

Who nurtures the nurturer?

ALTHOUGH psychology at post-16 level has been around since the early 1970s, it has largely existed in isolation from mainstream academic and applied psychology, and the course of its development has passed under the radar of most professional psychologists. It is a decade since I have encountered an admissions tutor unaware of the existence of psychology A-level, but most university departments still do not take direct account of post-16 psychology qualifications, either in terms of admissions procedures or curriculum design (Banister, 2003). Conventional wisdom has long held that taught psychology at this level is of no concern to the psychology world at large.

In the last five years however, the situation has changed radically with the unprecedented growth in the numbers of students taking psychology at post-16 level, in particular A-level. Around 80,000 candidates undertook AS-level psychology in 2006, an increase of over 60 per cent since 2001, and between 2004 and 2005 psychology was the fastest-growing subject at A-level (Joint Council for Qualifications, 2005). For the first time, the majority of students embarking on undergraduate psychology programmes – the first formal step towards professional qualification – now have a post-16 psychology qualification. If the bright and enthusiastic young people currently expressing interest in psychology are to be nurtured into the next generation of psychologists it is crucial that their initial experience of psychology is a positive one.



MATT JARVIS considers professional development for the psychology teacher.

The aim of this article is to explore the extent to which post-16 psychology currently nurtures the development of future psychologists, to apply theoretical models of teacher development and research findings to better understand

the light of their experiences at university. Banister (2003) reports that having psychology A-level was not associated with better grades at undergraduate level, although there was an initial advantage in statistics. This is consistent with American data showing that studying high school psychology conveys no advantage to psychology undergraduates (Rossi *et al.*, 2005).

So why is studying post-16 psychology not more beneficial for undergraduates? The answer may lie in the 'gold standard' of A-level as heavy on volume and light on skills development. Toombs (2004) has reported on a workshop run as part of the Writing in the Disciplines initiative at Queen Mary's College. Academics at this workshop were said to be impressed at the complexity of information A-level students have to learn, but expressed concern at the lack of time given to developing skills of argument and analysis. This concern has been echoed by Green (2005, and in this issue), who has identified impressive knowledge but underdeveloped evaluative and analytical skills in A-level answers, with questions requiring higher-level thinking being predominantly addressed with rote-learned formulaic responses.

Given that the failure to develop better higher-level thinking skills at post-16 level is a product of the A-level system, the problem should be addressed through systemic reform as well as at the level of teacher CPD. Some excellent work has been done in the run-up to the new A-level specifications, and from 2008 A-level assessment will require more in the way of genuine psychological thinking skills. However, in the light of challenges to the rigour of psychology A-level (Jarvis, 2004; Morris, 2003) it has proved politically

development needs in psychology teachers, and to suggest future directions for CPD that enhances the experience of teaching psychology and allows teachers to better meet the needs of future psychologists.

Post-16 teaching as nurture for future psychologists

Student satisfaction with post-16 psychology is generally very high, with up to 80 per cent of students rating psychology as more interesting than their other subjects (Hirschler & Banyard, 2003).

However, evidence concerning the usefulness of post-16 psychology to students going on to HE is more equivocal. Linnell (2003) reports that most undergraduates who had previously studied post-16 psychology were positive about the experience, but a significant minority considered their post-16 teaching poor in

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Science Learning Centres:

www.sciencelearningcentres.org.uk

The British Psychological Society Research Digest, a vital and free resource for teachers:

www.researchdigest.org.uk/blog

The Society's Division of Teachers and

Researchers in Psychology: www.bps.org.uk/dtrp

Distance learning for psychology teachers:

tinyurl.com/3dvs6r

inexpedient to challenge too radically the gold standard of high-volume A-level, and teachers will be left with significant challenges in delivering the new combination of content and skills. CPD will thus be of increasing importance.

Applying models of teacher CPD

Perlman and McCann (1999) have identified a range of goals aspired to by psychology teachers, including helping students achieve the highest grade possible, teaching them about psychology, enthusing them about the subject, teaching them to think like psychologists, using psychology as a medium to teach transferable skills and to use psychology to understand the world. Elsewhere (Jarvis, 2006), I have found it helpful to think of these in terms of proximal and distal goals. Proximal or short-term goals centre on what is easily measurable and hence favoured in quality-assurance mechanisms, most obviously student grades. Distal or long-term goals include inculcating critical and creative

thinking about psychological material and developing primary and secondary research skills. Evidence from higher education suggests that post-16 teachers are less successful than many assume at achieving these distal goals, and so working towards teaching strategies that imbue a deeper understanding of psychology constitutes one direction for CPD.

Shulman (1986) has made a further influential distinction between three categories of teacher development activities. CPD activities can be seen in terms of their focus on 'content knowledge' or CK (i.e. improving/updating the teacher's knowledge of psychology), 'pedagogical knowledge' or PK (i.e. generic teaching skills) and 'pedagogical content knowledge' or PCK (skills of how to teach psychology).

However, a burgeoning area of training for psychology teachers not covered in Shulman's classification is that of assessment regime expertise (i.e. how to teach students to gain maximum marks through understanding mark schemes and

their implementation). Currently there is an emphasis in the CPD activities marketed to psychology teachers on subject knowledge and assessment regime expertise. These are easy for teachers to justify and are hence marketable in the 'age of accountability' (Guskey, 1998), when CPD needs to be justified in terms of a link to a measurable outcome. These development activities are probably not particularly effective in helping psychology teachers meet their more distal goals. A further direction for future CPD is thus a new emphasis on PCK.

Listening to psychology teachers

Surveys of psychology teachers (e.g. Haworth, 1994; Jarvis, 2003) have revealed overwhelming support for appropriate CPD. In a recent conference survey (Jarvis, 2003), over 90 per cent of respondents from schools and colleges said that they would undertake a further qualification to develop their teaching of psychology. 100 per cent of those without a psychology

degree said they would undertake a CertHE-level course in psychology for teachers. The majority of respondents with a psychology degree reported that they would undertake a postgraduate training in the teaching of psychology. In line with Guskey's age of accountability, virtually no respondents favoured courses involving regular day release because they could not imagine securing the necessary support of their employers. Subject updates and research collaboration with colleagues in higher education were popular additional CPD activities.

Current CPD opportunities and future directions

It is clear that some aspects of CPD for psychology teachers are currently well

catered for. The awarding bodies (exam boards) and private training organisations offer development of assessment regime expertise and some subject updating. The Association for the Teaching of Psychology hosts two annual conferences (England and Scotland), offering a blend of subject update lectures and a range of workshops addressing a range of issues.

Perhaps the most exciting recent development for psychology teacher CPD has been the inception of the Science Learning Centres. These are a joint initiative of the Department for Education & Skills and the Wellcome Trust, their remit being to develop the quality of teaching in the sciences, including psychology. What distinguishes the SLC courses from those of other providers is their combined focus on subject updating (CK) and developing pedagogical content knowledge (PCK), bringing to bear the experience of experts, both teachers and academics, on how to use contemporary psychology to fulfil the demands of the curriculum and how to effectively teach aspects of psychology. This emphasis on developing subject knowledge and subject-specific pedagogy is likely to be of particular benefit to teachers' achievement of more distal goals, and hence to students seeking to study psychology at higher levels. For example, the 'Using ILT to teach psychology A-level' course includes the use of (free) online databases, statistical software, experimental simulations and survey tools in post-16 teaching, all of which facilitate a lessening of the culture shock of the post-16 to HE transition. In 2007 the National Science Learning Centre launched a week-long conversion course for teachers of other subjects to begin to develop some of the necessary subject knowledge and pedagogical content knowledge necessary to teach psychology.

The Science Learning Centres seem set to meet many of the unfulfilled needs in terms of short PCK-oriented courses, but what of more formal qualifications for psychology teachers? Although a number of postgraduate conversion courses exist, allowing graduates in other subjects to gain the British Psychological Society's graduate basis for registration, there is currently a lack of courses tailor-made for psychology teachers without a background in the discipline. The fact that all of the respondents in the recent BPS-ATP survey said that they would undertake such a course at CertHE level suggests that the

market is there should universities be minded to provide it. More positively, in autumn 2006 Staffordshire University launched a distance learning MSc in teaching psychology. This is a three-year part-time course, with students having the option to take units in isolation where they have specific development needs.

Meeting CPD needs sometimes means thinking outside the box of formal training, and there may be other strategies to enable post-16 teaching to better meet the needs of future psychologists. Published guidance could be produced on the sort of teaching strategies that avoid the brief formulaic evaluation of psychological material and prevent the over-reliance on single textbooks that detract from students' future experiences in HE. Perhaps most importantly, strategies are required to better include psychology teachers in a community of psychologists. Local BPS branches could perhaps take a lead in this, targeting their meetings to teachers and offering opportunities for collaborative research.

Conclusions

Most future psychologists will first encounter academic psychology at post-16 level; developing post-16 teaching is therefore a priority in nurturing their development. In practical terms this means developing the CPD available to post-16 psychology teachers, focusing on developing pedagogical content knowledge and encouraging teaching towards distal goals. The inception of the Science Learning Centres is an important step forward in providing short courses and psychologists should support their local SLC wherever possible. The recent launch of the first MSc in teaching psychology and the first conversion course for teachers of other subjects are also extremely positive moves.

More work now needs to be done to provide further formal qualifications for psychology teachers; perhaps including CertHE-level qualifications for those without a psychology background. In addition, more work needs to be done to include post-16 psychology teachers in the community of psychologists.

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