

## **Introducing a Compendium of Psychological Literacy Case Studies: Reflections on Psychological Literacy in Practice**

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### **Abstract**

This article introduces a set of case studies that were submitted to us following requests in psychology learning and teaching conferences and publications, and through professional networks at the British Psychological Society (BPS) and the Higher Education Academy (HEA). The full versions of the case studies make up the first version of a Psychological Literacy Compendium of Practice that has been available since September 2015 online at [www.psychologicalliteracy.com](http://www.psychologicalliteracy.com). The first part of this article presents a very brief synopsis of each case study and categorises the case studies to allow those considering introducing activities to develop psychological literacy to easily compare and contrast the different approaches. Categories used include: when the activity takes place in the psychology curriculum / degree; whether it is a core or elective unit or optional activity, and assessment strategies. In the second section, we describe and evaluate each case study in terms of which of the nine psychological attributes identified by McGovern et al (2010) each case study illustrates. This information can be used to assist curriculum design and quality assurance procedures, and also highlights the need to define the attributes of psychological literacy that activities are designed to address. Finally, we conclude with a discussion and some suggestions for future work and activities. This article aims to highlight practical ideas to develop psychological literacy and to encourage academics and practitioners to use the Compendium to develop activities to embed psychological literacy within the Psychology curriculum.

### **1. Introduction**

Psychological literacy is a relatively recent concept within psychology education, and can be loosely conceptualised as an ability to apply the knowledge, skills and attributes acquired through the study of psychology in a real-world context (Halpern, 2010; Mair, Taylor & Hulme, 2013; Hulme, 2014). The related concept, psychologically literate citizenship, seeks to extend psychological literacy and to explain its importance in the context of social responsibility and contribution (Cranney & Dunn, 2011). Both concepts have been increasingly emphasised by psychologists within the UK higher education sector in recent years. The importance of psychological literacy was first recognised in the UK by Trapp et al. (2011), who recommended that it should be embedded throughout the higher education

psychology curriculum as a way to enhance the value of psychology education to graduates and to the UK economy. This was followed by the incorporation of psychological literacy into the BPS accreditation criteria for undergraduate psychology programmes (first published in 2012, and updated in 2014), which state that the skills acquired through the study of psychology at undergraduate level: *“represent a coherent set of knowledge, skills and values that underpin students’ psychological literacy and which enable them to apply psychology to real life contexts. These scientific, critical thinking and ethical skills encapsulate the contributions a psychology graduate can make to the workplace and to society more generally”* (p26).

As can be seen from this quote from the BPS, psychological literacy recognises the intrinsic value of studying psychology for life beyond the education system. Hulme (2014) argues that psychological literacy incorporates aspects of scientific and information literacy, enabling students and graduates to develop as lifelong learners who are able to keep up with the ever-changing demands of an information-rich society and workplace. Psychology graduates are also able to apply psychological knowledge to real-world problem solving, for the benefits of their communities and societies, in ways that can improve productivity, environmental sustainability, interactions with technology, and health, among other issues. In this regard, they can become inter-culturally competent and ethically aware global citizens. In addition, psychological literacy within the curriculum facilitates students in appreciating the relevance of psychology to everyday life, which in turn helps to make the subject more interesting and engaging.

In response to a growing demand in the UK for information on psychological literacy, the HEA produced some resources (Mair, Taylor & Hulme, 2013; Watt, 2013) for academic psychologists to introduce the concept and to stimulate reflection on ways in which psychological literacy might be embedded within the UK undergraduate psychology curriculum. Additionally, other recent articles from countries outside the UK expand upon the many merits of embedding psychological literacy within psychology curricula within higher education (Dunn et al, 2011) and further education (Sokolová, Lemešová & Kittler, 2014); and even more recent work is widely covered in this special issue of Psychology Teaching Review highlighting the “added value” of psychology (e.g. Hulme et al, 2015). One of the key suggestions for further work highlighted by Mair, Taylor & Hulme (2013) was the need for practical examples to demonstrate psychological literacy in action and this stimulated us to produce a Compendium.

The aim of the Compendium was not to replicate existing resources, but rather to seek to collate contemporary practical examples of approaches taken by higher education psychology providers, with a view to sharing practice and encouraging others to consider adapting these examples within their own curriculum. Requests were circulated through a variety of media within the UK, including through e-bulletins and publications produced by the BPS and HEA and through flyers and verbal requests at psychology learning and teaching conferences. All of the case studies submitted to the Compendium were included and while they were not peer reviewed, editorial feedback was provided and various versions submitted.

## **2. Synopses and categorisation of case studies**

Full case studies are available at [www.psychologicalliteracy.com](http://www.psychologicalliteracy.com)

As can be seen from Table 1, the majority of case studies included in the Compendium involved the teaching and learning of Psychological Literacy in a specific unit at one level, rather than a whole-course approach, although the case studies by Cachia et al and Reddy report employability and placement activities at all levels of the degree programme, and another case study by Rosenkranz involves the collaboration of level 4 and 6 students. Similarly, most case studies are led by an active academic, rather than a course team. These observations are consistent the majority of publications on Psychological Literacy (Trapp et al, 2011; Mair et al, 2013) which recommend embedding it throughout a degree programme to realise the true benefits and ensure all students come into contact with the concept, similar to the incorporation of employability at all levels of the degree now (Reddy et al, 2013) and not just an add-on.

[insert Table 1 here in landscape format = 3 sides A4]

Table 1: The categorisation of case studies according to: where they are included in the degree; whether the activity is compulsory, optional or voluntary; and the type of activity and assessment.

As can be seen in Table 1, psychological literacy was mainly covered at level six in the case studies submitted to the compendium. Although it was encouraging to see that many students were exposed to Psychological Literacy, only six case studies were based on core units; suggesting that students could proceed through a university degree without exposure to psychological literacy-focussed units. The majority of case studies were based on elective units and some were based on voluntary extra-curricular activities, therefore missing out on the potential for value to all students (Hulme et al, 2014).

Psychological literacy lends itself more naturally to some topics than others, but as was highlighted in the HEA Psychological Literacy Guide (Mair, Taylor & Hulme, 2013) it can be covered by academics across the whole syllabus. The units where psychological literacy was covered in the Compendium range from core units such as social and developmental psychology to more applied units such as occupational psychology and mental health. While the majority consisted of more generic units developing transferable skills and learning and included: experiential learning, psychological enquiry, psychology in everyday life and employability. In fact, except for three case studies, all aimed to develop skills for employability in some way.

Teaching and learning activities were varied and included many interactive techniques, such as seminar discussion or groupwork, and enquiry-based or project-based learning; although the majority of activities involved either placement, volunteering or work based learning or peer mentoring. Not all units covering psychological literacy activities were assessed. The level of assessment varied and some were novel, such as asking students to present in the Pecha Kucha format, and proposing, developing and evaluating an intervention and assessing peer-assisted learning. However, reflective pieces were the most usual form of assessment

method. When designing activities and assessment educators need to make links to programme intended learning outcomes, and consider university quality assurance procedures and professional body requirements. It is also important to define the attributes of psychological literacy that activities are designed to address so we thought it would also be useful to map these on to those attributes already defined.

### 3. Psychological literacy attributes

The broadest definition of psychological literacy was proposed by McGovern et al (2010), and although it has been considered by some academics as too wide, it is the most frequently cited definition within the psychological literacy literature. McGovern et al. (2010, p11) comprehensively identify nine attributes that link psychological literacy to those that graduates from psychology degrees should display:

- (1) having a well-defined vocabulary and basic knowledge of the critical subject matter of psychology;
- (2) valuing the intellectual challenges required to use scientific thinking and the disciplined analysis of information to evaluate alternative courses of action;
- (3) taking a creative and amiable sceptical approach to problem solving;
- (4) applying psychological principles to personal, social, and organizational issues in work, relationships, and the broader community;
- (5) acting ethically;
- (6) being competent in using and evaluating information and technology;
- (7) communicating effectively in different modes and with many different audiences;
- (8) recognizing, understanding, and fostering respect for diversity;
- (9) being insightful and reflective about one's own and others' behaviour and mental processes.

Table 2 highlights which of the case studies address each of the nine attributes. Although many of the case studies address most of the attributes to some extent, we wanted to highlight the key attributes addressed and those indicated in bold are highlighted as the two primary attributes. Therefore, it can be seen that if an academic or team would like to include reflective activities they could review the work presented by Cachia et al. or Griffin. Similarly, for activities and reflections relating to the development of a sceptical approach to psychology research reported across various media see Elcock and Jones. For evaluating alternative courses of action when presented with a novel problem and to design an intervention or solution, one could review the case studies by Smith and Morton, Hill, Kent & Skipper, Watt or Brunsdan.

	1. Knowledge of subject matter	2. Evaluate alternative courses	3. Sceptical approach	4. Apply in work, relationships, community	5. Acting ethically	6. Using / evaluating information and technology	7. Communication	8. Diversity	9. Reflexivity
Brunsdan	x	<b>x</b>	x	<b>x</b>		x	x		

Cachia et al	x	x		<b>x</b>					<b>x</b>
Cachia	x	<b>x</b>		<b>x</b>		x			
Elcock & Jones	x		<b>x</b>	x	x	<b>x</b>	x		
Griffin				x	x		x	<b>x</b>	<b>x</b>
Hadlington	x			<b>x</b>					<b>x</b>
Hill		x	<b>x</b>	<b>x</b>			x		
Hughes				<b>x</b>	x		x	x	<b>x</b>
Kent & Skipper	x	<b>x</b>		<b>x</b>		x	x		x
Maunder	<b>x</b>			<b>x</b>			x		x
Mayer et al	<b>x</b>			x	x	<b>x</b>			
Pauli et al	x				x		<b>x</b>		<b>x</b>
Reddy	x			<b>x</b>		x	x		<b>x</b>
Rosenkratz	x				x		<b>x</b>		<b>x</b>
Smith & Morton	x	<b>x</b>	<b>x</b>			x			
Walker	<b>x</b>			<b>x</b>					x
Watt	x		<b>x</b>	<b>x</b>		x			x
Weinberg	x		x	<b>x</b>	<b>x</b>				

Table 2: Mapping of the case studies to coverage of each of the 9 attributes highlighted by McGovern, et al (2010).

It can be seen that the majority of case studies addressed the 4<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> attributes on employability and reflexivity. While completing this mapping exercise, we noted that a number of the attributes were covered in a subsidiary way (for example, numbers 1 and 6) and some rarely featured (for example, numbers 5 and 8). Also, we realised that there were two attributes not included in McGovern's attributes which could be added. The first is global citizenship and although important in recent reviews (Cranney and Dunn, 2011; Bourke, Bamber. and Lyons, 2012), it was not specifically covered in the case studies submitted to us.

The other attribute ..more ..

#### 4. Discussion

A recent study by Hulme and Kitching (in press), on behalf of the HEA and the BPS, found that, within the UK, psychology undergraduate providers are keen to identify practical ways to embed psychological literacy within the curriculum, and to assess it, especially given the difficulties associated with teaching and assessing practical skills with large student numbers. This article, and the Compendium itself, are first steps to attempt to provide examples of practice from within the community of psychology educators, in the hope of inspiring others to borrow ideas, adapt them, and create their own.

We realise that the case studies included are neither exhaustive nor representative of all psychological literacy activities taking place. Indeed, we hope to continue to update the

Compendium over the coming years, to continue to support undergraduate psychology providers in identifying and sharing good practice in embedding psychological literacy within the curriculum. In particular, there is a need to collate more case studies where the focus is not just on employability, but perhaps with more emphasis on psychologically literate citizenship. There is a clear need to include examples of good practice occurring globally and we would like to appeal for case studies that address intercultural competence and the ability to work internationally. In order to facilitate the development of psychological literacy and psychologically literate citizenship within our students, it might be expected that the curriculum would contain all nine aspects of psychological literacy, and that all nine would be encountered by all students.

It is clear that the most advantages will come from embedding psychological literacy across a degree programme so that all students are exposed to it, and to all of its components; if psychological literacy is only in optional modules, then many students are missing out on those important skills and ability to gain extra value. Also, psychology educators are missing out on an opportunity to engage their students with the discipline and through making the relevance of psychology apparent, are likely to engage them far more deeply than might be the case through teaching more abstract theory (Dunn et al., 2011; Grabinger & Dunlap, 1995). Hulme (2014) notes that embedding psychological literacy in the curriculum may enhance students' intrinsic motivation to learn, by bringing psychology to life – but also by bringing life to psychology. We would like to disseminate examples of where this is occurring and how it is managed in a practical sense by a programme team or department.

Additionally, there appears to be a need for academic staff to develop their own psychological literacy (McGovern, 2011). The Research Excellence Framework (REF) exercise which took place in 2014 in the UK has gone some way into highlighting societal impact of all research, including pure. However, not all academics are practiced in thinking about how theoretical psychology can be applied to real-world contexts. If we want our students to think psychologically, then we need to model it ourselves as academics, researchers and teachers. Looking forward, it is hoped that the current proposals for the planned Teaching Excellence Framework will ensure that such activities are recognised and rewarded.

We hope that the Compendium goes some way to start developing a bank of resources exemplifying the ways in which psychology teachers, researchers and academics have supported the psychologically literate development of their undergraduate students. It is hoped that the reader will be stimulated and inspired to use these examples, to benefit from the experiences of others and to develop their own creative solutions to embedding psychological literacy within the curriculum. If you have case studies that you wish to contribute to the next edition of the Compendium, please contact us. We are undertaking further dissemination activities over the course of 2015/16 and hope to upload a revised edition during 2016.

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