

'There's a place for us'¹ – and our graduates – in the workplace

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IS THERE a recipe for becoming a psychologist? We certainly behave as if it were so when we compile the desiderata of a 'proper' psychologist in terms of degree content. We might further add to the mix additional emergent skills such as independence of thought. So much for the ingredients.

The reality is that 'the proof of the pudding is in the eating'. For how do we know when we have a psychologist? We need some measure of our graduates that is comprehensible to people outside our discipline, employers, and prospective students. To achieve this we must determine what types of assessment best illustrate the intellectual and personal qualities of a psychologist.

Radford's article explores the *place* of psychology. So it makes sense to start looking where we see the majority of people with psychology degrees, that is, the workplace. Only 20 per cent of psychology graduates will become professional psychologists (Lantz et al., 2008), so it is imperative that the psychology degree prepares our graduates for the full range of alternative careers available. We should offer students the opportunity to both learn and be assessed on attributes relating to employability.

So what aspects of our discipline have most value in the workplace? Let's start with the uncontroversial claim that psychology is distinctive in what it offers students and society.

We all believe that psychology graduates possess a unique range of skills that make them employable. But we cannot simply assert this. We need hard evidence. Is the

evidence we currently provide employers helpful or predictive?

The employability of psychology graduates is not only related to the content of the degree, what one might call the 'hard' measures. Success in the workplace is also underscored by the intellectual and personal development afforded by studying our discipline, the 'soft' measures. We can easily measure memory for degree content and competence at research skills, but do we, indeed *can* we measure the more subtle aspects of our graduates? The issue is important because it is precisely these more generic characteristics that employers value.

In meeting this challenge we need to go back to what we do best. When we approach our research activities we consider how to operationalise the research question. We think deeply about the appropriate data required to test our hypotheses. Yet when it comes to measuring the intellectual and personal qualities of our undergraduates we do not employ the required vigour. In fact, we usually evaluate psychology undergraduates in the same way as any arts, humanities or science discipline, with essays and examinations.

I advocate carefully and creatively devised unseen examinations where the student is thrown on their own resources to deliver an answer within a deadline. Exams are virtually our only means to test the student's own intellectual reserves in the absence of external assistance from texts, journal articles or web sites.

Useful though they may be, is the exam the best way to demonstrate the distinctive

¹ Stephen Sondheim (1957), lyricist, *West Side Story*.

qualities of our graduates? To the employer interviewing graduates from a variety of disciplines one exam is much the same as any other. Thus all the employer has to go on is a comparison of degree classifications. In a short list of candidates from a variety of disciplines we need employers to select our students in their capacity as psychology graduates. Otherwise our graduates find themselves in a 'first past the post' degree classification competition.

Employers need to know that our graduates have something to contribute to their business and the only way they can know this is if we give them the appropriate data. We can achieve this by employing a variety of assessments and devising them so they are more *authentic* (MacAndrew & Edwards, 2003; MacAndrew, 2004). The requirements of authentic assessments are meaningfully related to the requirements of the workplace whilst at the same time testing competence in the discipline. Authentic assessments test our undergraduates for the attributes that will make them employable. How do we embark on designing such useful measures?

In order to design authentic assessments we need to reflect upon our core beliefs about our subject. A cynic might say that some academics construct their courses and their assessments on the same principles as a textbook subject index. This approach means we can feel comfortable about comprehensive coverage but not much more. I argue we should shift focus and examine the transformational effects upon an individual who has studied our discipline. In what ways have we impacted positively on a student's mind? How has knowledge of psychology prepared our graduates for a fulfilled and productive life?

We may get some answers to these questions by considering 'graduate attributes'. There is now a large body of work (over 500,000 Google hits) describing the generic characteristics of someone who has an undergraduate degree and evaluation of this work is beyond the scope of this piece. Let me instead choose four key attributes, situate

them within psychology, and illustrate means by which we may produce evidence of them in our students.

1. Our graduates are *insightful problem solvers*. The honours research project is the most authentic demonstration of this crucial ability. Our students are trained in a particular way of thinking, can use powerful analytical tools, and can design and perform tests of almost anything. We need to deliver this message to employers in the strongest terms.
2. We claim that our graduates are *good communicators*. Yet the conventions of an essay are not particularly useful in the world of work. I argue that we are artificially restricting the scope of our students' communications. We speak in 'lecturerese' and they reply likewise. Is there an alternative?

Almost every element of a psychology degree impacts on the real world. But often we don't require our students to situate their learning anywhere other than in the lecture hall. A useful graduate can explain complex psychological research in clear and simple terms to the lay-person so our assessments should be designed to test this facility. Effective communication for the workplace can be achieved by assignments such as writing an article for a popular science magazine, preparing health promotion information for teenagers or devising advice for new parents.

3. Our graduates should be *flexible thinkers*. Thus they ought to be able to employ their knowledge effectively across a variety of contexts and in a variety of different formats. Graduates must be fluent in all the contemporary modalities of knowledge creation and sharing. They can show evidence of this in assessments such as designing web sites or writing and producing documentary films.
4. Employable psychology graduates should be *creative thinkers*. Yet traditional assessments neither require nor measure this facility. In practice, a creative response to

a question is often graded as ‘not relevant’ when matched against a model answer. If we demand creativity from our students they will step up to the plate. If we don’t, we promote an impoverished definition of our craft. The assessment of creativity is not simple. Nevertheless there is scope within authentic assessment to approximate. There is never simply one correct answer in authentic assessments such as those mentioned here, and so we can emphasise that there is more to psychology than remembering facts. We can demonstrate that making new connections between islands of knowledge is important.

How can we meet this challenge of assessment for employability without compromising the credibility of our science and our integrity as academics? Are soft measures of student attainment ‘easier’? How can we be sure of a student’s knowledge of an area without directly testing it? Are we not selling scholarship short?

It goes without saying that we need evidence a psychology graduate has absorbed the best of our subject. But that is not necessarily at odds with addressing the workplace needs of students and employers. We should have confidence that exposure to our subject changes people’s minds and that this remains apparent *regardless of the means of assessment*.

In the workplace our students are faced with unstructured, open-ended challenges to which they must bring their knowledge to bear. In contrast to most assessments, there is no clue to which bit of knowledge is relevant to a particular task. There is no obvious criterion for ‘pass’ or ‘fail’. There is no reassurance of how ‘good’ you are and little feedback on how to do better. No wonder students often

feel out of their depth and employers feel disappointed in their highly qualified new appointments. At the risk of frightening the horses, I would suggest that involving potential employers in assessment would be of benefit. Few of us have sought, secured and been successful in a post outside of education. Yet it is our judgement that determines the probability of future appointments for our graduates. When we award a good degree class it is a ticket to a personally and financially rewarding job and a poor degree class is not. Our decisions make a difference in people’s lives.

I have argued that appropriate assessment can better meet the needs of employers, but what of the enjoyment of undergraduates? My research (MacAndrew, 2008) shows that when students undertake authentic assessments they appreciate that the assignments require a greater level of understanding than that required by essays and examinations. Importantly, they report that the demands of the task identify for them what it means to be a psychology graduate. Finally, such assessments help the student to better see the relevance of their subject to their future career.

Whatever we teach, the only evidence that our teaching has had a transformational effect is in our students’ assessment performance. We must ask ourselves what documentary evidence shows that you are a graduate who can contribute to society. If we can answer that question we do great service to our graduates and ourselves.

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