

Psychology Teaching Review: Special Issue

Pedagogical Action Research in Psychology in a Changing Educational Landscape.

In April 2014, Lin Norton ran a workshop for the British Psychological Society; *Researching your Psychological Teaching Practice: An Action Research Approach*. The workshop left us all feeling invigorated and keen to apply our newly found knowledge about Action Research to our own pedagogical research. This Special Issue is the result of this workshop and our continued discussions about Action Research and pedagogy. I would like to thank all of the authors of the papers within this Special Issue for their enthusiasm and hard work.

There has been a previous Special Issue of this journal that focused on Action Research in 2002. The papers covered a wide range of relevant and contemporary issues in the teaching of psychology, all demonstrating different approaches to Action Research. The papers included topics such as the management of teaching programmes, assessment, widening participation, student involvement in decisions about the teaching they receive, and integrating work experience into the psychology degree. In the editorial for that issue, Lin Norton suggested that pedagogical action research had an important role to play in both the policy and practice of teaching psychology. Twelve years later, the educational landscape is greatly changed. With the rapid increase in student fees, the slowly increasing numbers of students attending university degrees and the reduction in government funded research, there are new challenges facing pedagogy. In many institutions the aim is to increase student contact time, engagement and satisfaction, whilst maintaining, or even decreasing, staff workload. These changing pressures are reflected in many of the topics that pedagogical researchers are keen to pursue, and taking an Action Research approach provides many advantages. It allows for the continuous development of a programme or module, with frequent evaluation of needs and any changes made. Participatory Action Research also allows for students to become involved in the research itself, which is likely to benefit their own learning, as well as further elucidating the relevant pedagogical issues for the researcher.

Within this Special Issue a range of contemporary pedagogical research topics have been addressed, often from the exciting first cycle of a programme of Action Research. The Special Issue opens with a review article from Lin Norton that provides the background and context for Action Research within psychological teaching. Two papers tackled what is often perceived as one of the most challenging topics to teach within the psychological curriculum: research methods and statistics. Many students find this topic very anxiety provoking, and in one paper Victoria Bourne examines whether mathematical ability can predict performance across different types of assessment, whereas in the other Patrick Rosenkranz and colleagues have evaluated the introduction of a new curriculum to encourage student engagement by shifting from a tutor focused towards a curriculum that allowed for more active participation from the students.

In recent years various techniques have been introduced that attempt to increase student's engagement with their learning, either through the use of technology or innovative approaches to teaching. In the paper by Rosamond Watling and colleagues, the use of Student Response Systems (or Clickers) is evaluated, whilst Sophie McCormack examines the use of scenario based learning to engage students in a cognitive psychology module. Fiona Lintern and colleagues discuss three projects, run by postgraduate MSc students, which address different pedagogical issues around student engagement. What is particularly interesting about this paper is that it not only addresses pedagogical issues through Action Research, but this research is conducted by students, adding an interesting perspective to the research.

"Transitions" is a current educational concern in pedagogical psychology, referring both to the transition from A-level studies into the Undergraduate degree, but also the transition out of the degree and into a career or postgraduate education. Charmaine Deuker presents an interesting paper that attempts to elucidate the expectations of students taking A-level Psychology, and their insights into their transition from GCSE to A-level studies. In another paper, Alana James presents a piece of research in which Undergraduate students mentored A-level students, tackling the issues of both transition from A-level to degree level studies and employability skills in undergraduates.

Finally, the Special Issue is completed with a Debates paper, led by Sophie McCormack and co-authored by a number of participants from the BPS workshop. This paper very much takes a forward looking approach to the current challenges in the teaching of psychology, and considers how Action Research might be uniquely placed to understand these wide ranging issues, with a view to further developing and improving the teaching provision of psychology.

Taking together all of the papers presented within this Special Issue, it is clear that this a uniquely challenging time within Higher Education. However it is also a very exciting time, where alternative approaches to teaching and developing technologies are affording new teaching opportunities to tackle the challenging and changing educational landscape. Whilst the development of new curricula and approaches to teaching, it is important to ensure that developments are as evidence based as possible, and for any changes implemented to be evaluated effectively and appropriately. Action Research is uniquely placed to assist pedagogical researchers and the teachers of psychology, and we hope that this Special Issue will provide people with ideas that they might apply within their own teaching practice and inspire people to take an Action Research approach to the evaluation of their own pedagogy. Sophie McCormack has set up an online forum to help facilitate discussions about the teaching of psychology and Action Research into pedagogy, so please do join the forum for further inspiration: www.universityteachingofpsychology.net