

Curriculum Matters

Structure, Content, and Psychological Literacy

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We often teach like everyone is going to graduate school, but graduate school is [for] the minority.

DIANE F. HALPERN (*quoted in Goldstein, 2010, p. 23*)

Psychology differs from many other disciplines in that students can readily connect what they learn in their coursework to their own lives (Goldstein, 2010). This distinction is at the root of the idea of psychological literacy as defined by McGovern and colleagues (2010). Promoting psychological literacy entails reorienting what and how we teach students in a way that emphasizes psychology's relevance. To the extent that the acquisition of core psychological knowledge takes place in the classroom, the obvious channel for cultivating psychological literacy is the undergraduate psychology curriculum.

In this chapter, we begin by reviewing the history of psychology curricula in the United States and then consider how learning outcomes related to psychological literacy might shape disciplinary curricula for undergraduates. Such curricular change must address the necessary balance between graduate and undergraduate needs, and the balance between cutting-edge and core knowledge; for this reason, we specifically discuss the range of learning outcomes a psychologically literate curriculum should comprise. We then turn to the competencies that should appear in psychologically literate curricula and address ways to give courses a more global perspective. The next section of the chapter focuses on practical ways to make a departmental curriculum more psychologically literate and offers advice on assessing literacy. We conclude with a call to develop a psychologically literate citizenry.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF PSYCHOLOGY CURRICULA

Curricula Then

Informal wrangling notwithstanding, virtually no systematic study of the undergraduate psychology curriculum in the United States happened prior to the 1950s. The earliest concerted efforts, which took place in the 1950s and 1960s respectively, involved two small, self-selected groups of participants (Buxton et al., 1952; McKeachie & Milholland, 1961), each of whom endorsed the notion of psychology as a liberal arts discipline, and who specified preferred curriculum structures. In the 1970s, based on a national survey of schools that did and did not offer a psychology major, a qualitative study of the undergraduate psychology curriculum was advanced (Kulik et al., 1973). It detailed the growing diversity of undergraduate education in psychology and deliberately refrained from stipulating preferred curriculum structures, a decision that reflected a divergence from previous efforts.

Throughout the 1980s there was growing demand for curricular guidelines for undergraduate psychology students, and a concomitant call for ongoing assessment of many facets of undergraduate psychology, including the curriculum (McGovern, Furumoto, Halpern, Kimble, & McKeachie, 1991; Scheier & Rogers, 1985). In the mid-1980s, the American Psychological Association's (APA's) Committee on Undergraduate Education (CUE) resolved to clarify the function of the undergraduate psychology major in relation to traditional liberal arts education, as well as to detail curricular guidelines. This work inspired the APA's National Conference on Enhancing the Quality of Undergraduate Education in Psychology, which convened at St. Mary's College of Maryland in 1991 (see McGovern, 1993). The curriculum report of the St. Mary's Conference (Brewer et al., 1993) reaffirmed the conception of psychology as a liberal arts discipline, stating that the general goal of an undergraduate education in psychology is to "teach students to think as scientists about behavior and experience" (Brewer et al., 1993, p. 169). Intended to elucidate the common features of all undergraduate psychology programs, the curricular framework for the psychology major described in the Brewer report was not prescriptive in nature. It did, however, recognize four distinct groups of courses, ideally to be taken in the following sequence: the introductory course, methodology courses, content courses, and integrative experiences. A recent comparison of psychology major programs around the nation to programs described 10 years earlier showed some progress had been made in aligning with the Brewer report, although many suggestions (e.g., capstone courses) were still not common (Stoloff et al., 2010).

A Core Curriculum for Now

The most recent curricular review (Dunn et al., 2010) was part of the APA's National Conference on Undergraduate Education in Psychology, which convened at the University of Puget Sound in 2008 (see Halpern, 2010) and sought to address key issues in undergraduate psychology education in light of recent

changes and developments both within and outside the discipline of psychology. The curricular report that emerged from the Puget Sound Conference reaffirmed psychology's place in the liberal arts tradition. Arguing that the increased fragmentation of the field, technological advances, and the rise of a consumerist culture have threatened the traditional identity of psychology, Dunn and colleagues (2010) advocated a core curriculum that not only emphasized scientific methodology, but also ensured breadth and depth in substantive content areas of the field: Biological Bases, Learning/Cognition, Developmental, and Sociocultural (see also APA, 2007; Dunn, McCarthy, Baker, Halonen, & Hill, 2007). This recommendation was intended to provide greater coherence to the undergraduate psychology curriculum in the United States, which could then be attuned to the specific needs and resources of various programs.

PSYCHOLOGICAL LITERACY, STUDENT LEARNING OUTCOMES, AND THE PSYCHOLOGY CURRICULUM

How can a curriculum be tuned to promote psychological literacy? First, we believe that psychology departments should review their current curricula in light of the core curriculum recommended by Dunn and colleagues (2010), and make adjustments as necessary. Psychology departments should also familiarize themselves with the *APA Guidelines for the Undergraduate Psychology Major* (APA, 2007), the recommendations of which outline the knowledge, skills, attitudes, and values that derive from the undergraduate psychology major and its place in the context of a liberal education. Table 2.1 categorizes two sets of five learning goals, the first more specific to the science and application of psychology, the second more related to the broader goals of a liberal arts education as addressed by psychology (APA, 2007). McGovern and colleagues (2010) note that the APA guidelines are consistent with their definition of psychological literacy and with student learning outcomes (SLOs) created independently by academic psychologists in Australia and Europe.

SLOs are concrete statements that indicate what students will know or be able to demonstrate once they have completed an activity, a course, or a major (Angelo & Cross, 1993; Diamond, 2008; Suskie, 2009). For SLOs to be meaningful, departments must also identify useful measures for assessing SLOs. We identify selected learning outcomes consistent with psychological literacy (McGovern et al., 2010) and the core curriculum recommendations made by Dunn and colleagues (2010). What follows is a description of each SLO, along with how each can be achieved via the psychology curriculum.

Writing

It is important for students to have the ability to write effectively for a variety of audiences and purposes. An essential skill for psychology students is to be able to employ the discipline's vernacular and writing style (e.g., APA, 2010; Beins, Smith,

Table 2.1 LEARNING GOALS ADVOCATED IN THE APA GUIDELINES FOR THE UNDERGRADUATE PSYCHOLOGY MAJOR

Consistent with the Science and Application of Psychology

- Goal 1: Knowledge Base of Psychology
- Goal 2: Research Methods in Psychology
- Goal 3: Critical Thinking Skills in Psychology
- Goal 4: Application of Psychology
- Goal 5: Values in Psychology

Consistent with Liberal Arts Education Further Developed in Psychology

- Goal 6: Information and Technological Literacy
- Goal 7: Communication Skills
- Goal 8: Sociocultural and International Awareness
- Goal 9: Personal Development
- Goal 10: Career Planning and Development

Source: Adapted from APA (2007).

& Dunn, 2010). Thus, the undergraduate psychology curriculum should provide students opportunities to produce discipline-based writing samples, such as empirical laboratory reports or critical literature reviews. Equally important as writing professional discipline-based papers, which require the use of APA style, is the ability to write clear and effective prose in general. Such writing may include composing professional letters, e-mail messages, book reviews, or project proposals, and may be intended for psychologists and non-psychologists alike. Accordingly, we recommend that psychology instructors require students to write in a variety of forms, including reflective or persuasive essays, book reviews, and blogs, in addition to the more traditional discipline-based papers. With respect to writing, the goal of psychological literacy is to be able to write clearly and concisely about psychology for professional and lay audiences alike.

Speaking

In addition to being proficient in written communication, psychologically literate students should be able to deliver formal and informal oral presentations to both professional and lay audiences. Such presentations may include delivering a lecture-style talk, engaging in a relatively casual exchange of ideas and reactions, or leading a group discussion, all of which may involve groups of people of varying sizes. An undergraduate psychology curriculum that promotes psychological literacy should offer students speaking opportunities that evolve in length and

complexity as students move through their programs of study. For example, oral presentations in introductory psychology courses should be straightforward and of relatively short duration. In contrast, capstone experiences that involve an extensive written project should entail opportunities for significant and relatively formal oral presentation about the students' work.

Research

The use of scientific methodology is a defining feature of psychological science, the objective of which is to understand and predict human behavior. As such, it is imperative that psychology majors not only understand how the discipline's methodologies distinguish it from other disciplines that use different methods, such as hermeneutics (Donald, 2002), but also that students appreciate what constitutes good science. Students need to develop the scientific acumen to separate the wheat from the chaff when evaluating the evidence for psychological claims. This is truer now than ever, as the public is continuously bombarded with research findings from multiple media sources. To promote psychological literacy, the curriculum should include statistics and a research methods course that exposes students to the variety of research approaches used in psychological research, ranging from highly controlled experimental approaches to field-based naturalistic observation. It is particularly desirable that such courses include laboratories in which students gain more practical experience with the material. Ideally, students would be able to conduct an entire research study, engaging in all the stages of the research process. Research methodology in psychology should be emphasized throughout the curriculum. Indeed, hands-on research experience in general allows students the opportunity to integrate the content they learn with the practice of corresponding skills.

Collaboration

The nature of psychologists' work is often collaborative. In hospitals and clinics, professional psychologists commonly work in interdisciplinary teams, while academic psychologists routinely engage in collaborative teaching and participate in research teams. In addition to being able to work independently, psychologically literate students should be capable of working effectively with others. Thus, a curriculum promoting psychological literacy should provide opportunities for students to work alone (perhaps doing library research) and in teams (possibly designing and executing research projects). Where research teams are concerned, faculty members should make it possible for students to rotate serving as team leader (or principal investigator), affording students opportunities to further develop leadership and organizational skills (see, for example, Beins & Wann, 2010). The ability to collaborate is a hallmark of psychological literacy. In learning to work cooperatively with others, students are able to appreciate the various skills

and abilities of their peers, develop greater empathy, and learn to constructively resolve conflicts.

Information and Technological Literacy

Students should be able to make use of modern information technologies, an established and ubiquitous feature of academia, and life in general. Accordingly, psychology teachers and department administrators should make concerted efforts to incorporate current and emerging technologies into classes within the psychology curriculum and the program's wider milieu (e.g., Dunn, Wilson, Freeman, & Stowell, 2011). Psychologically literate students should be adept users of psychology databases (e.g., PsycINFO, PsycARTICLES) and of those in the social sciences (e.g., JSTOR, Sociological Abstracts, ERIC) more generally. They should be able to use technological tools to collect, analyze, synthesize, and disseminate information. Students should be comfortable learning new technological skills in and outside of classroom settings.

Students Should Be Able to Define and Describe the Concept of Psychological Literacy

Students should understand that psychological knowledge is meant to inform daily life as well as intellectual challenges in the classroom. To this end, teachers should connect psychological principles to "personal, social, and organizational issues in work, relationships, and the broader community" (McGovern et al., 2010, p. 11), thus demonstrating how course material relates to everyday phenomena. Moreover, instructors should develop learning activities that demand the application of psychological knowledge.

The rationale for promoting psychological literacy should be introduced immediately and referenced consistently throughout the undergraduate psychology curriculum. Discussing the concept of psychological literacy should not be restricted to one course. Instead, consideration of topics, learning experiences, and SLOs relevant to psychological literacy should be included at all stages of students' program of study, albeit in an appropriately sequenced fashion. That is, teaching about psychological literacy should be done in a way that reflects the consideration of students' developmental progress, cognitive abilities, and level of knowledge (cf., Baker, McCarthy, Halonen, Dunn, & Hill, 2010; Halonen et al., 2003). Thus, introductory students should first be introduced to the topical areas in and basic terminology of the discipline, then should acquire knowledge of research methodology and analysis, as well as the discipline's writing style (both intermediate), and only then should they undertake a project that involves the synthesis of knowledge and the application of skills acquired over the course of their undergraduate curriculum, a distinctive feature of psychological literacy. Such a project may be required as part of a well-designed capstone course (Dunn & McCarthy, 2010) or independent research,

or it may derive from a discipline-based internship. As a practical matter, instructors should also identify specific SLOs on course syllabi, indicating those that are linked to psychological literacy.

Students Should Be Able to Think and Act Ethically when Applying Psychological Knowledge

Although virtually all psychology students in a research methods course discuss the APA's (2002) ethical principles and code of conduct, discussions of ethical matters should not be limited to this context. Indeed, ethical principled behavior—a hallmark of the psychologically literate student (and citizen)—should be promoted across the curriculum, and should also bear relevance to students' personal and professional lives.

Students Should Be Able to Demonstrate an Understanding of and Respect for Diversity

Psychologically literate individuals understand that diversity—how people differ from one another—is multifaceted: gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity, disability, race, religion, culture, social class, age, *inter alia*, are categories within which people vary. The breadth of diversity should be recognized and incorporated into the entire psychology curriculum (Gurung & Prieto, 2009). The ultimate goal is for students not only to understand and respect individuals from different groups within or beyond their culture, but also to interact with them in cordial and open ways. One means by which to teach students about diversity is to expose them to global issues regarding psychology. In this way, the notion of internationalizing the undergraduate curriculum (e.g., Lutsky et al., 2005) can be realized. Students should learn about the psychological science being conducted around the world and not only that produced in the United States and other Western nations. Cultural perspectives and folkways, for example, can inform research and practice, and psychologically literate persons—as global citizens—should be both sensitive to and interested in variations among nations. Minimally, instructors should look for ways to include theories, methodologies, and research findings from different nations in the undergraduate psychology curriculum. Study abroad experiences, too, should be encouraged, especially those that might have an experiential component allowing for some application of psychological knowledge.

IMPORTING A GLOBAL PERSPECTIVE

Around the world, more and more students are taking psychology classes. For example, during the 1970s there were only four departments of psychology in China, whereas today there are nearly 250 (Kan, 2008, in Halpern, 2010).

This trend is reflected in other countries, including the United Kingdom and Yemen (Halpern, 2010). Correspondingly, psychology curricula abroad can inform our own (Sexton & Hogan, 1992). What is nominally called psychology in some countries is quite similar to American psychology. Other countries, in contrast, have developed more indigenous psychologies that differ markedly from their American counterpart. What lessons may be gleaned from the world's psychology curricula? A systematic and comprehensive survey of psychology curricula around the world is beyond the scope of the chapter, but even a cursory review reveals a noteworthy trend: curricula abroad tend to require more interdisciplinary coursework. In Argentina, for example, students are required to take sociology and anthropology courses as part of their psychology program. Such interdisciplinary requirements are worth considering, particularly given the degree to which psychology influences and is informed by the work of other disciplines (Cacioppo, 2007). For example, given the current biological emphasis in psychology and concomitant rise of neuroscience, perhaps requiring coursework in biology as part of the psychology curriculum may be worthy of consideration.

Beyond courses for inclusion in the curriculum, a look abroad provides us with models for how we should look at curriculum. As stated previously, in the United States there have been only a few thorough examinations of the psychology curriculum (e.g., the St. Mary's and Puget Sound conferences). In contrast, it seems that psychology curricula are evaluated more frequently overseas. For example, after education leaders from 29 European countries met in Bologna in 1999 to create a European Higher Education Area (EHEA), members of participating countries (numbering 47 in 2007) began to meet biennially to "arrive at consensus objectives that will not homogenize national educational systems but provide tools to connect them" (McGovern et al., 2010, p. 16). Similar meetings take place in the Asia-Pacific region and in Canada. Such international movements suggest an additional curricular component for psychology. For example, to earn a European Certificate in psychology, students are required to appreciate non-psychological theories, such as sociological, anthropological, and philosophical, underscoring the value of interdisciplinary education. In Australia, undergraduate programs must integrate cross-cultural and indigenous issues, and promote increasing indigenous participation at all levels of psychology training (McGovern et al., 2010, p. 18). Each of these examples suggests thought-provoking ways in which American psychology curricula can be modified.

ADVICE ON PROMOTING PSYCHOLOGICAL LITERACY IN PSYCHOLOGY CURRICULA

Beyond evaluating student learning outcomes in the context of the undergraduate psychology curriculum and infusing the curriculum with a more global perspective, how else can psychology curricula promote psychologically literacy? To address this question, we offer concrete advice concerning the following three areas: program mission, planning, and assessment.

Reflect on Program Mission and Current Learning Goals

Before undertaking any curriculum revision, psychology department members should review their respective mission statement (Dunn, McCarthy, Baker, & Halonen, 2011), verifying that it reflects the department's long-term goals, including the cultivation of psychological literacy. Departments should also evaluate the extent to which student learning goals in psychology are achieved at their institutions. Mission statements and learning goals should be adjusted as necessary to incorporate psychological literacy into the curricular framework of departments.

Creating and Implementing a Plan

Curricular reviews often occur as part of a larger evaluative process, such as an external review or self-study, or in the context of personnel changes, such as new hires. We encourage readers to avail themselves of the myriad sources within the discipline that champion the importance of fostering psychological literacy and provide practical, relevant information regarding the planning and implementation of curricular reviews (e.g., Dunn et al., 2007; Dunn, McCarthy, Baker, & Halonen, 2011; Halpern, 2010; Pusateri, Poe, Addison, & Goedel, 2004).

Ongoing Assessment

Following curricular change, routine assessment of SLOs should occur to ensure that student learning goals related to psychological literacy are being achieved. Curricular adjustments (and follow-up assessment) can be implemented accordingly. As the curriculum matures, individual course assessments can be scheduled on a rotating basis (e.g., every 2 or 3 years) rather than each semester. Given that the concept of psychological literacy has important implications for students well beyond their undergraduate years, postgraduate surveys of alumni seem worthwhile. Such surveys can query graduates about the extent to which their psychological knowledge informs and contributes to their current professional and private lives.

EDUCATING A LITERATE CITIZENRY

Beyond the formal undergraduate curriculum (see Dunn et al., 2010), we hope that all students—including those who do not pursue careers or education related to the discipline—will retain a lifelong interest in psychology and an appreciation of its relevance to everyday life. A curriculum designed to promote psychological literacy should equip students with the intellectual tools necessary to becoming “socially responsible problem solvers” (McGovern et al., 2010, p. 20). Such a curriculum can foster the development of individuals ready to combat societal ills

and work for the betterment of daily life for men and women across the socioeconomic and cultural spectrum. Indeed, the ultimate goal of a curriculum designed to promote psychological literacy is the cultivation of a psychologically literate citizenry.

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