

# Developing the 'psychologically literate citizen' at the University of Stirling



Roger Watt





# Contents

<b>Section</b>	<b>Page</b>
<b>Introduction</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>Background</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>Our ingredients for developing psychologically literate citizens</b>	<b>4</b>
Student motivation	5
Staff motivation	5
Communication routes with staff	5
Opportunities for practice	6
<b>Our recipe for delivering psychologically literate citizens</b>	<b>7</b>
Induction day	7
Dissertation	7
Elective modules	7
<b>Proof of the pudding: unsupervised group projects</b>	<b>8</b>
The process	8
The work	8
Successful?	8
<b>Conclusion: is the psychologically literate citizen on the menu?</b>	<b>10</b>
<b>A taster to tempt you</b>	<b>10</b>
<b>Reference</b>	<b>10</b>

## Introduction

The Division of Psychology at the University of Stirling has been developing a programme for its final-year undergraduate students that is modelled on the idea of the 'psychologically literate citizen' (Cranney and Dunn 2011). This report explains what we are doing.

The report is written by the academic co-ordinator for the final-year programme. It describes the outcome of a fairly radical overhaul of final-year teaching within the context of employability. That overhaul was led by the author but has been debated and approved by colleagues. The report is mostly a record of common values shared by all Psychology staff at Stirling. It does occasionally represent the personal opinions of the author, and I hope that this will be clear to the reader.

## Background

In common with most Scottish degree programmes, the Honours Psychology degrees at the University of Stirling are based on four years' study. In the first two years we cover the basic topics and skills of Psychology including laboratory practice, statistics and the breadth of psychological knowledge. In year three, we cover the whole curriculum at an honours level. This provides the basis for the British Psychological Society (BPS) accreditation. That leaves year four with a range of additional and less constrained options for students.

In our degree programme, year four is the focus for moving students away from directed study and into more independent learning. We expect they will show initiative in all aspects of their final year, and especially in managing their work.

For the last three or four years we have been running a final-year programme which has an overarching structure determined principally by the desire to ensure that students leave university with a clear understanding of what they know and what they can do. The latter, what they can do, is particularly important to employers and in our experience can be underdeveloped; students who know that a t-test is appropriate in a given circumstance and who know how to do a t-test can nonetheless be reluctant to actually go off and do one.

In this regard, the concept of the 'psychologically literate citizen' is a useful context for the final-year work. In broad terms, we think of this as having two branches. There is the knowledge that an honours degree imparts and there are the skills that an honours degree trains. Both of these are important. In simple terms, the honours degree traditionally assesses the extent to which students acquire that knowledge and those skills. For us, the main contribution of the concept of the 'psychologically literate citizen' is to move emphasis towards using that knowledge and those skills, and particularly outside of the Psychology teaching setting.

Our final-year programme has three main assessed elements. Each student does a research project leading to a dissertation with a credit weighting of 40%; each student also does four short elective modules with a combined credit weighting of 40%; and each student does a group project with a credit weighting of 20%.

The group project, with which the bulk of this report is concerned, is the most challenging of these elements as it is entirely unsupervised. Students undertake this as the last component of their degree programme. A group of four students is given a problem, frequently placed in a real-world setting. Students are expected to establish the approach to be adopted, the tools required to answer the question and, often, to find the answer. Although they find this quite daunting, especially its unsupervised nature, most students enjoy the work and the challenge. Moreover the work produced is typically of a high standard.

The group project runs from late March until the end of May. The earlier elements of the final year are designed to equip students with the appropriate sense of independence that will allow them to undertake this group project. The research project and dissertation, which is the element they begin first, is closely supervised but does require them to become proactive. The electives are classroom modules, generally involving discussion around journal articles. These are set up so that students are required to do most of their work independent from academic staff: finding the journal articles, reading them and presenting them to the class. The elective classes allow students to try out the skills of finding literature and reading it for themselves. This proves to be a key step towards the fully unsupervised work.



# Our ingredients for developing psychologically literate citizens

The details of programme provision that contribute to the development of psychologically literate citizens will be explained below. Before that, we consider the basic ethos and environment within which the programme operates.

## Student motivation

One of the issues at Stirling we have to overcome is the observation that for many, probably most, students the main outcome of any learning experience is the grade they achieve. They are very adept at picking up any intelligence about how to maximise their grade and resist any effort that doesn't translate into an improvement in grade. It is far from unusual for student-staff meetings to involve many discussions about access to recorded lectures, about exam contents and such like. Rarely do students ask for more support in acquiring transferable skills.

A significant part of the final-year programme is concerned with altering this motivation in students. We aim to change final-year students into people who seek out opportunities to work at weaker skills. Many students do grasp the difference. This process of changing attitudes to study is emphasised at every stage in the process. We begin the year by asking them what skills they think they need, individually, to develop. We then present each part of the final year as an opportunity for skills development. Our experience is that this needs to be consistent. So, lectures in final year offer the message, emails to students continually emphasize the message and the departmental Facebook page keeps the message going.

## Staff motivation

As will become apparent, there are features of the Stirling final year that stray quite some distance from the more familiar. The extent to which academic staff commit to this approach varies, naturally. Our experience has been that a key factor in this variability concerns the amount of exposure a member of staff has had to empowered, independent students. A simple anecdote will illustrate this. Mainly for practical reasons in the first half of this past semester we have recruited a group of five final-year undergraduate students to teach statistics to our second-year students. They designed workbooks, delivered lectures, ran tutorials and practical classes. Needless to say, this was all done with very considerable support – round the clock at certain pressure points. There was some scepticism among some staff about this (and properly so), allayed only by the thought that the second half of the semester could be used to undo any damage or compensate for any lost time. Worries focussed on two main issues. The first worry was the quality issue: would the learning be as good as if a member of staff was teaching the module? The second worry was the issue of student complaints: can we justify this?

In practice each member of staff in turn who came into contact with the final-year students involved quickly became converted to the view that this was a safe and good thing to do. Watching final-year students sit down and argue passionately about whether pencil and paper Chi-square calculations are an important learning step demonstrated something important to those who watched. The mid-semester results were as good as we have ever seen; no complaints were received.

## Communication routes with staff

Successful communication between the partners is crucial. This is not about methods – we use them all – but about attitudes to partnership. Stirling students are probably no different from anywhere else, baffled by what you do with academic titles, unsure how formal they should be, the only documents they have ever produced that begin with 'Dear ...' were thank-you letters to distant aunts and uncles after Christmas. Equally, my colleagues are easily recognizable: bemused by text speak, baffled by what students do with academic titles, wistfully recollecting the days when an email didn't invariably begin 'Hey', but ultimately trying hard to keep up.

The key here is to understand roles.

There are two extreme versions of the role of a lecturer in the study life of a student. At one extreme, the lecturer is the guardian and source of knowledge: judgemental, authoritative and available to be consulted. At the other extreme is the lecturer as the facilitator of independence: encouraging, praising, open-minded and available for support. Both versions are appropriate – just in different circumstances.

The nature of our final-year programme tends naturally to bring out the facilitator role, and most interestingly, it appears to be student behaviour that causes this. Students communicate very effectively with staff once they have grasped what they want from staff. Academic staff respond readily and rapidly to this. On a personal note, I feel very strongly that it needs saying loud and clear: university staff really do want students to achieve and will go out of their way to make it happen in any way they can. It's a personal impression, but it seems to me that being a lecturer these days is very hard but we all leap at opportunities to do something that helps students often long after office hours have drawn to a close.

### **Opportunities for practice**

Using skills and knowledge in life requires that a person has acquired those skills and knowledge with some level of competence and that the person has sufficient confidence in their own competence. To a considerable extent, our students have acquired the knowledge by the end of their third year. The better ones quite possibly know more psychology than their lecturers. However, up until this point the only opportunities for them to demonstrate their accomplishment is through academic outputs – essays, lab reports and exam scripts. They are typically confident of their own ability as expressed in these media (albeit high ability or low ability). That confidence itself is based on instruction (we have told them how to pass exams) and on repeated practice (they do three exams each semester amounting to a total of 18 by the end of the third year). A significant part of the final-year programme is devoted to developing their broader confidence in their academic skills outside of traditional forms.



# Our recipe for delivering psychologically literate citizens

## Induction day

We begin the academic year with an induction day to which all final-year students are encouraged to come. This involves a three-way collaboration between Psychology staff, careers staff and academic practice staff. Students are asked to think through in some detail what type of career, work or further training they hope to follow when they leave next summer. In the course of the day, they attend workshops that are designed to encourage them to think about the types of work that might be indicated by their character and temperament. They are then asked to think what gaps their *curriculum vitae* (CV) might have in respect to these employment ambitions. Workshops are provided to cater for this: how to find volunteering opportunities, for example. After lunch, they are asked to think through the full range of academic skills and identify any gaps or weaknesses. They are offered workshops on skills such as planning and carrying out large-scale projects (ie doing a dissertation), group work, effective use of the library and IT, and oral presentations.

The day is drawn to a close with a simple message to students. They have ideas about what sort of work they aspire to; they have some idea of the qualities they need to develop and a strong message that concrete experience is better than a vague belief in oneself for the job market. They are challenged to decide what they need, personally and individually to achieve in their final year. They are inspired, we hope, to use their final year to change themselves.

Feedback at the end of the session is always positive. There are the inevitable grumbles about not everyone getting on to the workshops they most wanted but, beyond that, the students do come away with the signs of a different purpose.

## Dissertation

Students all do a dissertation. This is the same as every other Psychology department in the United Kingdom. We have set ours up so that the demands fit in with the logic of final year. This is typically the first piece of final-year work students will encounter, so it has a tempered amount of expected independence. We provide students with research questions (unless a student comes up with a really good one of their own). They have to create the design and discuss this with their supervisor. They are expected to be in charge of the practical aspects, including time management, and do most of the write-up without help.

## Elective modules

Students do four elective modules. These are modules with 12 students and with six meetings of two hours each that deal with highly specialised topics. Students choose from a list of around 20 modules each semester. Electives might be based on a staff member's research interest, on a topic that a member of staff is curious about or on a topic that students have requested.

The key feature is that there is typically very little teaching – in a traditional sense – on electives and an enormous amount of mentoring. At their very best, you wouldn't necessarily know which attendee was the staff member; everyone can be engaged in lively discussion. In the spring semester, we offer several electives that are designed and delivered by students themselves. The main format is that students locate relevant literature, present it to the class and discuss it. Students can, of course, choose how much they personally engage with this but few, if any, escape some degree of personal initiative. Alongside these modules we offer a variety of group and individual support with oral presentations. The function of these modules is that students learn advanced material, but they must take considerable responsibility in making that happen. They practice on a weekly basis the business of finding literature for themselves, critically evaluating it, and presenting it to others. We find that the best students really catch the idea and thrive on it. All students manage to cope with the demand.

For the students involved in designing a module there is a strong learning experience because the whole process is done under close personal guidance from a member of staff. For the students who take these electives, there is a wonderful sense of being equal to the module co-ordinator (even though assessment remains in staff hands).

## Proof of the pudding: unsupervised group projects

### The process

Students are offered a selection of group projects in the March of their final year. These are presented as brief descriptions (one page maximum), usually of a question or an issue to be explored. The description may contain a reference to a single paper, if the topic is closely related to that paper.

Students sign up for the group project through an online enrolment system. In practice the demand for some projects is higher than the places and the demand for other projects is low. The system adopted has the major merit that it leaves the matter in the hands of the students themselves. An interesting feature of the system is that some students form groups ahead of the sign-up and then act quickly to remain as a group. Beyond this point, there is no involvement in the work from teaching staff until the reports are handed in and require grading.

### The work

Students are expected to manage the work on their own. This places three demands upon them:

- they need to organize their work and their method of working together;
- they need to establish what the work is to be done;
- they need to choose for themselves an appropriate format of reporting.

The outcome of the student work is a pair of reports from each student: a technical report of the project with a word limit of 2,500 words, and a non-technical report of 500 words suitable for a lay reader. The technical report is expected to be written in a manner that would convey all the relevant detail at the level of a journal article (ie a reader with a Psychology degree). The non-technical report is intended to be read by a reader without any formal background in Psychology.

### Successful?

We can ask how successful this programme element is in various different ways. A simple one concerns the grade distribution that we get: this is very much in line with other modules in final year. Interestingly, the correlation between dissertation grades and group project grades is relatively low (for example, this year we had  $r=0.38$ ). This could mean various things, but suggests that the two are measuring slightly different aptitudes in students. We would count that a success.

More usefully, staff regard the outcomes (and grades) they see as indicating that most students have demonstrated an ability to apply psychological skills and knowledge for themselves and often in domains where the students previously have no experience.

Students themselves report an uncertainty about their readiness when they begin the project. Equally once the project is completed (and handed in usually with some revelry), most students report that they are pleasantly surprised by how well they managed to cope with the unsupervised nature of the project and the sense of 'going it alone'.

One student described her experience of the group project as follows. Most of the group she found herself in interpreted their question differently from her. She had to argue strongly and persuasively for her interpretation, nearly giving in at one stage. She discovered in a very practical sense how to make a case and stand her ground. When she goes for a job interview and is asked about teamwork, she has a really good example to draw upon. This happens because there isn't a member of staff to turn to – the unsupervised nature of the group project really worked for her.



Academic staff have also been asked for their views about the usefulness of this. I quote from one, although it is representative of the remainder:

*“I think the skills learned during their projects are put into practice here – I would think these group project reports would look very different if done even at the start of this year. As groups they produced evidence of having thought about the issue, read around it, and produced original ideas. Within groups, there was some evidence of further thinking in one or two cases because individual students adapted/extended the idea that had been discussed as a group. I would say that the group project is a worthwhile activity for students – it gives them a chance to think about project design in a way that to some extent is not offered in dissertation projects (because they are largely designed by us), using the skills learned during that process. It completes the project planning/independent thinking training that I think we can hope to offer at undergraduate level.”*

The external examiner (and we have been very fortunate in having extremely diligent, thoughtful and careful externals) has always remarked that the work at its best definitely shows that our students have become people who can meet the three demands above. Externals have commented that our best students are very capable indeed and that all students produce work of which they can be proud. This year our external has given us a further challenge, which we rather relish. She has suggested that we actually invite students to establish who they think the client or user of their group project might be and produce a report that is closely engineered to that person’s needs and understanding. This is a really powerful thought as it invites students to think through how they might engage with a non-psychological user, and very closely links to the psychological literacy agenda.

We have looked more analytically at the work students choose to do and ask how much of it they are really doing on the basis of student initiative. The range of psychological theory they produce is certainly wide and stretches from basic perception to social psychology. There is a bias, interestingly, towards practical outcomes rather than theory. Students (ours at least) prefer action.



## Conclusion: is the psychologically literate citizen on the menu?

We end this report with some observations about where we have reached in our own thinking and why we thought it worth your time reading about our final-year programme.

The concept of the psychologically literate citizen has been around for some time. It is, of course, a culturally-bound concept in its expression in any particular graduate. For example, one dominant theme in the literature on the concept refers to the tensions between western/westernized populations and indigenous peoples that characterise certain parts of the world.

For us, the major benefits of the concept are twofold. It allows us to address what we think we are supplying to the economy with our graduates and it allows us to organize our programme around a concept that has real meaning for the students. It is unfair and crude to say that traditionally Psychology has been taught as if the recipients are going to be either psychology professionals or university academics. It stretches the point, but does rather capture by exaggeration something that rings true. The idea that there is a real merit for society and the economy in having people who have the skills associated with a thorough and rigorous training in Psychology provides a tangible dignity to what we are doing. Our graduates matter as much as engineering and medicine graduates. It is a major accomplishment in a graduate to know how to apply the scientific method in the messy, complex, real world, while being aware of the pitfalls and perils. Having demonstrated it during the degree programme is important and correspondingly desirable.

Our discovery is that the concept also allows students to really buy into the value of having a Psychology degree and to work really hard at being the best psychologically literate citizens that they can become.

## A taster to tempt you

I thought it would be interesting for you, the reader, to see the titles of some of our group projects as they were devised this academic year:

- Understanding barriers to registering as an organ donor;
- How can psychological research have real 'impact'?
- Male power: innate, advertised or acquired?
- Eating disorders and the fashion industry: who is responsible?
- Does cheese give you strange dreams?
- Ethical standards in Psychology and reality television;
- Why people get lost: do humans have an internal sense of direction?

## Reference

Cranney, J. & Dunn, D. (Eds.) (2011) *The Psychologically Literate Citizen: Foundations and Global Perspectives*. New York: Oxford University Press.

## Contact us

**The Higher Education Academy**  
**Innovation Way**  
**York Science Park**  
**Heslington**  
**York**  
**YO10 5BR**

**+44 (0)1904 717500**  
**[enquiries@heacademy.ac.uk](mailto:enquiries@heacademy.ac.uk)**

© The Higher Education Academy, 2013

The Higher Education Academy (HEA) is a national body for learning and teaching in higher education. We work with universities and other higher education providers to bring about change in learning and teaching. We do this to improve the experience that students have while they are studying, and to support and develop those who teach them. Our activities focus on rewarding and recognising excellence in teaching, bringing together people and resources to research and share best practice, and by helping to influence, shape and implement policy - locally, nationally, and internationally. The HEA supports staff in higher education throughout their careers, from those who are new to teaching through

to senior management. We offer services at a generic learning and teaching level as well as in 28 different disciplines. Through our partnership managers we work directly with HE providers to understand individual circumstances and priorities, and bring together resources to meet them. The HEA has knowledge, experience and expertise in higher education. Our service and product range is broader than any other competitor.

[www.heacademy.ac.uk](http://www.heacademy.ac.uk) | [www.twitter.com/heacademy](https://www.twitter.com/heacademy)

The views expressed in this publication are those of the author and not necessarily those of the Higher Education Academy. No part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or any storage and retrieval system without the written permission of the Editor. Such permission will normally be granted for educational purposes provided that due acknowledgement is given.

To request copies of this report in large print or in a different format, please contact the communications office at the Higher Education Academy: 01904 717500 or [pressoffice@heacademy.ac.uk](mailto:pressoffice@heacademy.ac.uk)

