

Fostering Deep Learning Through Workshops: a re-design of a first-year Psychology Module

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Keywords: *psychology education, workshops, deep & surface learning*

Introduction:

This paper discusses the redesign of a module on 'Personality and Social Psychology' (PY1003) that is compulsory for first-year Psychology undergraduates at London Metropolitan University. It also forms an introductory platform for the rest of their degree, on which many future second- and third-year modules are based. Module aims as identified in the Module Booklet are:

*'to introduce students to a range of topics in personality and social psychology. The first part of this module focuses on theories and models of personality as explanations of behaviour and understanding individual differences in a wider social context. The second part focuses on the relationship between individuals and society'*p.4 (Marson, 2008)

The module was initially structured into ten weeks of lectures - the first five focussing on personality, the next four on social psychology, and the final one a revision session - and two workshops designed to help students prepare for their assessed coursework. Because there was a large discrepancy between the number of lectures versus seminars (nine versus two), it was not possible to cover in the seminars all the material from the lectures, meaning that some topics received more attention than others. However, it was made clear to students that lectures are intended to provide information which they can then use to guide their own independent study. Given the large numbers of students, lectures tended to encourage passive learning, whereas in the workshops students were encouraged to go through activities encouraging them to explore material in more detail. Students are assessed via two 1000-word essays (each accounting for 25% of the marks), and an exam (50% of the marks).

Theoretical approach

Current pedagogical thinking is that 'deep' approaches to learning should be encouraged over more 'surface' approaches. Toohey (2002) describing the different kinds of learning that each approach entails as follows:

'Students adopting a surface approach are primarily interested in meeting the demands which the system places upon them. Their usual strategy is to reproduce enough of the information they have been given to satisfy the assessment requirements of the unit. They often resort to rote learning and are satisfied if they can retrieve what they have memorized, even if they don't fully understand it.' (p.10).

'When students adopt a deep approach to learning their motive is to gain understanding: they adopt strategies such as reading widely and discussing the concept or topic with others: they seek to make new knowledge in terms of what they already know about this topic and related topics' (p.9).

An example that may illustrate the deep versus surface learning dichotomy is that of teaching delivered via seminars (deep) versus lectures (surface).

The importance of teaching in small groups has been noted by the LTSN Psychology (2000) survey into teaching in Psychology that found that small-group teaching can take up to 40% of teaching time in the first and second years, rising to as much as 70-75% in the final years of degree modules. Bennett, Howe, & Truswell (2002) provide the theoretical background for the importance of teaching in small groups by placing it within the tradition that draws upon the work of the Soviet Psychologist, Vygotsky (e.g. Vygotsky, 1962, 1978). He argued that students have 'Zones of Proximal Development' (ZPDs), which are characterised by the distance between what they can learn individually, and what they can learn by interacting with others with more knowledge. Students learn by crossing these ZPDs, and while the initial Vygotskian approach implied that such learning was best-suited for one-to-one interactions, it has since been developed to consider small group situations (e.g. Howe, Tolmie, Duchak-Tanner and Rattray, 2000), where students can act as 'expert guides' for each other. Indeed, Bennett et al. (2002) argue that this collaborative ZPD-crossing has been a central theme in the peer-tutoring movement.

While there may be practical benefits to lectures (as they can be delivered to more students than seminars), focusing on just this method may detract from the qualitative benefits that emerge from the more group-based interactive approaches used in seminars. Therefore, teaching that promotes the use of small groups should be encouraged.

Module redesign

During early 2008 there were discussions in the Psychology Department about improving the degree course in general. This was because like PY1003, most modules only have two seminars throughout the semester, despite having up to ten lectures, creating a mis-match in focus and potentially misleading students about the importance of topics covered in the seminars versus those that were not. As a result of this debate, it was decided to introduce two more seminars or 'workshops'

(as they are called in the Psychology teaching material) into the module teaching in the hope that this would encourage students to adopt a more deep approach to their learning. The intention was that students would have more opportunity with their peers to work through material from the lectures in greater detail, and to ask questions in a less intimidating atmosphere than that of the lectures.

To aid the development of these two new workshops for the PY1003 module, I decided to gather data by conducting qualitative views with staff teaching on the module, and use it to inform my new workshop design. I conducted semi-structured interviews (see Appendix I for a copy of the interview schedule) with the three colleagues available, which were tape-recorded, transcribed and then subjected to thematic analysis. Themes I looked at included: experiences of the delivery of teaching (both lectures and seminars) and assessment, perceived strengths and weaknesses of the module, ways in which it could be improved, perceptions of students' evaluations of the module, and finally, participants' views on the proposal to introduce two more workshops into the teaching.

The interviews with two participants (P1 and P3) were transcribed in full. However, due to a technical fault, the interview with P2 did not record, and so I had to rely on notes made during the interview. Further details of the relevant themes are presented as follows:

Views on module structure

Participants were asked about their views on the existing module structure and their view of the proposal to introduce two more workshops. P1's initial impression was that the two parts of the module could have been linked together better, but this view had changed over time;

P1: [] *My initial thought was there's no connection between the 2... it's not as if in the first few lectures we're saying 'look here's Personality, here's the basic stuff, and in the social stuff we're offering a more social psychological look at personality'- [but] I think the Personality initial one is kind of good cos it gives them this kind of general overview of different approaches to the study of personality but also applies to all other areas of Psychology- you know so it's kind of the nature versus nurture, environmental versus internal types of distinctions. And my initial thought as I say was that wasn't carried on in the Social Psychology, but it's not really meant to be.*

This was a similar sentiment to that shared by P3, as the following quotation illustrates:

P3: *Well when I first started it, I kind of wanted to change the world- you know... I think it was suggested that the module be split into 2 separate modules [But] I kinda realised that maybe sometimes you shouldn't just change things, kind of for the sake of it, and maybe stick with things, []. if they're doing OK*

These two extracts are interesting as the lecturers appear to share the initial view that the two parts of the module seemed a little incongruous together, but later both become less concerned by this and neither wished to fundamentally change the module as a result.

Students' evaluation of teaching:

Participants felt that feedback from students about the module was largely positive. For instance, P2 reported that the students' evaluation of the module was generally good, although they did comment that there was always the 'odd crackpot' who said negative and/or bizarre things about the module. The following quote from P1 illustrates this belief as well:

P1: *It was extremely positive, yeah- everything about it they really liked so and like I say lots of them wrote on their feedback 'this is the best we get' and all that sort of stuff... some of the conversion students comment it's bit dumbed down sometimes. You know it would be good to go into some issues in a bit more detail, but even account[ing] for that, it's generally still positive the feedback... the seminars, they seem to find them useful for writing essays in general.*

Module re-design plans

P1 supported the idea of introducing more workshops into the teaching, implying that this would encourage a deeper approach to learning in students as opposed to coaching them in how to pass the specified modulework;

P1: *Yeah that's a good idea.. [In] workshops you talk a bit more about why it's important to learn these things, and how it fits in to other areas of Psychology... It may be a bit more applied etc. not just about getting them a pass in the exam which is what the current ones are pretty much about.... I think a workshop based on actual topics- what it's about, why they're studying Personality and Social Psychology would be good.*

P2 was also in favour of introducing two more workshops into the module teaching, the only concern being whether it would be possible to find the staff and teaching hours to do so. P2 also felt that more workshops could help encourage a deeper approach to learning, but was aware that it would depend on the content of such workshops, as simply having more workshops would not necessarily encourage deeper learning *per se*.

P2 felt that students may struggle if it was pitched at a higher level, as more advanced second-year modules (such as PY2003- Social Psychology) have poorer performance levels. P2 suggested that this might be the case because students often expect Social Psychology to be a more 'fluffy' and less scientific form of Psychology (as opposed to Cognitive Psychology), and so put less effort into studying it or

attempting to grasp the scientific principles involved, and therefore do worse than expected.

However, P1 also felt that given the popularity of the module, there was some reluctance to implement fundamental changes to its structure:

P1: *Why fix it if it ain't broke? But that's not to say it couldn't be better, and I think it will be with these additional workshops if they get introduced.*

P3 also felt there was currently a tendency to encourage surface rather than deep learning in the students, with the emphasis in workshops on teaching skills to pass the essays, but that the plan to introduce two more workshops should encourage a deeper approach to learning.

P3: *I think it would be a good idea cos then you're getting [a] chance to get into the topic in more detail and look at some of the debates in the field... rather than the seminars we're currently doing, cos we're not really encouraging much of a deep approach to the students' learning, as I worry we're kinda basically coaching them to sort of just pass the 2 essays they have to do... So it would be better if we could get em to look at... the nature nurture debate...*

It is particularly interesting that all three participants spontaneously mentioned the deep versus surface learning dichotomy without being asked, suggesting that it is a robust phenomenon. It was also clear that there is an existing level of awareness of the need for a deep approach to learning amongst those teaching Psychology at London Metropolitan University, and that introducing more workshops could help facilitate a deeper level of learning. Therefore, after conducting the interviews, I was confident that there was general support for such proposals.

New workshop design

Two extra workshops were designed (see Appendix 2) around the idea of encouraging a less didactic and more interactive approach to discussing the nature-nurture debate in seminars.

The intention of the first workshop was to encourage discussions around lay perceptions of personality, and then proceed onto more scientific definitions, to raise awareness of the differences between the two, as well as introducing students to the nature/nurture debate.

The second workshop was structured around introducing students to research methods in Social Psychology, and included three different research questions based on relevant scenarios where students were expected to work together to come up with suitable research designs to investigate each question.

Feedback on new workshops

For reasons of confidentiality, I was not able to gain access to students' feedback of all staff teaching the module, but I did receive 14 completed evaluation forms

commenting on my own teaching for the Autumn 2008-9 semester which included the new workshops. Of these, eleven provided positive feedback about the seminars/workshops. Their comments (quoted here from those forms) indicated that they 'enjoyed' these 'very engaging' sessions which enabled 'a lot of group discussion of topics' that had been covered in lectures, and thereby contributed to 'our student university learning [sic]' and helped them 'to better understand the material presented'.

Conclusion

This project investigated staff perceptions of the teaching of the PY1003 Personality and Social Psychology module so as to inform the design of new workshops intended to encourage a deeper approach to learning. While it may be too early to tell if the extra workshops have indeed done this in the longer run, initial feedback from students and staff is positive.

On the other hand, developing the module content might have a knock-on effect on other later modules in the BSc Psychology degree module, as some second-year modules (e.g. PY2004- Individual Differences, PY2003- Social Psychology) deal with more advanced levels of the debate in this module, and one would have to avoid duplicating material that would be covered in these later modules. Later investigations to compare student performance on this revised module with previous years will further inform this development, and may even help pave the way for potential future changes in the structure of the Psychology degree in general.

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Biographical note:

Dr Chris Cocking is a lecturer in Social Psychology at London Metropolitan University. His research interests include social identity, collective action and inter-group conflict. His particular area of expertise is crowd behaviour in conflict and emergencies such as riots and terrorist attacks. His published work has contributed to revising current models of emergency planning. E-mail: c.cocking@londonmet.ac.uk

Appendix I

Interview schedule:

Introduction:

Get participant to read and sign consent form. Explain style and design of interview- how researcher will start off with open-ended questions that become more closed depending on their responses. Remind them that participation is voluntary and they can withdraw at any time they choose without penalty.

1) Perspective and experiences of participant:

Get them to explain their experiences of teaching the module, how long have they taught it for and in what capacity (e.g. module convenor, taking lectures or seminars, marking modulework and/or exams etc), and has it remained the same/ or changed over time? If there have been changes- what kind, and how did it affect teaching the module?

2) Teaching:

- Can you briefly explain your experiences of teaching the module.
- What do you think was good about teaching the module? Why?
- What could be improved upon in the module teaching? e.g. module content, how it's delivered etc. Why?
- What did the students appear to enjoy/ find useful? Did they appear to grasp the main issues involved?
- Did they find any aspects of it difficult? If so, what?- e.g. content, delivery etc.

3) Assessment:

- Can you briefly explain your experiences of the assessment process.
- What format did it take (essays, exams etc). Did you give the marks you expected to students? Do you feel they were an accurate reflection of students' work and ability? Do you feel they improved over the module?
- If you have taught it before, have you found consistency or variation in performance across different cohorts?
- Were the assessments an accurate way of testing ability? If not- what other methods could have been used?

4) Students' evaluation of teaching:

- Did you see the students' module evaluation feedback?
- What was your reaction to the students' evaluation of the module? Was it fair/ justified?
- Was there any feedback that you either can or will incorporate into future teaching?
- If you have taught the module before- was feedback similar to previous years' feedback, and was it incorporated into future teaching?

5) Overview:

- How useful do you think the module was in introducing the topic of Personality and Social Psychology?
- How do you feel about teaching the module in future? What do you think about the proposal to introduce 2 more seminar workshops?
- If you could make any other changes to the module content, structure or delivery- what would they be? (e.g. splitting it into 2 different modules, integrating the two approaches more, having more interactive seminars etc).

6) Debrief:

Thank participant for their help explain rationale of study in full, offer chance to add any other material, and ask researcher any questions about the project.

Appendix 2

New workshops- notes for teaching staff

Workshop 1: What is personality and how do we measure it?

(Materials for this workshop: some marker pens and flip-sheets or a white board would be useful for highlighting points for discussion)

A) Nature/ nurture debate:

1) (5 minutes) As an ice-breaker, split them into groups of 3-5 depending on numbers, and get them to discuss where they stand on the nature/nurture debate (e.g. is our personality inherent and influenced by the genes we are born with, or does it develop over time in response to our environment?). It's not necessary at this stage for them to have any 'expert' opinions here, more that this should get them thinking about the topic.

2) (5 minutes) Get them back into 1 large group and get each sub-group to feed back, and do a quick straw poll of where each group stands on the debate. It doesn't matter if they don't all agree (I'd be surprised if they did!), but the important thing is to encourage the idea that it's one of the longest debates in psychology, and there is no definitive answer, with respected and famous scientists on either side of the debate.

3) (10 minutes) Get them to consider the following questions in the same groups;

- a) What factors do they think influence personality (e.g. parents/upbringing, peer, social & cultural influences, major life events etc). Ask for relevant examples.
- b) Is our personality fixed or changeable?

If it is fixed, when does it form/become complete (18, 30, 50 etc)?

Point out that answers to this can depend on where one lies on the nature/nurture debate, with more genetic advocates arguing that it forms earlier, but more environmental advocates believing it gradually forms throughout our lives and is continually changing and/or developing.

Get them to feedback their answers into 1 big group. Try to keep these discussions fairly focussed as I find that this debate can end up taking up the whole workshop if you're not careful, and these topics will be explored in more detail in the 2nd year!

B) Definitions of personality & main differences between ideas in popular discourse and more 'scientific' concepts

The underlying point of this part is to get the students thinking about how we define and measure personality and also introduce them to the idea that how you define personality is influenced by the methods that are used to measure it.

They should also start thinking about how lay perceptions of personality may differ from more scientific definitions. Therefore, to be able to adequately study this area in a scientific way, they may need to overcome some popular pre-conceptions about how the concept of personality is used!

1) Definitions: (15 minutes)

They were asked before coming to this workshop to think about how they would define their own personality and someone else's (a friend or family member), so get them to do this for about 5-10 minutes in groups of 3-5 depending on numbers. Ask them to write down a couple of statements about each and feed back into one large group when done. Write up a couple on the board and get them to critically discuss each one.

Get them to unpick their statements- e.g. what do they mean when they say 'XXXX has an outgoing or shy personality'- how did they decide upon that definition, and what evidence did they use to come to that decision? Finally do they think that others would agree with their definition?

2) Similarities and differences between lay and scientific approaches (5 minutes):

Now ask them in one big group how they think psychological approaches to personality are similar to and differ from what they've been discussing so far (don't wait too long for a response here as they'll either know it from the lectures or they won't). For more psychological definitions and attributes of personality, see p.412 of Davey et al's (2008) edition of *Complete Psychology*, and if they're struggling use some of the following ideas from Pervin & John (2005) to help the discussion;

3) How do we measure personality? (15-20 mins)

Depending on time, you can either split them back into their groups to do this task, or if time is running out, ask these questions as 1 big group. Ask them what different methods are used to measure personality, using the following methods used by researchers as a guide (from Ozer, 1999, cited in Pervin & John, 2005);

LOTS data (this could go up on the board as it's an easy acronym to remember):

- 1) Life-record data- school records, criminal records etc- fairly objective but difficult to get hold of in systematic way
- 2) Observer: how others see you (friends, family teachers etc)- open to subjective and or self-fulfilling bias
- 3) Tests: standardised tests (IQ etc) fairly reliable but what do they actually test?
- 4) Self- reports: questionnaires etc easy to get data but strong subjective bias and depends who is tested (usually undergraduate psychology students!)

Ask them what kind of results you might get from each approach, and the pros and cons of each. If there's time, get them to discuss the validity and reliability of each approach..

References:

Davey, G. (ed) (2004) *Complete Psychology* . Hodder and Stoughton.

Pervin, L. A. & John, O. P. (2005) *Personality: Theory and research* (9th Ed.)

Workshop 2: Introduction to research in Social Psychology

(Materials needed for this workshop: marker pens, flipcharts/or whiteboards, and print-outs of each scenario given at the end)

1) Basic introduction to research methods in Social Psychology (15-20 mins)

Briefly ask them in 1 big group if they are aware of the 2 main forms of data that social psychologists gather. Don't spend too long on this (5 mins at most), as they'll either know it, or they won't (fill in for them if they don't)

Quantitative: uses experimental and correlational methods: control vs non-controls, surveys, questionnaires etc

Qualitative: non-experimental methods: observational, archive & interview studies

Now break them up into 3 groups of equal size and get each one to discuss the pros & cons of a different one of the following research methods used in Social Psychology. If they're stuck on what each methods involves, then use the following notes to help guide them, but encourage them to discuss it in their groups first for up to 10 mins and then feed back into one big group to discuss what they came up within the remaining time.

Causal/ experimental:

e.g.- lab experiments- where you usually test a theory by doing something to one group and not to the other (control) and see if there's a difference. It allows you to test for cause and effect and gives greater control over the variables but suffers from lack of realism- something you need to consider more in social psychology as you are supposed to be studying real social processes, which are rather difficult to recreate in the lab! Field experiments introduce more realism, but still problem of experimenter effect, and less control over variables, meaning that results may not exactly replicate behaviour you're after and so at best are analogues of behaviour rather than the behaviour itself (e.g. experimental studies of aggression and violence rarely study real violence because of ethical concerns)

Correlational:

Largely questionnaire studies where you measure attitudes, intentions, reported behaviours etc, to see if one or more factors influence the hypothesis in question. Less interventionist than experimental approach, so less ability to predict cause- effect relationship, but could be more realistic as social behaviour is rarely influenced by one variable in isolation. Problems of self-reporting and social desirability biases though

Observational/archival:

Such as interview or observing others' behaviour in the field. Gathers qualitative data, which is often richer and more diverse than numbers, but less generalisable and more time-consuming to gather and analyse. Less chance of experimenter effect (but it is possible to ask leading questions!), but data is more open to subjective interpretation and selective reporting. Here you could also make point that bias exists in all methods- none are value free, but different methods have different biases in different areas- it's about being aware of them and trying to limit their effects as much as possible

2) Group Task-how would you design research to answer the following psychological questions? (30 mins)

Allocate them into 3 equally sized groups, and give each one a different print out of the scenarios – A, B, C below - and get them to discuss how they would approach each research question. They need to come up with a suitable study that's also feasible. Each scenario is designed to lead each group in a certain methodological direction, so while they may have fun and get brownie points for being inventive, they need to be aware of the constraints of each scenario, and consider them in their design. Ask them to also be prepared to discuss the pros and cons of their plans, as well as any possible ethical issues that they may have to consider while conducting the studies. Depending on how many are in each group, you could suggest that different people report back each on part; e.g. 1) how to do the study, 2) & 3) Pros and Cons of their design, and 4) any possible ethical issues that may arise.

Scenarios for research designs

- A) It is 1945, and World War II has just finished. You are a Professor of Psychology in an American University and have been asked by the government to look at what could have influenced the evil acts committed by the Nazis in Germany to those from minority groups (such as Jews, homosexuals, gypsies etc). Was it that some people had inherently evil personalities, or was it the social situation that influenced them to behave in an evil way towards others? You have been allowed to conduct a study in real time with 40 Male Undergraduate students for up to 2 weeks, and been allocated the basement of your local Psychology department to design a suitable environment to test this question. How would you go about doing this? You have received ethical approval to conduct this experiment with the one condition that if there is any physical violence, then the study will be terminated immediately (participants will be made aware of this as well).
- B) You are an advisor to the Mayor of London who has just been approached by the Home Secretary as she is concerned about the rise in Islamophobic attacks in London since 7/7/2005. You have been given 12 months to measure levels of prejudice within the population of London across different boroughs towards those of the Muslim faith, with a view to targeting diversity awareness education programmes in those areas with higher levels of prejudice. How would you go about designing research to measure the levels of prejudice amongst the populations of different boroughs?
- C) You are a PhD student at London Metropolitan University with an interest in crowd behaviour, and have just heard that the Psychology Department has been commissioned by the Notting Hill Carnival Association to look at participants' experiences of the Carnival. They are worried that coverage of this Year's disturbances have portrayed a distorted view of the Carnival. Therefore, they want to investigate the events from carnival goers who witnessed or were caught up in the disturbances. You have been asked to look at how the disorder started and developed in an effort to advise organisers on how they can reduce the likelihood of such disturbances happening at future carnivals. How would you go about gathering and reporting information from festival goers about their experiences?

Guidelines of the kind of answers they should come up with are as follows;

- A) Here, they are basically being given some heavy hints to recreate the Stanford Prison Experiment, so some kind of experimental study of 2 groups should be expected, with the opportunity for one group to behave oppressively towards the other, while allowing the experimenters to retain a certain amount of control over the situation.
- B) Here they would be expected to come up with a questionnaire study of levels of prejudice amongst the different London boroughs that will create a large amount of data that can be

quantitatively compared across different sample sets. They could suggest doing some qualitative research (such as telephone or face-to face interviews) but the size of the samples would make large scale interview studies impractical, so the focus should be on a quantitative survey study.

- C) Here, they would be expected to conduct some kind of in-depth interview study with people that witnessed or were affected by the events, looking in detail at the richness of their experiences. They could mention doing a questionnaire in an effort to reach a larger sample of people, but they would need to include some qualitative data as well, as a load of numbers would not be able to explain adequately the processes that occurred (e.g. how a peaceful crowd became violent). Brighter ones may suggest trying to get some more 'objective' data, such as CCTV footage, or approaching the Police for a different perspective.