

# Open Dialogue peer review: A response to Hartley

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## Teaching psychology to teachers and researching student learning

IT WAS VERY INTERESTING to read James Hartley's reflections on the teaching of psychology and I thought it would be worth adding a rather different perspective, while agreeing with his main conclusions about the relative lack of change in teaching practices. My experience is of teaching psychology to teachers, mainly at MEd level and in initial teacher education, but I also taught undergraduate psychologists.

In the 1960s, when I began, psychology was an integral part of teacher education. In my PGCE in Manchester, the psychology element was taught by Stephen Wiseman and Frank Warburton in a way that captured my interest. I came in as a physics graduate, but their influence led me into educational research under John Nisbet, who guided me to a doctorate, and eventually to being Editor of the *British Journal of Educational Psychology*.

In the MEd courses I taught to teachers, it was always possible to keep a strong conceptual basis in the psychology teaching, but in the teacher education courses, over the years, sociological influences became stronger, while demands for 'relevance' created a curriculum in which the conceptual basis of psychology was only fleetingly reflected. The changing role of teacher training meant that the focus became more on the mechanics of teaching and the influences of social context, and less on child development and learning. This change also reflected a general drift towards utilitarianism in education, with academic understanding becoming subjugated to vocational relevance.

My undergraduate psychology teaching drew on research into how students learn. While I was trying to treat this as an academic contribution, my psychology colleagues (and most of the students) saw it as being more about study methods than a 'real' part of the psychology course. And that attitude also seems to have affected more general reactions to research into student learning. The interview and inventory-based research methods do not fit easily with the strong experimental tradition of psychology, and so the findings may get devalued. It always surprised me how little ideas from education psychology, or even the more general theories of learning, seemed to have influenced psychologists' thinking about the practice of teaching and learning.

Recent ESRC/TLRP research investigated ways of Enhancing Teaching-Learning Environments (ETL project) within specific course units and helped to suggest how best to support students' conceptual understanding (Entwistle, 2009). The problem, as Hartley so clearly pointed out, is that the additional pressures being faced by colleagues in all departments makes it difficult for them to justify the time and effort required to make significant changes in the curriculum or experiment with more innovative ways of teaching. Nevertheless, many suggestions of what might be done, even within these constraints, are to be found in the recent literature (Biggs & Tan, 2011; Christensen Hughes & Mighty, 2010; Hounsell & Hounsell, 2007). And, in spite of governmental and managerial instrumentality, we have to retain the academic integrity the subject in our teaching. We have to help

students to think and act like professionals and develop a lasting feel for the subject and love of learning, and that can be guided by the relevant research findings (McCune & Entwistle, 2011).

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