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Comment on: Psychology curricula for non-psychologists? A framework recommended by the EFPA Board of Educational Affairs (Dutke, Bakker, Sokolova, Stuchlikova, Salvatore & Papageori, 2019)

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Psychology is a multi-faceted discipline which can be applied within a wide range of professions, including health and social care, education, the criminal justice system, marketing, human resources, information technology, the military, and many more, where understanding human behaviour is beneficial. Psychology can change behaviours (e.g. to reduce smoking, or increase preference for a consumer product); promote and enhance learning and communication (e.g. cognitively-informed revision strategies, or improving patient understanding of a medical intervention); psychometrically assess individual attributes (such as personality fit for a particular profession, or the risk of re-offending following incarceration); and improve the quality of human life (e.g. improving accessibility of technology).

This recognition of the value of psychology is not novel; former APA president, George Miller, addressed this decades ago, arguing that the majority of the world’s problems were created by humanity, and thus a deeper understanding of human thought and behaviour would help to solve them. Miller (1969) suggested that the world’s problems were too vast for psychologists, proposing: “... our responsibility is less to assume the role of experts and try to apply psychology ourselves than to give it away to the people who really need it” (p. 1071). In Miller’s view, psychology must be accessible to the public.

For Dutke et al. (2019), those training for professions such as teaching, medicine and the law, “really need” psychology, which is frequently delivered in professional training. However, two challenges may arise. Firstly, the content may be delivered by an expert psychologist, with minimal knowledge of the school classroom. Secondly, content may be delivered by teacher educators, who understand the role, but may have limited psychological knowledge. This has two implications: (1) that the psychological content of the course may be deemed irrelevant by the trainee teacher because it is
insufficiently professionally focused; or (2) that the psychological knowledge gained is shallow, or misrepresentative of psychology. As Dutke et al. note, this can badly influence public perceptions of psychology.

As such, Dutke et al.'s framework is crucial if psychology education is to be appropriate for non-psychologists. Their criteria are aligned with pedagogic theory on curriculum design, and enable an engaging learning approach. Understanding the usefulness of the subject is important for motivating engagement (Jones, 2009). The curriculum must address the context in which the professional is working (and not stray beyond this), and fit non-psychologists’ specific needs and processes.

The need for deep, focused knowledge, and multi-perspectivity, relates to an ability to confidently select, evaluate and apply relevant knowledge. An old proverb states that “a little knowledge is a dangerous thing”. If one cannot evaluate information, or know how much one doesn’t know, mistakes are inevitable, with potentially damaging consequences in professional contexts. Non-psychologists can become experts in constrained aspects of psychology, so that depth is acquired, where breadth is unachievable, enabling the development of transferable skills and knowledge.

According to Billing (2007), transferability arises when teaching addresses problem solving rather than content, and when it is social, applying collective reasoning skills, and recognising similarities and shared strategies across different problems. An active, or problem-based learning (Savery, 2015), approach is ideal. Incorporating authentic assessment (Guliker, Bastiaens & Kirshner, 2004) may facilitate learners’ confidence in working on novel problems. These techniques are successful in supporting the delivery of psychological literacy (the ability to apply psychology to solve real problems) in psychology students (Taylor & Hulme, 2015, 2018), and could enable similar outcomes for non-psychologists.

However, some questions remain. Firstly, who should deliver psychology curricula to non-psychologists? Psychologists must collaborate with their counterparts in other disciplines to determine which aspects of psychology are relevant, and how to ensure a fit within the professional context. Collaboration can help us to “give psychology away”; and reciprocally, to learn about the value of our own discipline, and other disciplines. An approach similar to that found in interprofessional education in the health disciplines may be of use (Hammick, Freeth, Koppel, Reeves & Barr, 2007). This enables students to develop their own professional identity, whilst appreciating other professionals, invaluable skills for employment.

Further, how can we ensure that non-psychologists remain up-to-date with the relevant areas of psychology after training? Psychological research moves rapidly. As such, in addition to the recommendations, students need awareness of the need for knowledge currency. Psychology education develops critical thinking and evaluation skills (McGovern, Corey, Cranney, Dixon, Holmes, Kuebli et al., 2010), facilitating continuing professional development alongside further study of psychology.

Finally, it is important to emphasise to non-psychologists that their expertise is restricted. Understanding the psychology of learning, for example, does qualify a teacher to treat a pupil with severe mental ill health. Most ethical codes of conduct for psychological bodies include a requirement to “work within the bounds of competence”. Teaching non-psychologists this principle, encouraging them to consult professional psychologists for issues beyond their competence, would be a welcome addition to the framework.

In conclusion, this framework is to be applauded. Implementing its principles will enable high quality psychology education for non-psychologists, greatly benefit society and service users, and help to
improve the reputation of psychology amongst the general public. However, delivery of this will not be straightforward, and there may be room to expand the framework. To return to Miller (1969): “I can imagine nothing that we could do that would be more relevant to human welfare, and nothing that could pose a greater challenge to the next generation of psychologists than to discover how best to give psychology away” (p. 1074). The challenge should not, however, cause us to falter, and the benefits obtained will make the efforts worthwhile.


