

THE PHILOSOPHY BIT: WHO, WHAT AND WHY?

By the end of this chapter you should be able to:

- Explain some of the reasons why students opt to study psychology, with particular reference to perceived rigour, intrinsic interest and potential therapeutic value.
- Assess the potential benefits for students of studying psychology with particular regard to transferable skills and preparation to study psychology at degree level.
- Appreciate the tension between catering for the short- and long-term needs of psychology students.
- Apply research findings into reasons for and benefits of studying psychology to enhancing classroom practice.
- Discuss the attributes of an effective psychology teacher.
- Consider the concept of reflective practice as a model for understanding the developing psychology teacher.
- Discuss the role of evidence-based practice in psychology teaching.
- Be aware of the breadth of ways in which psychology can be applied to teaching psychology.

This book contains a blend of theory, research and practical advice. If you are reading purely for the top tips you may prefer to skip this chapter. This is a chance to step back from the practicalities of the classroom to think a bit more broadly about the philosophy of psychology teaching – what we are here for. This isn't meant to be an indulgence, but is rather based on the belief that practical ideas can be born, not necessarily from theory or research, but certainly from having a broader understanding of what we do. What are psychology teachers here for? What do students hope to get from studying psychology? What makes any teacher effective? It is extremely difficult for teachers to find space in the teaching day to

escape the minutiae of planning, teaching, marking and admin and focus on these ‘big picture’ issues. It is, however, possible to at least consider these questions with reference to the psychology teaching literature.

A useful starting point is to consider why students choose to study psychology and what the potential benefits are of studying the subject. There is a body of research addressing both these issues and some clear implications for shaping classroom practice. In order to help achieve some of the ambitious goals suggested by this research I explore what makes an effective psychology teacher – while at the same time thinking critically about the notion of effectiveness. In the remainder of this chapter I consider two rather different ways of thinking about the practice of psychology teaching; reflective practice and evidence-based practice. Reflective practice has become a byword for quality in education, while evidence-based practice has enjoyed similar status in psychology for some time, and is becoming increasingly important in education. Psychology teachers, with a foot in both the psychology and education camps, are in an excellent position of being able to appreciate and draw on ideas from both reflective and evidence-based practice.

WHY DO PEOPLE STUDY PSYCHOLOGY?

The rapid growth in the popularity of psychology, particularly at post-16 and undergraduate levels, has not gone unnoticed in either psychology or education circles. We are no longer ‘slipping under the radar’ (Jarvis, 2007), and this presents opportunities in the form of funding – but also challenges to justify our popularity. Three major hypotheses have emerged from discussions. The rigour hypothesis is the idea that psychology is, or is at least perceived by students as being, an ‘easier’ A-level, and so students choose it in the belief that they will gain a high grade with relatively little effort. The intrinsic interest or ‘sexy subject’ hypothesis posits that psychology is seen as a particularly interesting subject, and that this interest is students’ primary motivation. The therapy hypothesis emphasises the appeal of psychology to those seeking personal insight into their own existential, psychosocial or mental health issues.

Rigour hypothesis

More conservative elements in the education establishment believe that students see psychology as an easy A-level, and that this is important in accounting for its current popularity. We can call this the rigour hypothesis. Those who argue this often cite a now-dated study by Fitz-Gibbon and Vincent (1994) showing that, at that time, students tended to score on average half a grade higher in psychology than in the most difficult subjects.

There is, however, wide agreement now that the rigour hypothesis is flawed; apart from anything else the statistical evidence taken from more recent A-level cohorts is strongly supportive of psychology as a rigorous A-level (see Morris, 2003; Jarvis, 2004; and Chapter 2 for detailed discussions). Moreover, student surveys have found no evidence to suggest that they perceive psychology as an

easy subject. On the contrary, Hirschler and Banyard (2003) report that 43% of post-16 students surveyed described psychology as more difficult than their other subjects, with 30% describing it as equally difficult and only 27% finding it easier.

Sexy subject hypothesis

In fact, studies have clearly shown that the overwhelming factor influencing students’ choice of psychology is its fit with our current cultural ideas of what is inherently interesting. In other words it is seen as ‘sexy’. In one survey, Hirschler and Banyard (2003) surveyed 454 post-16 level-3 psychology students – all but 17 were studying A-level. Three factors emerged as particularly important in the decision to study psychology: interest; preparation for a career in psychology; and the novelty value attached to a subject not previously studied. Table 1.1 shows the percentages.

In this study, interest value emerged as the most popular response and no other factors were mentioned by more than 1% of respondents. Encouragingly, pre-study perceptions of psychology as an interesting subject were borne out by students’ experiences. The majority rated it as more interesting than their other subjects. A breakdown of responses is shown in Table 1.2.

Walker (2004) has extended this line of research by breaking down further the idea of interest. Based on a content analysis of responses to the open question ‘why do you want to study AS psychology?’, Walker has identified five distinct aspects of interest:

- Interest in people
- Interest in subject matter

■ **Table 1.1** Reasons for choosing psychology (Hirschler and Banyard, 2003)

<i>Rank</i>	<i>Primary reason</i>	<i>%</i>
1	Sounded interesting	64
2	Want a career in psychology	19
3	Something different to study	11

■ **Table 1.2** Perceptions of interest value of psychology (Hirschler and Banyard, 2003)

<i>Response</i>	<i>%</i>
Much more interesting	44
Slightly more interesting	36
About the same	15
Slightly less interesting	3
Much less interesting	2

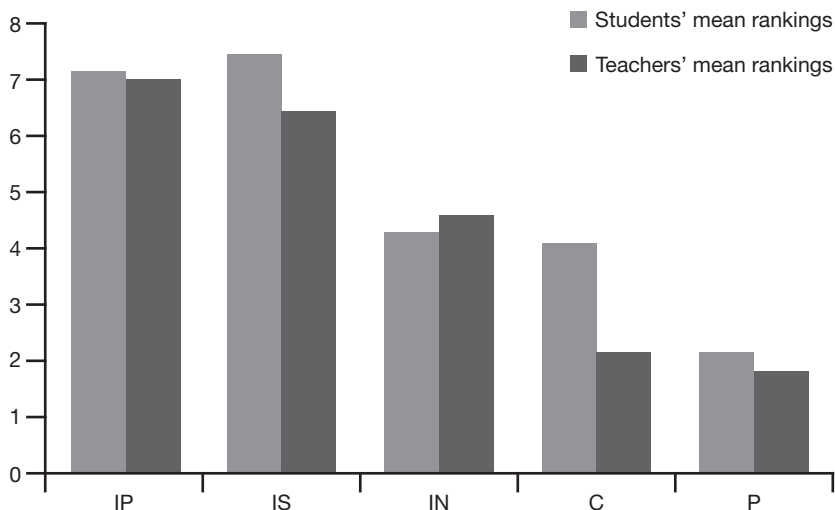
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- Novelty interest
- Career interest
- Personal issues

When students and teachers were asked to rank these in order of importance there was a surprising level of agreement, interest in people and subject interest emerging as the most important factors. Figure 1.1 shows student and teacher mean rankings.

Therapy hypothesis

It has long been believed by many post-16 psychology teachers that they have attracted a disproportionate number of students with mental health problems, and that these students have chosen to study psychology in an attempt – conscious or unconscious – to seek insight into their conditions. This has sometimes been called the therapy hypothesis. There is no doubt that many students with mental health problems do derive benefit from studying psychology, nor that for some this is an important factor in their subject choice. However, there is little direct evidence that psychology attracts particularly large numbers of students with mental health problems. Teachers' folk beliefs concerning this may be largely an artefact of greater disclosure rates in the context of psychology where the lesson content cues such disclosure. Surveys of students' subject choice-motives such as those of Hirschler and Banyard (2003) and Walker (2010) have not revealed significant numbers of



■ **Figure 1.1** Student and teacher rankings of interest factors (from Walker, 2010)

students suggesting that their subject choice was motivated by therapy-seeking. Indeed, Walker went on to directly investigate the therapy hypothesis by means of interviewing students, and in no case did his participants report a therapeutic motive.

WHAT ARE THE POTENTIAL BENEFITS OF STUDYING POST-16 PSYCHOLOGY?

This question has been approached from a number of angles in the psychology teaching literature. There is clear evidence that what students seek primarily from studying psychology is interest, and that in this sense they are widely satisfied. However, there may be additional long-term benefits from studying psychology, both in terms of preparation for studying psychology in higher education (HE) and acquiring generic study and employment skills.

Preparation for HE psychology

Prior to the 1990s there was a consensus that studying psychology at school or college was unhelpful in terms of preparation for study at undergraduate level, and that those hoping to study for a psychology degree should at all costs avoid psychology A-level. With the explosion of numbers studying psychology – in particular A-level – in the 1990s this view rapidly became untenable.

There is nonetheless still some ambivalence around among HE teachers towards psychology A-level. One professor of psychology has spoken of the difficulty of teaching students ‘acculturated into psychology A-level’ (anon, personal communication). Conway (2007) blamed attitudes in HE on the mismatch between the psychology curriculum at pre-degree and undergraduate level and called for a ‘standard scientific and representative curriculum’ at A-level. However, as Green (2005) pointed out, there has always been a lack of clarity over the purpose of A-level; is it meant to prepare students for HE or for employment? Unless we take the view that psychology at school and college exists solely or primarily to prepare students for study of psychology at undergraduate level, it is unreasonable to subjugate the curriculum to the needs of an HE lobby, even assuming a consensus emerged about what such a curriculum should look like – which it hasn’t.

HE ambivalence aside, common sense suggests that students who have already studied psychology enter a degree with a better idea of what to expect and so have some advantage. In response to this situation, the British Psychological Society (BPS) undertook two studies, one involving HE teachers and the other students. Banister (2003) surveyed the Heads of Psychology at 25 UK universities about their perceptions of and policies towards prior psychology qualifications. In the majority of departments (15) psychology qualifications were not a factor in the admissions process, although a minority (5) did specify that some psychology background was helpful for mature students. In a clear majority of departments (18), prior qualifications in psychology were neither encouraged

nor discouraged. Perhaps the most interesting findings concerned the advantages or otherwise for psychology students of having a prior qualification. Although in raw figures students with psychology A-level did slightly worse on research methods and statistics courses than others, once GCSE and A-level score were controlled for they did slightly better – students with psychology typically had worse qualifications overall. There is thus probably some advantage in having a psychology qualification for HE study. However, there was some concern expressed that students with a post-16 psychology qualification were at risk of coasting in their first year of undergraduate study and so acquiring bad study habits.

In the second BPS study, Linnell (2003) surveyed second-year undergraduate psychology students about their perceptions of pre-degree experience. Although attitudes were more positive among those who had previously studied psychology, overall students felt that post-16 psychology was helpful to studying undergraduate psychology. Percentages are shown below in Table 1.3.

Students in the Linnell study were acutely aware of the differences between post-16 and university teaching. Some commented that, in light of their university experience, they now considered their earlier teaching poor. On the other hand, others bemoaned the lack of opportunity for class discussion and the narrow focus on research methods and replicating classic studies required in undergraduate study.

Development of generic skills

The 1997 Dearing Report¹ highlighted a need for the curriculum at post-16 and undergraduate levels to address more effectively the development of generic skills in students as well as their subject knowledge. The six key skills that came out of the Dearing Report are still embedded throughout the curriculum, including in psychology specifications:

- Communication
- Application of number
- IT
- Working with others

■ **Table 1.3** Psychology undergraduates' beliefs about post-16 psychology (Linnell, 2003)

<i>Item</i>	<i>% yes (no psychology qualification)</i>	<i>% yes (psychology qualification)</i>
Helped with study skills	61	92
Helped with understanding	78	94
Improved grades	67	78
Improved motivation	33	66
More enjoyable	48	76

- Improving own learning and performance
- Problem solving.

Following the influential work of Carol McGuinness (1999), there is now an additional emphasis on developing a number of thinking skills throughout the curriculum:

- Information-processing skills, including classifying, sequencing and comparing
- Reasoning skills, including making inferences and judgements
- Enquiry skills, including defining problems and planning research
- Creative thinking skills, including generating hypotheses and ways to test them
- Evaluation skills, including forming judgements of their own and others' work.

These broadly reflect the skills that psychology teachers expect to help develop during their teaching. In fact, psychology is arguably best placed of any discipline to address the full range of these skills. Key skills and thinking skills are addressed throughout this book, through whole chapters on developing psychological thinking and use of ICT, but also through problem-based learning, practical work and co-operative learning.

It is likely, of course, that the situation with regard to transferable skills changes with each incarnation of the curriculum. Curriculum 2000 drastically reduced the emphasis on essay-based assessment, with the result that teachers spent far less time developing essay-writing skills. In Curriculum 2008, coursework was removed from psychology, and with it the opportunity to develop creative, enquiry and communication skills. At the time of writing, the government has called for a return to more essay-based assessment, but we are awaiting clarification of how this will manifest.

LESSONS FROM THE RESEARCH: WHAT SHOULD PSYCHOLOGY TEACHING GIVE STUDENTS?

A balance between proximal and distal aims of teaching

Quality assurance mechanisms tend to encourage teachers to think exclusively in terms of outcome measures such as achievement by grade percentages. This is particularly true now that the Coalition Government has made clear its emphasis on outcome data in the form of raw attainment (Gove, 2010). Clearly grades are important, not least in encouraging social mobility, and we would not be doing well by our students if we abandoned exam preparation altogether to pursue more esoteric ideals in the classroom.

This much is obvious. There are, however, two factors that might militate against adopting a purely strategic grade-driven model of psychology teaching

with an exclusive focus on drilling students for formal assessments. First, while psychology teaching has a proximal purpose in gaining the student a post-16 qualification, we are also responsible in some measure for what happens to students in the future. To put it bluntly, if we genuinely care in June we should still care in September; undergraduates and new entrants to employment are not an out-group, simply our 6th formers after the summer holiday. Teaching also has long-term or distal purposes in the form of developing transferable skills and fostering the enthusiasm to sustain students at the next level. We can gain students good exam grades by rushing them through a formularised process, but this is likely to be at the cost of both enthusiasm and skills.

The second caution against purely strategic teaching concerns motivation. Extrinsic motivation undermines intrinsic motivation, and in the same way as athletes' performance often worsens when they turn professional, we risk a loss of performance when we over-emphasise attainment to our students. To get the most from students it is essential that they receive the things psychology promises at the outset.

Make psychology interesting and relevant

This is in some ways so obvious that it might sound crass. Most students take up psychology for the sake of interest and the majority do find it interesting. However, this does not mean that every topic is always taught in such a way as to maximise its interest value, nor that every option is equally interesting to students. Experience tells us that in general it is theory and research with a clear real-world implication or application that arouses student interest. Every time a theory is taught, given a finite limit on the total volume of information students should take away, there is a trade-off to manage between the level of theoretical detail and the time left for real-world implications/applications. To maximise the interest value that can be obtained from a topic, try to avoid thinking 'how much theoretical detail should I teach for students to have the sort of understanding I'd like?' and think instead 'how little theoretical detail can I get away with teaching within the constraints of the nature of the assessment if students are to have a satisfactory understanding?' The latter approach may help free up time to focus on making the topic interesting, which in turn will probably lead to its being deeper processed and better remembered. The theme of how to maximise the interest value of psychology is a recurring one in this book. Examples of strategies include applying theory and research to understanding real-life scenarios (see p48), making reference to popular culture, for example in psychoanalytic interpretation or content analysis of television programmes (p101).

Consider the particular needs of future psychology undergraduates

In the Linnell (2003) survey study a number of undergraduate students reported that they found the transition from post-16 to undergraduate level difficult and would

have welcomed more support. It was also clear that opinion varied as to how useful post-16 psychology was as a preparation for a psychology degree. Banister (2003) reported that studying post-16 psychology was less associated with good essay skills than was studying other subjects. The current A-level curriculum eschews report-writing and has cut essay-writing to a minimum. Although these changes have probably had benefits in terms of widening participation and increasing the reliability and validity of assessment, in terms of preparation for HE they have been disastrous.

It is clear that, although opportunities exist to help prepare psychology students for HE, generic teaching does not necessarily constitute effective preparation. Of course, responsibility for the post-16–degree transition does not lie exclusively with psychology teachers, and it can be difficult to reconcile the proximal aim of preparing for A-level exams with the more distal aim of preparing a minority of students for a psychology degree. Nonetheless, there are some things that post-16 teachers can do to lessen the culture shock of moving to higher education. Some examples are shown in Box 1.1.

If you are concerned about preparing students for a psychology degree but these activities seem too radical a departure from your usual teaching, consider writing a short tailored course for future psychology undergraduates. The Open College Network accredits short courses of at least 30 notional hours, and schools and colleges will have – although may not advertise – a budget dedicated to curriculum enrichment. You may well find that your local university will be supportive of any efforts to smooth the post-16–HE transition and help design such a course. The Extended Project (level 2 or 3) also provides an outstanding opportunity to develop skills of independent learning, primary and/or secondary research and report-writing. Free-standing maths qualification (FSMQ) statistics can be used to enhance research methodology. More about that in the next chapter.

WHAT MAKES A COMPETENT AND EFFECTIVE PSYCHOLOGY TEACHER?

This section begins with a call for critical thinking. We often use constructs like ‘effectiveness’ and ‘competence’ as if they had a reality independent of the current context. They do not. Currently, there is a trend in quality assurance and performance management for defining effectiveness by student attainment, not even taking account of value-added measures let alone a holistic view of education. Yet education is multifaceted. Who is really more effective, the teacher who maintains the straight A-grades their cohort arrived with or the teacher who moves students from a low starting point to a middling outcome? Who is really more effective, the teacher who gets excellent exam results, the teacher whose sensitivity prevents a suicide or the teacher who inspires the next Loftus or Baron-Cohen? These are, of course, daft questions – all the above are great achievements – but they serve a serious purpose in highlighting the difficulty in pinning down real quality teaching without locating it in a particular context.

■ **Box 1.1 Strategies to better prepare post-16 students for a psychology degree**

- Get students used to using electronic resources. Psychology undergraduates will use library databases to locate books, specialised databases like PsycINFO to find original studies and statistical packages like SPSS to analyse data. Much of this software is beyond school and college budgets but there are similar and very user-friendly free and open source packages with which psychology students can become familiar (see Chapter 7 for details).
- Expose students to a range of texts that represent the same material differently and which express contrasting views. Part of the ‘acculturation’ that concerns some HE teachers occurs because at school and college level it is possible for students to think of what is in their textbook as ‘fact’. At undergraduate level they will have to recognise that each textbook contains merely a representation of the original material presented and evaluated in the light of the author’s interpretation and biases.
- There are other ways to encourage students to think beyond textbook contents. Doug Bernstein, former Chair of the National Institute for the Teaching of Psychology, has pioneered a useful exercise in which he gives groups of students the task of summarising studies described in his textbooks and showing students how different their interpretations of the study are to his own and to each other’s (Bernstein, personal communication).
- Expose students to some psychology journals. Although journal papers are initially intimidating to anyone, mostly because of the statistical analyses, it is possible with appropriate scaffolding for students to extract much more detailed information about studies from original papers than from textbook accounts of them. A useful exercise is to present students papers with abstracts removed with – carefully selected for conceptual level – and have students generate their own abstracts.
- Focus on teaching psychological thinking throughout the course. For example, rather than teach evaluation points for theories and studies, focus on teaching how to evaluate theories and studies. This develops the transferable skill of critical thinking. Strategies to achieve this are discussed in Chapter 4.
- Expose students to academic psychologists. Many lecturers are happy to give talks in schools and colleges. Remember, as well, that academics are often short of research participants, and that your students can gain valuable experience of seeing ‘real’ research in action by serving as participants. See Chapter 3 for a model of how this has been achieved.

Operationalising competence

Competent teaching is currently operationalised by means of a set of standards, available at a range of levels, starting with the Q (qualification) standards needed to pass a PGCE course, and divided into three categories:

- Professional attributes
- Professional knowledge and understanding
- Professional skills.

Measures of effectiveness and competence can be useful in reflecting on professional development, and the current competency standards are certainly thorough and wide ranging. Effectiveness and competency are, however, just social constructs and not absolutes. Problems begin when we start to assume that all these criteria are sufficiently all embracing and robust to make valid judgements about teachers, and when we start to ignore achievements that don't neatly fit into the frameworks.

The concept of good practice

Any rant about ideas like effectiveness and competence would be incomplete without a mention of 'good practice'. Most of us have innocently used this term when recommending a technique or strategy. However, it can have sinister connotations. In a recent paper, Coffield and Edward (2009) have attacked the rolling out of 'good', 'best' and 'excellent' practice, comparing the progression through these terms to a 'ratchet screwdriver with no reverse movement allowed' (2009: 373). As Rice and Brooks said of best practice: 'Even if the judgement is backed by an appropriate theoretical background and teaching experience, it remains a judgement and one likely to be challenged by the next professional with similar background and experience' (2004: 86). The term 'best' causes particular problems because it implies that there is a single best way of doing things, regardless of the situation. This is unlikely to be true, and psychology teachers are in a good position to challenge the evidence on which bold assertions of 'best practice' are made. This is important in maintaining teachers' professional autonomy (Jarvis, 2010).

A values-led alternative

After working with the current limited notions of effectiveness and the thorough but rather rigid and mechanistic competency framework it can be refreshing to look at literature from abroad. Perlman and McCann (1999) offer a framework for psychology teachers based more on positive values than competencies:

- To get students the highest grade possible
- To teach students about the subject matter of psychology
- To enthuse students about psychology
- To teach students to think like psychologists
- To use psychology to teach generic skills
- To use psychology to understand the world.

This range of aims reflects a (healthy) tension between academic excellence, idealism and pragmatism. We can extract from the Perlman and McCann a simple tripartite model of the characteristics of the effective psychology teacher:

- Subject knowledge and skills – including research design and critical thinking

- Generic and subject-specific teaching skills – the latter including, for example, running practicals and teaching psychological thinking
- Assessment regime expertise.

Subject knowledge and skills

It is a truism that effective teaching requires a minimum level of subject knowledge. This includes knowledge of both the subject and the skills that go with it, for example, research design and critical thinking. What is much less clear is the extent to which good teaching is associated with subject expertise beyond this minimum. The reality on the ground has always been that some teachers will be professionally qualified psychologists while others will be just a few pages ahead of their students in a textbook. A number of small-scale surveys have looked at exactly how many psychology teachers have psychology qualifications.

In a survey for the British Psychological Society (Jarvis, 2003), a substantial minority of psychology teachers – 28% of school teachers and 19% of further education (FE) lecturers – did not have an HE qualification in the subject. More recently Rowley and Dalgarno (2010) found a similar number of school teachers without a psychology degree (28.6%), but a smaller number of FE lecturers, just 2.5%. All such surveys have problems with sample size and representativeness so don't take the exact percentages as gospel. Suffice to say that a substantial minority of psychology teachers have no formal qualifications in psychology. This is absolutely not to suggest that psychology teachers without a psychology background cannot be good psychology teachers. It does however highlight a direction for continuous professional development (CPD) – 100% of Jarvis' sample who did not have psychology degrees reported that they would undertake a suitable qualification in psychology if it existed.

Generic and subject-specific teaching skills

Shulman (1986) made the important distinction between pedagogy and subject-pedagogy; in other words there exist generic teaching attributes, knowledge and skills, but also more subject-specific ways of doing things. This is important because the 33 competences currently applied to teachers are entirely generic. One weakness of the competency framework is that it does not easily recognise the creativity and specific expertise employed by teachers in delivering their own subject. On reading this book it should become clear that, while generic teaching skills are important, there are in addition a number of subject-specific techniques developed for psychology teaching. Some of these have not been widely disseminated among psychology teachers and they represent an important direction for professional development in experienced teachers. Examples include Sternberg's triarchic model of psychology teaching (p86), Dietz-Uhler and Lanter's four-question model (p88), Norton's use of PALS (p48) and McGhee's thinking skills toolkits (p81).

Assessment regime expertise

This refers not to the generic skill of assessing student progress during courses, but specifically to the understanding teachers need to develop of the processes by which the outcomes of their courses will be assessed. For most psychology teachers this will mean understanding the assessment procedures followed by the unitary awarding bodies responsible for psychology GCSE and A-level. Some of these are discussed further in Chapter 2, and a number of training providers – including the exam boards themselves, learned bodies such as the Association for the Teaching of Psychology and private training companies – provide workshops on A-level teaching and marking. However, there is no substitute for first-hand experience, and the best way to gain an in-depth understanding of the exam system is probably to become an assistant examiner. Most teachers report after their first experience of examining that they have a better understanding of how to prepare students for exams and some rethink much of their practice. Paradoxically this is at least as important if you have a holistic view of education. The better you understand the exam system the more efficiently you can prepare students for it and the more time you can free for other activities.

PROFESSIONAL VISIONS OF THE PSYCHOLOGY TEACHER

If we have established a range of goals of psychology teaching and explored some of the attributes of the psychology teacher that contribute to their achievement, perhaps the next logical task is to look at how the psychology teacher can achieve those attributes. Two models are of particular interest, reflecting the dual professional identity of the psychology teacher. The reflective professional model has been particularly influential in education. The scientist-practitioner model dominates applied psychology.

The reflective professional

For a more detailed account of reflectivity see Jarvis (2005). What follows here is a condensed version of that discussion. A broad vision widely espoused by educationalists has been of the teacher as a ‘reflective professional’. The term captures effectively the essence of teaching as having professional status and the teacher as an active participant in both individual professional development and as a contributor to wider pedagogical development.

The most influential view of reflective practice comes from Schon (1983, 1987). Schon has put together a complex model of professional expertise by fusing cognitive and social constructionist theory. Based on social constructionist awareness, Schon proposed that professions entered a crisis by the 1980s due to the growing awareness of the limitations of technical rationality, the dominant belief that professional ability could be understood simply in terms of mastering a set of skills. Based on a cognitive understanding of automatic processing of information

(Allport, 1980; Tharp and Gallimore, 1991), Schon developed the term ‘knowledge in action’ to describe the ability of the experienced professional to respond automatically to a situation without diverting attentional resources and distraction. Rather than subscribing to technical rationality, Schon suggested that professional expertise could be better understood in terms of ‘professional artistry’, whereby experienced professionals make use of knowledge in action.

To Schon the reflective professional is distinguished by the capacity to consciously bring to bear a subjective awareness of their knowledge in action. This means that actions that would otherwise be implicit and automatic become explicit and can be reflected upon individually and shared in a process of professional discourse. Much of this reflection occurs simultaneously with the action, thus the reflective professional is constantly analysing and modifying their practice. This is called reflection in action. This is not, as has been sometimes suggested, to devalue the automatic processing involved in responding to situations in the form of teachers’ craft knowledge, but rather to suggest that conscious reflection upon these automatic processes is an effective tool of professional development.

Schon’s ideas have been enormously influential in educational academia. The concept of reflectivity has enormous heuristic value – that is, as a cognitive tool to aid thinking about a topic – among those seeking to look at development of pedagogy. Among practitioners, the term ‘reflective practice’ has also proved something of a rallying cry for those seeking to improve the professional status of teachers and been linked closely with Schon. This is not to say that Schon is without critics. Usher *et al.* (1997) have pointed out a logical inconsistency between reflection in action as a feature of professional practice and deliberate attempts to apply Schon’s model by demonstrating reflectivity. Those influenced by Schon can only try to apply the model and, by definition, this cannot achieve Schon’s ideal. In addition, Schon’s liberal mix of cognitive and social constructionist principles is epistemologically messy, fusing theoretical ideas based upon largely incompatible views of the nature of knowledge and human understanding.

Evidence-based practice: the psychology teacher as scientist practitioner?

If reflectivity has been the dominant idea in understanding the teacher as professional, then the professions of applied psychology have been similarly dominated by the scientist-practitioner ethos. Essentially this means that the psychologist is both a practitioner and researcher, and that the practising psychologist contributes to research and tries as far as possible to use techniques that have been validated by research. The British Psychological Society’s Division for Teachers and Researchers in Psychology (DTRP) promotes the ideal of linking teaching and research in its stated aims ‘to ensure that the essential mutual relationships between teaching and research – so special within psychology – are sustained wherever psychologists are engaged in teaching; and to promote the application of psychological knowledge in

the settings where psychological research is conducted and psychology is taught' (British Psychological Society, 1997).

There are serious problems in attempting to crudely emulate the scientist-practitioner ethos as it applies to other areas of applied psychology. One problem – felt even in clinical practice where the role of psychologist is distinguished from other therapeutic professionals by the science–practice link – is that the scientist-practitioner label can seem precious and elitist (Shapiro, 2002). This could present considerable problems for psychology teachers in the face of the egalitarian ethos of the staffroom. Moreover, evidence-based practice is currently made difficult by the small volume of directly relevant good quality research. Although the quality and relevance of education research has vastly improved over the last decade – at least from the perspective of empirical psychology – it still has a way to go before it bears comparison with medicine or clinical psychology (Torgerson *et al.*, 2005).

Clearly then, neither the state of the evidence base nor the context in which psychology teachers operate is conducive to adopting a strict scientist-practitioner ethos. However, there is no reason why teaching should not be informed by research provided teachers have realistic expectations and retain a sense of ownership of their practice. The more politically neutral term 'research informed psychology teaching' is now used to gently promote the influence of empirically validated technique (Zinkiewicz *et al.*, 2003). Actually there are some compelling reasons for psychology teachers to at least dip into the research literature of psychology teaching and to consider contributing to that literature.

- 1 Accounts of techniques used successfully elsewhere can inspire teachers broaden their own professional understanding and practice. This is true even when research has been conducted in a different context, for example US schools or universities in the United Kingdom. This is not to suggest that teachers should make knee-jerk responses and change their teaching to follow evidence-based practices, just that perusing research can inspire innovation.
- 2 In the current era of accountability teachers have increasingly to justify their practice (Guskey, 2007). Being able to refer to published evidence is a powerful argument for doing things your way. This is especially the case when you can demonstrate personal expertise by means of citing your own publications.
- 3 The term 'evidence-based practice' is being spoken with increasing frequency in government circles in relation to education. In the light of the growing expectation that teaching methods will conform to the empirically verified, there is a real danger that teacher discretion and hence professional status will be eroded. Top-down direction of teaching methods was explicit in both New Labour (Rammel and Haysom, 2006) and Tory (Gove, 2010) policy. Such control can only be resisted if teachers actively contribute to the evidence base, demonstrating that, in fact, they 'know best'. Psychotherapists, a decade

or so ahead of teachers in facing this issue, have responded by supplementing the top-down evidence-based practice agenda with a bottom-up agenda of practice-based evidence (Barkham and Mellor-Clark, 2000).

- 4 Researching your own practice is likely to lead to an enhanced understanding of what happens in your classroom. Psychology teachers, with a degree of disciplinary knowledge of research methods, are well placed to research their own practice. Moreover, as Nummedal *et al.* (2002) point out, consideration of what works in teaching and learning should be intrinsically interesting to proponents of psychology – a discipline largely devoted to establishing cause and effect relationships. More pragmatically, conducting this type of research is recognised as continuing professional development and can form part of performance management.
- 5 While the current evidence base for psychology teaching is limited, we can work towards a more substantial body of evidence and cautiously begin to identify techniques that can be said to be reliably demonstrated to work in the context in which psychology teachers work. For example, a technique demonstrated to work well in an American university department of sociology *may* prove effective in the psychology A-level classroom of the UK school. If we ignore it on the basis of the context in which it originated, we may be missing a trick. Clearly though we cannot take it as read that the same technique will benefit practice in our very different context. The logical way to respond to such a technique would be to replicate and evaluate it in the psychology classrooms of UK schools and colleges.

At the time of writing there are two UK research journals looking to publish papers on practice in teaching psychology at school and college. These are *Psychology Teaching Review*, published by the British Psychological Society, and the *e-Journal of Psychology Teaching*, published by the Psychology Teacher Training Network.

Applying psychology to teaching psychology

This can be considered as an aspect of evidence-based practice in the wider sense that we can apply an empirically validated psychological theory to teaching psychology, even when such theory may not have been validated specifically in the context of teaching psychology. Zinkiewicz *et al.* (2003) have suggested a range of ways in which disciplinary knowledge of psychology can be applied to teaching psychology. These are summarised in Table 1.4.

Clearly the application of psychology to teaching psychology is tremendously broad and we cannot do justice to it in this short section. Many of the areas identified by Zinkiewicz and colleagues form the basis of discussions in this book. For those particularly interested in developing this area of their practice there are now Master's degrees in psychology teaching.

Table 1.4 Examples of applying psychology to teaching psychology (After Zinkiewicz *et al.*, 2003)

<i>Area of psychology</i>	<i>Examples of applicable theory and research</i>
Cognitive development	Piaget's genetic epistemology, Vygotsky's sociocultural theory and research into adult cognitive development
Student diversity	Intelligence and ability, personality, learning styles, cultural diversity
Learning and thinking	Behavioural theory, experiential theory, cognitive approaches, theories of memory and learning
Motivation	Intrinsic and extrinsic motives, humanistic theories, cognitive theories
Social processes	Group development, conformity, intergroup relations, attitude change and leadership
Barriers to and facilitators of learning	Arousal, anxiety and stress Psychotherapy and resilience

CONCLUSIONS AND REFLECTIONS

Students overwhelmingly opt to study psychology because it fits neatly with our current cultural understanding of what is intrinsically interesting. There is little empirical support for alternative explanations for psychology's increasing popularity. As well as a qualification, students studying psychology have the opportunity to gain a set of transferable skills and a possible advantage in studying psychology at degree level. However, neither of these benefits should be taken for granted, and it is important that teachers are aware of making the subject interesting and engendering transferable skills. Two visions of the professional are particularly important in understanding how psychology teachers can develop their practice. The reflective professional model is particularly influential in teaching, while the scientist-practitioner model is similarly influential in psychology. While both of these models have their limitations, they are helpful in pointing to directions for continuing professional development.

An issue that has arisen continually through this chapter is the balance between two philosophies of teaching: that which emphasises exam success alone and that which focuses as much on quality of student experience and development of student attributes and transferable skills. Although there is no argument to be made that results are not important, teachers do vary in their attitudes to the relative value of student grades as compared to other criteria. Crudely, we can identify a continuum between what we might call strategic teaching on one hand – oriented purely towards maximising exam results – and holistic teaching on the other – balancing exam preparation against the quality of student experience and the achievement of more distal goals.

Although this is one of the most talked-about issues among psychology teachers it has generated surprisingly little literature. Drawing on his experience as HE teacher and A-level Chief Examiner, Green (2007) has denounced what he calls

the ‘cookbook approach’ to psychology teaching: delivering formulaic chunks of information that allow students to technically satisfy assessment criteria without giving students a genuine understanding of the material. The question then arises: is the problem an over-emphasis on strategic teaching or the pedagogically poor approach that some teachers have taken to achieve it? In a context where teachers are constrained by the focus on them in terms of student attainment there is probably more to be gained by a focus on the latter. The philosophy of the rest of this book is about searching for a set of strategies and techniques that are compatible with an exam focus in the short term and also with the development of transferable skills in the long term.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

- 1 Critically consider the reasons why students choose psychology. What implications do these reasons have for professional practice?
- 2 To what extent does studying psychology help students beyond their course? What can teachers do to influence the long-term benefits of studying psychology?
- 3 What is effectiveness and what makes a psychology teacher effective?
- 4 What are the benefits of research-informed psychology teaching?
- 5 Outline the range of ways in which psychology has been applied to teaching psychology.

NOTE

- 1 A copy of the Dearing Report can be found at <https://bei.leeds.ac.uk/Partners/NCIHE/>

FURTHER READING

- Jarvis, M. (2005) *The psychology of effective learning and teaching*. Cheltenham, Nelson Thornes.
- McGuinness, C. (ed) (2003) *Post-16 qualifications in psychology*. Leicester, British Psychological Society.
- Zinkiewicz, L., Hammond, N., and Trapp, A. (2003) *Applying psychology disciplinary knowledge to psychology teaching and learning*. York, LTSN.