

Psychological literacy: A multifaceted perspective

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The concept of psychological literacy has grown in importance within psychology education at all levels, in the UK and globally, in recent years. Increasingly, psychology educators and policy makers are seeking to emphasise the relevance and usefulness of psychology within everyday life, within the workplace, and as an element of global citizenship.

The Division of Academics, Researchers and Teachers in Psychology (DART-P), recognising this recent development, hosted a symposium at the British Psychological Society (BPS) Annual Conference 2015, at which the concept of psychological literacy was explored within the context of higher and pre-tertiary psychology education. The aim of the symposium, reflected in this article, was to explore current thinking, developments and practice within contemporary psychology education, with a view to stimulating critical discussion and reflection on psychological literacy and its delivery within both pre-tertiary and higher education contexts. Ultimately, the symposium, and this article, are intended to facilitate exploration of the opportunities provided by psychology education, at all levels, to develop students as psychologically literate citizens.

This article summarises the talks and discussions which occurred during the symposium. Firstly, we introduce the concept and literature surrounding psychological literacy and its importance to modern psychology education. This is followed by a case study illustrating one way in which psychological literacy has been embedded into the curriculum within a university undergraduate programme. We move to consider the development of thinking about psychological literacy in a historical context, linking it to societal benefits and Miller's (1969) concept of 'giving psychology away'. This raises the question of the extent to which pre-tertiary psychology education can equip students with psychological literacy, and the impact of the growing numbers of people who have studied psychology upon society. In England and Wales, the most popular pre-tertiary psychology qualification is the A level, which has undergone recent revisions, and so we consider the contribution of the new A level psychology specifications to psychological literacy. In conclusion, this paper offers some thoughts about the implications of the growth in emphasis on education for psychological literacy, reflecting the discussions held during the plenary session at the end of the symposium.

Keywords: *psychological literacy; higher education; pre-tertiary; A-level; transferable skills; global citizenship.*

1. Julie Hulme: Psychological literacy: Bringing psychology to life

JULIE HULME set the scene for the symposium, introducing the related concepts of psychological literacy and psychologically literate citizenship, outlining recent practices with regard to the embedding of psychological literacy within curricula, and signposting available resources relating to psychological literacy.

Psychological literacy was first defined by McGovern et al. (2010, p.210), who

suggested that it was comprised of the following skills and knowledge that would be acquired by students during the course of an education in psychology:

- vocabulary and knowledge of the critical subject matter of psychology;
- scientific thinking, disciplined analysis of information to evaluate alternative courses of action;
- creative and 'amiable skeptic' approach to problem solving;
- applying psychological principles to

personal, social and organisational issues in work, relationships and the broader community;

- acting ethically;
- competent in using and evaluating information and technology;
- communicating effectively in different modes and with many different audiences;
- recognising, understanding and fostering respect for diversity;
- insightful and reflective about one's own and others' behaviour and mental processes.

It is noticeable that the specific subject content that is to be learned by psychology students becoming psychologically literate is not defined in McGovern's account. Instead, the emphasis is on learning enough psychology to be able to think critically, solve problems, and apply knowledge of psychology to become an effective scientist and citizen. To a large extent, McGovern here encapsulates the way in which psychology education facilitates students' enculturation into the discipline (Brown, Collins & Duguid, 1989), and supports them in learning to 'think like' a psychologist (Hulme & De Wilde, 2015, p.20). Psychological literacy is also perceived in McGovern's account as facilitating self-awareness and understanding in a social context.

The underpinning knowledge and skills that constitute psychology are thus much wider than its academic 'ingredients' might suggest. Trapp et al. (2011) designated psychology as a STEM+ subject, arguing that it fosters all of the skills that might be expected of a typical science graduate, alongside communication and interpersonal skills more typical of a social sciences or humanities graduate. Psychological literacy is, therefore, useful to students not only if they pursue a career in psychology, but more generally to facilitate their contributions as global citizens, an issue which is at the forefront of many university learning and teaching policies at the moment (e.g. Bourke, Bamber & Lyons, 2012; Mair, Taylor & Hulme, 2013).

The idea that psychology is useful in the wider world is not a new one; Miller (1969) talked about the need to 'give psychology away' (p.1071), in that understanding human behaviour could provide a means to promote human welfare through a peaceful 'psychological revolution' (p.1065). More recently, these conceptions have been developed around the theme of psychologically literate citizenship (Cranney & Dunn, 2011). It is suggested that many of the problems facing the modern world require psychological understanding in order to achieve a solution, as argued eloquently here:

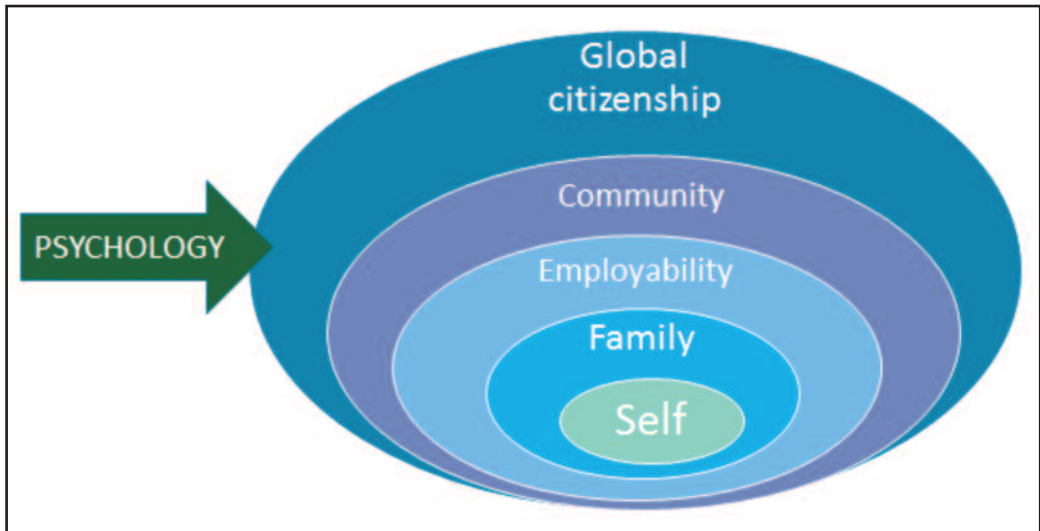
'Today's students must prepare themselves for a world in which knowledge is accumulating at a rapidly accelerating rate and in which old problems such as poverty, racism, and pollution join new problems such as global terrorism, a health crisis created by alarming increases in obesity, and the growing gap between the poor and the very rich. All of these problems require psychological skills, knowledge and values for their solution.' (Halpern, 2010, p.162).

Harré (2011) expanded on these themes by considering the role of psychology in changing behaviour to improve ecological sustainability and so to create a better world. Hulme (2014) went a step further, suggesting that psychological skills and knowledge can be applied to all aspects of human life, asking:

'Do we want to enhance wellbeing in our workplace? Reduce the negative impact that our species has on the global environment? Increase charitable giving? Reduce bullying, conflict and racism, or improve our nation's health? ...Solving our problems as a global community requires people with an understanding of psychology.' (pp.934–935)

Thus psychology education can be argued to enhance the lives of the students who study it, and the lives of those around them. In some respects, psychology is like a pebble, thrown into a pond, which creates ripples all around it, influencing the individual student first, who can then apply their knowledge and skills to their immediate family, their

Figure 1: Psychological literacy is influential on all aspects of human life, from understanding the self to the global context.



workplace, community and the world at large. This is illustrated in Figure 1.

The current BPS (2012a) accreditation criteria for undergraduate degrees, and the BPS policy work around pre-tertiary psychology education (BPS, 2012b), underline the importance of developing psychological literacy through psychology education. The challenge for psychology educators, then, is how to maximise the opportunities within the psychology curriculum to ensure that students develop psychological literacy. Dunn et al. (2011, p.16) argue that 'Promoting psychological literacy entails reorienting what and how we teach students in a way that emphasises psychology's relevance'. This implies a need for a constructively aligned curriculum (Biggs, 1999), with learning outcomes that directly signpost the application of psychological skills and knowledge in a real-world context, learning activities that allow students opportunities to practice such application, and authentic assessments (Ashford-Rowe, Herrington & Brown, 2014; Gulikers, Bastiaens & Kirschner, 2004) that genuinely assess students' abilities to apply their knowledge to solve real-world problems. Taylor and

Hulme (2015; see also this volume) have collated examples of best practice within higher education within a compendium, to be published on the Psychological Literacy website (Cranney, nd; Taylor & Hulme, 2015), some of the ideas from which could be adapted for use at other levels of the education system. Research methods training perhaps provides an obvious tool for encouraging students to develop independent learning and problem-solving skills, as does some content intended to deliver employability. The psychology curriculum itself, however, can also be applied to real-world contexts; for example, students' self-awareness can be developed through understanding of learning theory and metacognition, social psychology can be readily applied to the workplace, and the psychology of behaviour change is relevant to global issues such as health improvement, environmental sustainability and community living. Ethics, diversity and inclusion are also embedded throughout the psychological literature, particularly within the field of individual differences.

In addition to finding ways of incorporating psychological literacy within the curriculum, McGovern (2011) suggests that

it is important to model it within our own practice as educators. This includes delivering learning and teaching in ways that are informed by psychological principles, modelling a problem-solving approach using our own psychological skills and knowledge, and interacting inclusively with students. An interesting aspect of this is a need for teachers to consider ethics within their own teaching, particularly around equipping students to understand their own competences and limitations, including around their maturity and level of education, when encouraging them to apply psychology to solving problems.

Embracing the challenge of embedding psychological literacy within the curriculum is worthwhile for many reasons. Firstly, it directly appeals to students, many of whom chose to study psychology because they perceive that it will help them to make a difference to society (Bromnick & Horowitz, 2013). Secondly, students are more likely to engage with content that they perceive as relevant to their own lives (Jones, 2009). Learning about personally relevant subject material is also supportive of student transitions (Hulme & De Wilde, 2015; Kitching & Hulme, 2013). Finally, psychological literacy is closely allied to global citizenship (Cranney & Dunn, 2011), as well as to employability and internationalisation (Reddy, Lantz & Hulme, 2013) and has much to offer with regards to improving the quality of life for humans and other animals around the globe.

**2. Rebecca Skinner, Francesca Worsnop, Elizabeth Collins & Roger Watt:
Making psychologically literate citizens:
The Stirling experience**

In order to be able to facilitate the embedding of psychological literacy into the psychology curriculum, it is helpful to identify and share examples of best practice. This year, the psychology undergraduate programme at Stirling has been awarded the inaugural BPS Education and Public Engagement Board Award for Innovation in

Psychology Programmes (BPS, 2014), as a result of their work on psychologically literate citizenship (see also Watt, 2013), which is achieved through a model of working with students as partners (Healey, Flint & Harrington, 2014).

A key issue in delivering psychological literacy and psychologically literate citizenship within the curriculum that was encountered during the development of the Stirling programme was that whilst academics are familiar with the requirements to facilitate students in developing knowledge, skills and understanding, they may be less familiar with the attitudinal components that constitute citizenship. It can be argued that psychologically literate citizenship has a foundation in deeds, rather than words, and is best delivered and assessed through project working, rather than traditional assessments such as essays. The related concepts of psychological literacy and psychologically literate citizenship at Stirling are clearly defined, allowing shared understanding between members of the teaching team and the students themselves: psychological literacy is the ability to recognise how and where psychology is relevant in the real-world; psychologically literate citizenship is the willingness and ability to act on that recognition, safely, for the benefit of others. It is not only about what one knows or understands, it is something one has the confidence and independence to do.

This emphasis on the practical and active aspects of psychological literacy is important to the ethos of the Stirling programme. The team emphasised the importance of independence, collaboration and honesty, on the part of both students and tutors. Students were required to be responsible for their own learning, so that they developed abilities to work unsupervised, and to know when to ask for support (rather than directive help). Within the context of collaboration, it was important to recognise one's own strengths, and the strengths of others in the group.

The undergraduate programme at Stirling is a four-year psychology degree, as is usual within Scottish higher education. The

model is highly consistent with the Vygotskian concept of scaffolding (Vygotsky, 1978) with first and second year students learning research methods and statistics from fourth year student tutors and mentors. Much of the focus on psychologically literate citizenship is introduced within the third year of the degree, as students begin to take part in supervised research, which is then followed up by more fully independent work in the fourth year, with some of them also adopting tutor and mentoring roles for second year students at this point. The fourth year is devoted to developing and articulating the confidence and safety that are perceived as crucial to becoming a psychologically literate citizen. The dissertation, which takes place in the autumn semester of the final year, is supervised, and runs alongside two elective modules, one which focuses around staff-led small group discussions, and one which uses peer-mentoring to develop research methods skills. In the final, spring semester, students carry out a group research project, working largely unsupervised, which focuses on psychologically literate citizenship. Alongside this, a further two elective modules are taken. One builds upon the staff-led small group discussion module, using a similar format but this time co-led by staff and students, while the other is entirely student-led. There is, therefore, a shift of control, from staff to students, within the learning process. This shift of control has to be based on mutual respect and trust between students and staff. That is a powerful point to reach: to stand back and watch what students can achieve, without staff.

Thus the final year of the Stirling programme introduces independence gradually, so that the final quarter of the year is entirely based on student contributions and has no academic staff input whatsoever. In this final stage, students are given a real-world problem, with a client, and they are asked to examine, explore, research if necessary and report to the client. They are given no hints about how to proceed and no help or advice on methodology or theory. The

reports they produce are worth 17 per cent of their final year credits. At the same time, within the student-led elective module, they are also given the opportunity to organise and run a conference showcasing their work, entirely without staff input. Their contribution to this conference is assessed alongside their reflections on the learning experience and is worth eight per cent of their final year grades. The purpose of these two assignments is articulation; students prove to themselves (and also to employers and to academic staff) that they are capable of being independent. Students find these two experiences very rewarding, and the work produced is of a very high quality.

A key finding from the work at Stirling is that this combination of independence, collaboration and honesty is crucial in developing leadership skills amongst the psychology student body. Not only do students have the opportunity to develop their potential and ability to lead, but the work they do as part of their degree provides them with evidence of their leadership contribution, which is invaluable when they are seeking jobs or places for further study. Unusually, at undergraduate level, students have the opportunity to develop and deliver their own, credit-bearing modules, and to teach each other; they have project management experience, skills for communicating with clients, event organisation experience, and oral and written presentation skills. Students are able to articulate their own personal examples of their development as confident and employable graduates. They are, by the time they graduate, psychologically literate citizens, who are capable of making a real contribution to the world beyond university.

3. Philip Banyard: Giving psychology away: How George Miller's vision is being realised by psychological literacy

Not all of psychology education occurs within universities, and it is important to consider the impact of psychology education at all levels upon wider society. Psychology is growing in popularity, and as such, many

individuals have at least some psychological knowledge. To what extent is this potential growth in psychological literacy affecting communities?

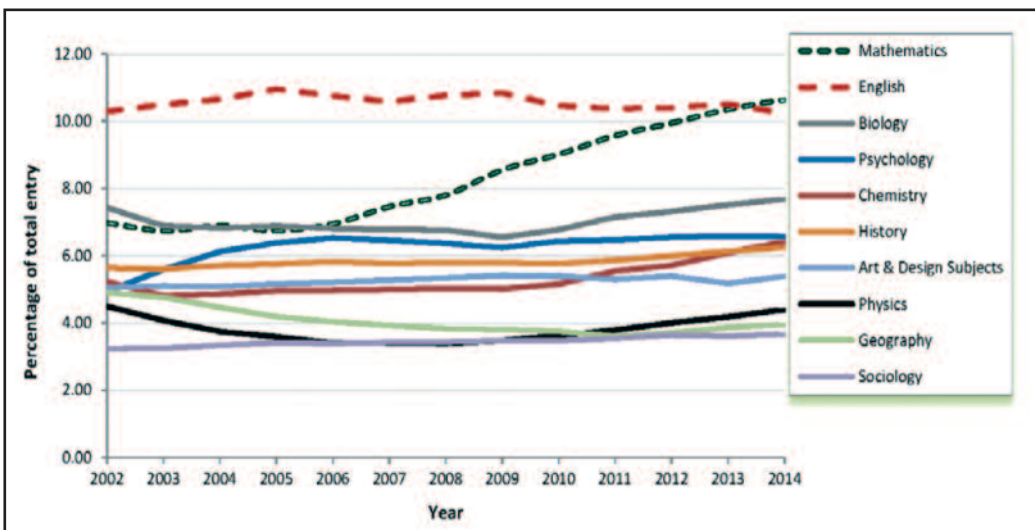
Within higher education, there are over 91,000 students studying psychology (HESA, 2014). Psychology is the fourth most popular subject of study at pre-tertiary level; last year, there were over 56,000 entries for A-level psychology and over 101,000 entries for AS-level psychology (JCQ, 2014). One consequence of the growth in popularity of psychology courses at all levels is the increasing proportion of the population of the UK who have taken a programme of study in the subject. It is estimated that for the last 15 years over 13 per cent of each cohort of 18-year-olds have taken a named qualification in psychology (BPS, 2013), while many more have taken psychology as part of their courses in other subjects, such as health and social care. A result of this is that the UK population possesses a growing awareness of the basic ideas of psychology (a picture which is mirrored across the globe, and particularly within Europe, the US, Canada, Australia and New Zealand).

Many A-level and other pre-tertiary psychology students go on to apply to read the subject at university but the majority do not. As a result, for a large number of people, the A-level is the only psychology they will study and so these courses are in a position to have a profound effect on the nation's understanding of psychological concepts. With over 100,000 people taking these courses every year for over a generation (see Figure 2), it can be deduced that approximately two million individuals in the UK alone have studied psychology over the last 20 years, and thus that the nation may be becoming increasingly psychologically literate as a result of engagement with pre-tertiary psychology education.

Given the numbers of people who study psychology at pre-tertiary level, it is important to consider what this psychological literacy means in practical terms. What are representations of psychology that are held by these students and how do they differ from those held by psychologists?

A survey of psychology A-level students conducted by the BPS (2012) investigated students' perceptions of their chosen course

Figure 2: Top 10 A-level subjects as a percentage of the total entry over the period 2002 to 2014 (taken from JCQ, 2014).



of study. Students frequently identified psychology as an interesting subject, which differed from other school-based subjects, and had relevance to real life. However, they disliked the amount of content and emphasis on remembering within the A-level curriculum. A question about who they perceived to be the most important or influential psychologists revealed a strong focus on historical (particularly Freud and Milgram), rather than contemporary, psychological research and theory, suggesting that there may be a difference between psychology as it is understood within academia, and psychology as it is perceived by the majority of those who study it at pre-tertiary level (Banyard & Duffy, 2014).

This raises a question about who determines the nature of psychology; traditionally, academics have claimed ownership of psychological knowledge. However, in modern times, there has been a democratisation of knowledge; access to psychological knowledge is widely available through the internet, and it is becoming increasingly important for individuals to be able to evaluate critically, select appropriate material and synthesise information, rather than simply to acquire it (Candy, 2000; Delanty, 1998). Psychology is no longer in the exclusive domain of psychology academics, or experts, but is becoming the property of the wider population.

The growing psychological literacy of the UK population, as a result of the increased popularity of psychology and growth in engagement with pre-tertiary psychology education, could be argued to be beginning to fulfil Miller's (1969) vision of giving psychology away. This has implications for education policy makers and for teachers, who need to consider carefully the nature of the pre-tertiary psychology curriculum, and the ways in which psychology is taught, in order to maximise societal opportunities arising from improved national psychological literacy.

4. Helen Kitching: Potential implications of the new A-level psychology syllabuses: Could the more contemporary topics introduced enhance psychological literacy?

Given that the largest number of psychology students in the UK are those who study AS and A-level psychology, it is important to reflect upon the extent to which these qualifications deliver psychological literacy and psychologically literate citizenship. In 2012, Ofqual announced a reform of AS and A-levels in the UK, including psychology, to create more ambitious qualifications, to decouple AS from A-level, review assessment objectives, and to enhance the mathematical and employability skills, and preparedness for further study, of students who study these qualifications. The new subject criteria were published in November 2014, and the four UK examination boards (AQA, 2015; OCR, 2015; Pearson EdExcel, 2015; WJEC/ Eduqas, 2015) subsequently produced psychology specifications for teaching from September 2015.

At the time of writing, pre-tertiary teachers were choosing the examination board whose specification they would teach, and starting to prepare for the new academic year. It was important to consider the extent to which the new syllabus would engage and enthuse students, as well as fit comfortably with teachers' interests, skills and expertise, and to reflect on the degree to which the new qualifications would equip learners with skills which were appropriate to their aspirations and ambitions with regard to future study and employment. A key issue, then, in making a choice, was whether the new specifications would facilitate students' development of psychological literacy.

One important aspect of psychological literacy, according to McGovern et al. (2010, p210) involves having a 'well-defined vocabulary and basic knowledge of the critical subject matter of psychology'. The question of what defines critical subject matter in terms of pre-tertiary psychology is a pertinent one. Is it where psychology has come from or does it refer to where we are today?

A frequent criticism of the legacy awards was that they were too historical in content. This has been addressed to some degree in the new specifications, although all of the boards have updated their specifications in different ways. Two boards have introduced requisite 'contemporary studies' (OCR, 2015; Pearson Edexcel, 2015), whereas the other two have focused on 'contemporary topics' (AQA, 2015; WJEC/Eduqas, 2015). It is noticeable that some of the research covered in these parts of the specifications derives from the 1990s. The extent to which an 18-year-old might consider a 20-year-old study to be 'contemporary' could be open to questioning. However, given that the specifications are likely to remain in place for a number of years, and that the prescribed content must remain valid for the lifespan of the specification, it is understandable that the boards may have felt the need to draw upon landmark studies from the relatively recent past, rather than from very recent studies that have not yet stood the test of time. Certainly, incorporating research from the 1990s onwards provides a more up-to-date perspective on psychology than that presented in the legacy specifications.

According to McGovern et al. (2010), psychologically literate learners are able to apply psychological principles to personal, social and organisational issues in work, relationships and the broader community. Whilst we would not expect A-level students to be able to use their psychological skills directly to solve work and community issues (for ethical reasons), providing them with topic areas that are relevant to their everyday lives and contemporary issues for society will hopefully provide them with an insight into way things happen, how they can be solved and who could help them (for example, knowing when to seek advice or support from professional psychologists). Learning psychology could also empower them to advocate for changes within their own communities, and, for example, to look at solutions to bullying that may not already be in place in their school.

The four new UK A-level specifications offer different content relating to real life issues such as these, which will differently impact upon the psychological literacy of the learners who study them. For example, the WJEC/Eduqas (2015) specification addresses issues of bullying, while Pearson Edexcel (2015) requires students to consider the application of knowledge from social psychology to reduce prejudice in situations such as crowd behaviour or rioting. The boards make it clear that learners should be looking at how psychology impacts on society, not just academic argument (Pearson Edexcel, 2015). This provides learners with the basis to view psychology from an applied perspective which should support their psychological literacy.

McGovern et al. (2010) also state that learners should be competent in using and evaluating information. The Office of Qualifications and Examinations Regulation (Ofqual) has set the weighting for mathematics within the psychology subject criteria (with which all four examination boards must comply) at 10 per cent. It is not clear at this stage how much calculation of statistical tests learners will be expected to do in the examinations, but the newly enhanced requirement to study non-parametric statistics will hopefully broaden the students' understanding of the tests themselves and encourage them to become more competent in data handling and thus assisting the transition to higher education (Field, 2014; Hulme & De Wilde, 2015; Kitching & Hulme, 2013).

All of the examination boards require students to study research methods. However, the precise approach to practical research differs across the different boards. One board specifies compulsory practical work to take place throughout the course, which will be examined, in addition to testing students' understanding of research methods through assessment of their ability to apply learning from practical work to novel scenarios in the examination (WJEC/Eduqas, 2015). The other three

boards recommend that students do practical work throughout the course, but these are not examined directly, and assessment of these skills is through similar application of learning to novel scenarios within the examinations (AQA, 2015; OCR, 2015; Pearson Edexcel, 2015). Although it is impossible to determine which students have actually had practical experience, it could be expected that those who have personally conducted practical work are likely to do better when applying their knowledge and understanding to the novel scenarios. If this is the case, then it might be expected that all four boards' specifications should enhance psychological literacy through the development of skills in research methods.

Part of being a psychologically literate student is acting ethically (McGovern et al., 2010). Learners within the A-level specification are expected to have an understanding of the BPS ethical guidelines (BPS, 2009) and to be able to apply these both within the context of conducting their own research, and in evaluating others' research. The expectation is that all students who conduct research will do so in an ethical manner under the guidance of their teacher. There is a great opportunity for teachers to explore the applicability of ethical principles in a broader sense, extending beyond research into everyday life, around issues such as diversity and inclusivity, such as showing respect for other members of the class, being intolerant of bullying, or being supportive if their classmates choose to disclose personal information such as relating to a phobia or to mental ill health.

The new A-level specifications offer opportunities for learners to come away with a sense of being psychologically literate. The emphasis on application of knowledge supports this idea. It is always going to be difficult to go far beyond the specification in a climate which is so exam orientated. However, if these examinations are designed in such a way that taps into skills pertaining to psychological literacy then it can only benefit our learners, and, consistent with the

themes running throughout this paper, help to create a better world.

Discussion (chaired by Simon Goodson)

The four talks presented during the DART-P symposium at the BPS annual conference were united by a common theme: the opportunities provided by psychology education, at all levels, to develop students as psychologically literate citizens, who can contribute to society in a multitude of ways. The scientific literacy skills which underpin psychology education facilitate employability and economic contributions, as well as equipping individuals with problem-solving and critical thinking skills. Likewise, the communication and interpersonal skills acquired through psychology education, more usually associated with social science and humanities education, support the development of well-rounded individuals who are competent to work in social contexts. In addition, the raised awareness of diversity, inclusion and ethical integrity that result from psychology education are central to the global citizenship agenda which currently prevails in the UK education system. Finally, it is clear that psychological literacy incorporates aspects of critical thinking and information literacy, which are essential to success in an era of rapid knowledge growth and ease of access to information. While the psychological literacy acquired from engagement with pre-tertiary psychology qualifications will be less sophisticated than that achieved during higher education qualifications, there is a clear added value that arises from studying psychology, which goes beyond its academic content, and supports the development of global citizenship.

The popularity of psychology creates a strong opportunity to facilitate actively the development of scientific, interpersonal and citizenship skills and values within the UK population. This requires continued support for the embedding of psychological literacy within the psychology curriculum from the BPS, and active engagement with psychological literacy on the part of educators and

educational managers, policy-makers (ideally including at government level), examination boards and students themselves.

A note of caution, however, should be sounded clearly; during discussion, delegates at the symposium emphasised that students must be made aware of the ethical implications of psychological literacy. The BPS (2009, p.16) code of ethics advises that: 'Psychologists should... practice within the bounds of their competence'. Psychology students, however well informed they may be regarding psychological knowledge, are not qualified psychologists, and may not practice as such. However, training in psychological literacy would be expected to provide good grounding in ethical issues, and one aspect of this may involve exploring with students themselves the extent to which it is appropriate to apply psychology to everyday life, and the point at which it becomes appropriate to seek support from professionally qualified individuals. There is scope for the BPS and other interested stakeholders in psychology to explore ways to best exploit the opportunities provided by psychological literacy, whilst maintaining safe practices that will protect educators, students and the public.

So, what next for psychological literacy? There is clearly an opportunity here for psychology education to impact positively on global society, in terms of enhancing health and wellbeing, the economy, the ecological health of the planet, and more. To facilitate this, psychology educators themselves need to embrace the attitudes associated with psychologically literate citizenship; we need to share practice, particularly around issues of curriculum design, ethics, classroom teaching practices and assessment. The psychological literacy agenda will need to be

made explicit within and throughout psychology education, to elucidate for students, employers and others, the benefits that can be gained through the study of psychology and its application to everyday life. To some extent, it is now the responsibility of psychology educators to work collectively to define, explain and promote the concept of psychologically literate citizenship to the wider world, to facilitate Miller's (1969) vision of 'giving psychology away'.

Acknowledgements

The authors would like to thank the Division of Academics, Researchers and Teachers in Psychology (DART-P) for their support in organising this symposium, and for funding the speakers to attend the BPS annual conference 2015, where it was presented.

The ordering of authors on this paper does not necessarily reflect relative contributions.

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