Learning and teaching issues in psychology: the importance of sensitive topics

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Outline

- Overview of HEA/BPS ‘Learning and Teaching Issues in the Disciplines: Psychology’ project
- Findings and reflections – teaching sensitive topics in higher education (JH)
- Reflections and implications – pre-tertiary education (HK)
- Conclusions
Learning and Teaching – Issues in Psychology

- The Higher Education Academy (HEA) commissioned a series of research reports from professional and subject related bodies, to identify discipline-specific issues within HE:
  - [https://www.heacademy.ac.uk/resource/teaching-and-learning-disciplines](https://www.heacademy.ac.uk/resource/teaching-and-learning-disciplines)

- Focus groups were held in England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, involving diverse people teaching psychology in UK HE.

- Semi-structured interview schedules were provided by the HEA, with questions about resources, challenges, direction of travel, perceived ‘gaps’, and possible support mechanisms.
Summary of findings - overview

- The data corpus was analysed using thematic analysis, following Braun and Clarke (2006).
- Identified themes related to:
  - Marketisation of HE and its impact on psychology education
  - Teaching methods and innovative pedagogies
  - Technology-enhanced learning
  - Assessment, skills and knowledge
  - Professionalisation, teaching and research
  - Diversity of students and transition
  - Nature of psychology.
Participants explained that psychology as a subject covers many topics that might be considered as ‘sensitive’. Examples given included mental ill health and psychopathology, addiction, death and dying, gender, sexuality, eating disorders, genocide.

- They say there is a need to teach these topics to give students a good understanding of the discipline.
- There are benefits for student engagement:

  “I would argue that it should be powerful, and that it is either powerful because it is fun and entertaining and they are really engaged and enjoying it, or it is powerful because it is so emotive.”
Psychology students can be vulnerable

Psychology students may be studying psychology because they wish to understand their own, or close others’, experiences. This can make teaching sensitive topics risky, because tutors do not know who is affected, and students are emotional about the topic and may not cope in a classroom environment.

- “Sometimes students come in because they have had a breakdown, and they have received fantastic help from a clinical psychologist, and therefore that is what I want to do.”

- “Your students might have suffered something...if you are talking about transgender, LGBT rights, you cannot assume your students don’t know somebody or haven’t gone through it...I have a transgender student I never knew I had...you talk about alcoholism and you talk about the genetic influence, and then there is somebody whose father is an alcoholic, and they think ‘Oh, does it mean I’m going to become an alcoholic?’ and you have to be aware when that question is going to come, and how do you respond to it accurately without making them feel worse.”
Institutional sensitivities

Some participants talked about institutional pressures not to upset students, and to avoid controversy. There needs to be a balance between covering topics sensitively, and trivialising them or not covering them at all. This requires skill and sensitivity on the part of the teacher, which is sometimes not facilitated through early-career HE teacher training. Teachers can be left feeling vulnerable to student complaints, and conscious of ethical concerns:

“One of the arguments we had when we were doing some PGCE training was that teaching should be fun...if you are talking about death and dying, or psychopathology or something, you don’t want people laughing, it is not supposed to be funny. They need to get the gravity of what is being discussed and think about it, so no, you don’t make it fun, and you do make them cry, and that is when you know you have done well.”
And so psychology tutors are vulnerable...

Students may disclose highly personal information to tutors, in an attempt to seek help – they see tutors as experts, and may confound academic psychology with counselling/clinical practice. Participants talked about a lack of training and preparation for these situations, and a lack of personal support. Who can help the tutor after they send the student to central support services?

“When we touch on PTSD, we will have students come to our offices afterwards…and tell us their life story – I had four of my students come in…One was pregnant and didn’t want to be, one was suicidal…I had got nobody to offload to.”

“If they were doing Computer Science, and their computer went down at home, they would come in…Psychology is particularly problematic because of the emotional element and the psychological element.”
Reflections...HE

- This topic resonated with me personally – having taught sexuality, addiction, psychopathology – and topics such as attachment in first year introductory seminars.

- A high proportion of students in psychology, relative to other disciplines, experience disability and/or mental ill health (Craig & Zinckiewicz, 2010). We have a responsibility to our students to raise awareness – psychological literacy – but we have a responsibility to do so sensitively, and also to take care of our psychology teachers/ourselves.

- Can we learn from counselling/counselling psychology? Tutors engage with personal development and counselling sessions to maintain their fitness to practice and help them to deal with sensitive issues raised by students. This is not the tradition within mainstream Psychology, where there has typically been more emphasis on scientific, rather than personal, content.

- Is this issue becoming more pressing given the direction of travel of the discipline? – increased focus on applications of psychology in everyday life, community settings, etc.
Reflections and implications...pre-tertiary

- Over 100,000 students are studying psychology at level 2 (GCSE) or level 3 (A level equivalent) in the UK.
- The majority of these students are aged 16-19 years with some as young as 13 years.
- We might expect that a similar proportion experience mental ill health and/or disabilities to their peers in HE?
- The psychology curricula at levels 2 and 3 cover sensitive topics such as eating disorders, and mental ill health – some students are likely to be highly vulnerable:
  - Banyard and Flanagan (2005) – “It is likely that teachers deal every day with students who have such eating disorders...estimates of young women with mild versions of [anorexia nervosa] are as high as 10 per cent...Teachers might well know the theory of eating disorders but are unlikely to be trained as counsellors to deal with the response they may get from vulnerable students”.

BPS (2013) – Future of A level psychology

This report identifies three main concerns regarding teaching sensitive issues:

- Upset to students – although it is better to learn about sensitive topics in education than through informal information;
- Ability of teachers to deal with responses from students – support materials are needed for teachers, and such topics need to be optional rather than compulsory;
- Labelling – a tendency for students to think they can diagnose mental health conditions, and to see people with mental ill health as “exotic oddities”.

In addition, the report raises concerns about non-subject specialists, who are self-taught psychology, or have generic teacher training, having to teach sensitive topics without appropriate training.
Psychological problems

- an introduction to mental health:
- how the incidence of significant mental health problems changes over time
- the effects of significant mental health problems on individuals and society

- students must study two from the following: clinical depression, schizophrenia, addiction, or autism spectrum disorder (ASD); and know and understand:
- characteristics of each according to the International Classification of Disease (ICD)
- one biological and one psychological explanation
- interventions or therapies for each and how these improve mental health
Conclusions

- Sensitive topics are interesting and engaging, and it is important for students to have solid grounding in these aspects of psychology.
- Psychology students may be vulnerable and may have direct experience of sensitive issues covered in the psychology curriculum. This is true throughout the education system, and may be of particular concern with regard to younger students in pre-tertiary education. Students see psychology teachers as experts who may be able to help.
- Psychology teachers within both HE and pre-tertiary settings may lack training to deliver sensitive topics and support their students.
- Psychology teachers within both HE and pre-tertiary settings need training and support to be able to deliver sensitive topics.
- DART-P hopes that this symposium will open a conversation amongst psychology educators about positive ways to address concerns and support students and teachers. Please join in the discussion at the end! – and/or contact Julie or Helen afterwards.
- Pick up a copy of the HEA/BPS report!