

Teaching psychology: The political context

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RADFORD (2008), in a wide ranging article on the teaching of psychology in higher education, creates the image of rambling through a forest. In this image, teaching psychology is represented by the process of negotiating a way through the vegetation rather than the vegetation itself. Hence, no discrete 'content' is transmitted from teacher to learner (or conversely from learner to teacher) since the vegetation can be labelled in myriad ways depending upon the perspective adopted by the Rambler. This is a fascinating image.

However, in order to find a focus, this commentary will be limited to two critical aspects not adequately addressed in the article. The first aspect is the relevance of boundaries. The second aspect is the political context(s). These two issues, though artificially dissociated for current purposes, are inextricably linked. By way of a preface, this commentary argues that the Graduate Basis of Registration (GBR) is not 'the professional tail' that is 'wagging the teaching subject dog [p. 6]', but a consistent stance in order, *inter alia*, to maintain standards within the teaching of psychology.

Radford (2008) argues that a distinction can be drawn between a discipline and a profession in that the former does not have boundaries whereas the latter does. A counter argument is that disciplines do have boundaries even if such boundaries are artificially erected by university governing bodies. In fact there is a real sense in which the creation of these boundaries is almost an inevitable and spontaneous function of university governing bodies. Imagine higher education processes as a series of nested loops as in a computer programme. The inner loop represents first degree students who are linked to the university for three years. The second loop is that of the aca-

demically staff who co-exist with these students for potentially a longer time of say five years. The next loop comprises the university governing body. The time span for the governing body potentially runs into centuries and in a very real sense has seen extensive changes over time. The final loop is that of extant government policy whose time frame is commensurate with that of the academic staff but clearly dwarfed by the timescale of the university governing body. Creating boundaries enables the university governing body to moderate the fit between resources that are received, those expended and less the resources necessary for its own maintenance. Psychology as a discipline is placed within such a contextual framework that is not independent of all other disciplines. It is one of many disciplines. Therefore teaching psychology is not just about what academic psychologists would like to teach.

Within this looped structure students have many reasons for wanting to obtain a psychology degree; academic staff have many reasons for being in the educative process; government policy has many reasons for engaging with universities. In contrast, the university governing body has one main reason, that of its survival. The creation of boundaries enables university governing bodies to identify those disciplines that contribute to the survival of the organisation, i.e. those whose contribution to resources is a positive one. Critically many psychology departments, as an implicit strategy, have aligned their boundaries with 'hard science' disciplines. A cursory inspection of degree titles awarded by UK psychology departments needs no statistical analysis to state that the 'Bachelor of Science' significantly prevails over 'Bachelor of Arts'. Given that government strategy predominantly funds these 'hard science' disciplines, psychology

departments that have used the strategy have benefited from that alignment. The impact on the teaching of psychology is that it does become perceived as a scientific enquiry and specifically of experimental method. The actual teaching, however, as in all psychological enquiry, may not entirely be that which is perceived. Boundaries place the process of teaching of psychology into a defined context within higher education making it intelligible to the university governing body and to the funding allocation processes.

The second aspect is the political context. Stating that 'psychology is a science' is part of a political process (which itself is a psychological phenomenon). Making such a statement does not define the discipline of 'psychology' in an absolute way. It is important to stress that such a statement does not detract from the current premise that the content of psychology enquiry has an empirical basis.

However, by using the statement linkages can be made to prestige and funding within a particular phase of government policy. Interestingly propagation and adherence to the statement by the various stakeholders is not evidence of validity but rather an index of political conformity. Political awareness in higher education is evidenced by recognising that processes are privileged above content. The statement 'psychology is a science' is part of an ascendant narrative that implies utility. Education is the process by which society is provided with members who are useful. Scientific method has particular utility in that the knowledge base generated enables the physical environment to be manipulated in predictable ways. Therefore, if the process of teaching psychology results in determinate output skills then it can be claimed that psychology has utility. Clearly there are alternative narratives which place emphasis on the socially diversifying function of education or on the maintenance of culture. However, current prominence, although determined by political values that are themselves relative, is for 'psychology as a science'.

The legitimacy of the 'psychology as a science' narrative is further augmented by external validation from a professional body. It is not accidental that the Graduate Basis of Registration (GBR), has a syllabus that places emphasis on an empirical approach. Compliance with the GBR can then be used to confer authenticity on psychology departments within the university setting. What is being taught is generally accepted as what needs to be taught.

The political dimension is scalable in that it also extends to the individual academics within the psychology department. If 'psychology is a science' then the world view espoused in teaching and research is geared towards experimental methods and little is taught about alternatives though the possibility exists that time can be allocated 'if there is a demand'. The presumption is that the students know what they need to know.

If 'psychology is a science' then the knowledge base is based on scientific method and imponderable questions are in the realm of philosophy. If 'psychology is not a science' then what are we teaching?

The place of teaching psychology in higher education might also be, in part, to ensure that students leave not only with the ability to challenge the accepted status quo and acknowledge the relativism that underpins human science, but also the confidence to do so.

In summary, Radford provides a timely opportunity to rehearse some of the relatively under discussed issues of what constitutes psychology as an academic discipline. These issues are often perceived as fundamentally unfathomable and perceived as debate topics rather than of substantive enquiry. More systematic study of the political processes should be part of that enquiry.

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