It is a longer examination with more open-ended questions biased towards approaches and controversial issues in psychology, applications of psychology in the real world, and research methods. Some candidates, while showing impressive knowledge and focused evaluative skills, are clearly stymied by the requirement to think beyond the trammels of the A-level specifications and to apply their knowledge in novel ways. Others take to it like ducks to water.

Before moving on to more positive aspects of the A-level and future developments (both actual and desirable), I must mention research methods. Most psychologists would accept that empirical coursework is a key element in the teaching of research methods. In the A-level this has historically been the case. However even this area has been affected by the explosive popularity of pre-HE psychology. With large classes and limited time, many teachers lead rather than guide their students through

coursework, and even though reports are written up independently they tend to have a high degree of conformity and are rarely a key discriminator of student performance. Certainly, and as a gross generalisation, performance on the research methods questions in AS, A2, and even the AEA unseen examinations is often depressingly poor.

Future developments

There is no doubt that A-level psychology has been an enormous success. Thousands of students have been introduced to core studies, concepts, issues and methods, and this growing awareness of psychology should be welcomed. The problems it has emerge from this success.

A-level specifications can be tinkered with but not modified substantially while they are running. The last wholesale revision was Curriculum 2000, but in the

light of the Tomlinson report (see www.14-19reform.gov.uk) – and even though most of those proposals were rejected by the government – all A-level specifications are in process of change. Guidelines for the revision of all AS and A2 psychology specifications have been laid down by QCA. Major changes include the removal of centre-assessed coursework and a reduction in modules contributing to the A-level from six (three each at AS and A2) to four (two each at AS and A2).

The removal of assessed coursework will be controversial. In theory this should be a prime source of research methods training, but, as outlined above, in many cases it is not fulfilling this role. Some awarding bodies are confident they can achieve the same ends through more imaginative assessment, while teachers will be encouraged to see that class experiments would still be an effective method of teaching research methods.

The reduction to four units is intended to reduce the assessment burden on students rather than to reduce subject coverage. It is hoped that despite the vagueness of the subject criteria published by QCA, awarding bodies will attempt to update some of the content, and through more imaginative assessment procedures encourage the development of core skills of understanding rather than the rote-learned accumulation of knowledge. Unfortunately, from some perspectives, there will still be no 'core psychology' common to all specifications, outside of research methods. This will not help any potential linkage between the A-level and HE, but is inevitable given the competition between different awarding bodies.

Finally, an encouraging development has been the increasing involvement of interested parties, such as the British Psychological Society and the Association of Teachers of Psychology, in pre-HE psychology and its development. This broader consultation must serve as a model for other possible expansions of pre-HE psychology, in particular the suggestion that psychology may play a greater role as a core curriculum science subject at GCSE. It should not be forgotten that teaching pre-HE psychology is potentially a rewarding career for psychology graduates, and cannot be ignored by the wider psychology community.

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Proof of the pudding? Exam results or a deeper understanding of psychology?