

# Teaching A-level psychology

## Myth and reality

**A**S an A-level psychology teacher of many years' standing, it's good to get this opportunity to address an audience of higher-education academics and practitioners. Allow me to get my red pen out to correct a few myths, and suggest a few realities.



**JENNY TOAL** on the challenges faced by teachers of psychology – *Is the subject destined to become Cinderella to science?*

**Psychology is not a trendy new 'soft option'** Students actually find psychology one of the hardest subjects they do at A-level, as often they cannot get to grips with the concept that there may be no single 'right' answer. And it has been around for over 25 years. Indeed the Association for the Teaching of Psychology (ATP) is celebrating its 25th birthday this year! This organisation grew out of the need to support teachers in the delivery of the subject. Those who were psychology graduates helped new teachers. There were no A-level specific textbooks, or support material, so we devised our own. Local groups were set up, so help was at hand. An annual conference gave teachers the chance meet and share good practice. Today our conference is very high profile and professional, supported by the awarding bodies and publishers. Lectures are given by highly respected psychologists, many of whom have an international reputation.

**There is more than one psychology A-level** In reality there are four quite different specifications to choose from with each focusing on different skill requirements and approaches, although they share domain areas of AO1, AO2 and AO3 – assessing knowledge and understanding, the candidate's ability to analyse and evaluate, and to choose from

a range of methods of how to design, conduct and report on psychological investigations. I would advise admissions tutors to be familiar with the different specifications, to gain a better understanding of the knowledge base of prospective students.

**Psychology is not just taught by non-specialists** As a psychology graduate who wanted to teach, I had to find another area in which to train as there was no A-level psychology. For me it was physical education, as I was good at sport and enjoyed sports psychology.

Even quite recently people wishing to teach in schools would tend not to choose a psychology degree. Only when psychology started to boom, could we psychology graduates come into our own. As there were few of us, heads recruited other staff to teach, and often with no in-service training. They had to learn it over the summer holiday and then deliver the course in the autumn term. Not all heads took this unprofessional view, but many were scathing about another 'ology'. It was seen simply as a way of attracting higher numbers.

I have sympathy for the heads, who were under great pressure to increase numbers without having additional resources. Getting staffing right is a nightmare for many management teams. Some subjects lose their popularity, new government requirements come on

board, and staff must be found to teach these classes. A head is faced with two possibilities – one is making the teacher redundant, the other is allocating them to a more popular subject.

Recruiting new teachers would seem reasonable, but the problem here is that only five institutions offer a PGCE course with psychology. Even these courses have been told to reduce the number of places over the next five years! Logic would have determined that more psychology teachers

CHRISTA STADTLER (PHOTOGRAPHY)

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The Association for the Teaching of Psychology:  
[www.theatp.org](http://www.theatp.org)

are needed to cater for the ever-increasing demand, but in reality they are to be cut.

The reality of the situation in schools is a complex mess, which is about to get worse if we – the British Psychological Society, the ATP and the Higher Education Academy – don't take control of the psychology curriculum and who teaches it.

Another problem is that many schools only offer psychology at A-level, and teachers are often given another subject to make up a full timetable. The psychologist could well find themselves with a higher commitment in other subject areas, often including citizenship, sex education and RE. This is not helpful to the committed psychology teacher who wants to teach psychology.

The other side of the coin is a newly qualified teacher finding themselves with more than enough psychology on their plate. They may be expected to run a department on their own and without any experience or support in their schools, plus extra new subjects for which they are not qualified to teach! The same happens at the other end. I was head of department, responsible for other teachers and a student cohort of about 200, and yet I had to teach three other subjects. This puts a great burden on many psychology teachers and they leave the profession after a few years,

as they didn't come in to teach a potpourri of constantly changing subjects.

The problems for psychology teachers do not stop here. Many are only qualified to teach post-16 students which precludes them from teaching lower down the school, unless they are on Instructor Level. To teach in schools one must be qualified to teach across at least two key stages; for many psychology graduates that means teaching out of their subject area. During PGCE training, psychology can become the least practised subject for the trainee.

Now add to this already complicated situation that psychology is now considered to be part of science. This can be clearly seen in the proposed new A-level specifications in the section 'How science works'. Also new GCSE specifications are being written which include the science criteria. Meanwhile many psychology departments remain in Humanities or elsewhere! Where psychology 'fits' in science still hasn't been resolved. Questions remain as to whether psychology can stand alone alongside chemistry and physics. We need our professional bodies to be a major part of the consultation process so we can hold our place in the science curriculum. Indeed, there is still a lot to be sorted!

Already I have seen an example of the problem. The head of psychology is post-16 qualified only, and in her school, they have started considering the new GCSE. The biology teacher will take control of GCSE psychology – choose the specification and teach it. The head of department, a psychology graduate, has no say, but will be expected to provide the schemes of work, etc. So already the problems are emerging.

Another concern is that the best science students will take the traditional sciences and the weaker students will be put in psychology as the supposed 'soft option'. That would satisfy the government's drive for more people taking science, but it will be disastrous for the future of psychology. The fact that you don't need A-level psychology if you want to pursue it at university further weakens the academic status of psychology.

I fear that psychology in schools will remain the least funded. It will now become the Cinderella to

science, as it was in the past to humanities, who saw us taking their students away from their subjects of history and geography. Many of us have to fight to get a computer for the department! Technology is reserved for Key Stage 3 and 4 subjects.

In order for us to achieve academic status (and be treated as a real subject) some fundamentals have to change. Firstly we need a proper psychology curriculum starting at Key Stage 3 and following through to post-degree level. Psychologists must take control of what is to be taught and when. Next, A-level psychology has to be pre-requisite for degree in psychology. This has to enhance the standard achieved at degree if the students have a good command of knowledge as they enter university.

If we don't enhance the status of A-level psychology, we will never get the best students. Working together with higher education, the HEA, the BPS and the ATP is the way forward. There is excellent teaching going on in psychology, and that includes those who have converted to psychology. The problems of inadequate teaching and lack of knowledge is where school managements do not invest in training and professional development. I would like to see all teachers who are not qualified in psychology undertake a proper programme of study. There are some HE institutions working towards this, which is most hopeful. We must demand high standards of training. Schools provide higher education's future students. We need your support to further psychology education in schools. Professional bodies in psychology must keep control of what is taught, when and how. If we don't do this, then someone else will. That will be of no help to any of us, and could be disastrous for psychology.

Let me end on a positive. Psychology teachers are most enthusiastic and committed. Just see them at conference at the end of a long year – still enthusiastic, anxious to share what works and eager to learn about new developments. With such commitment, school psychology has a good future in the hands of its caring teachers.

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