

Considering experiential components in psychology courses?
What might be learned from *Reflections on a damaged education*
by J. Watson-Gaze, *Psynopsis*, 29(3)

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As a graduate student at York University, I struggled to read and digest the description of an undergraduate degree program at York University, in the recent *Psynopsis* article entitled, *Reflections on a damaged education* (Summer 2007) by James Watson-Gaze.

Mr. Watson-Gaze described a number of important issues, including a lack of development opportunities for critical thinking skills, and lack of discussion/critique in the curriculum. I was left with an impression that Mr. Watson felt that the education process only involved the mere transmission of information from professor (and books) to the student, without engagement and reflection. *While some persons may not share his experience, the situation described seemed tragic.*

I entered a graduate Clinical Psychology program at York University in 2002, after completing an undergraduate and master's degree in biology, and six years of work experience. There was also a year or more of additional undergraduate education in psychology, humanities and social sciences classes, so as to qualify for admission to psychology.

After reading Watson's *Reflections* article, I noticed how differently I felt about my first undergraduate experience, which I found very positive, challenging, and oriented

toward critical thinking, as well as other skills development. I felt compelled to review old notebooks and records, and consider the differences between the experience of biology and psychology courses in my undergraduate training. I wondered to whether teaching methods in biology might include elements not yet found in psychology courses. As it goes, I decided to share some of my findings in this article.

Here's a summary:

30 completed courses, 6 full-year and most half-year.

33% of the courses required attendance at 3 hours of lecture per week AND a 3-hour laboratory exercise every week.

in my first two years of education, the total number of hours of instruction was 15 hours per week in lecture, and 9-12 hours every week in labs.

Laboratory exercises involved conducting experiments that were set up and prepared by the lab coordinator. Laboratory exercises sometimes involved simulations, microscopy, dissection, chemical reactions, demonstrations, and rarely involved anything more than basic statistics (mean, median, graphs).

Tutorial assistants were assigned 20 to 30 students, and guided us through the lab exercises, as well as graded all of our submissions.

At least 60-70% of the course weight came from lectures, and 30-40% from the lab exercises.

On the whole, the biggest difference between my experiences in biology vs. psychology courses *involved the presence of experiential learning methods*. There were similarities between the disciplines in terms of lecture content – theory, definitions, history, and processes; however, the biology courses often had an experiential component – the laboratory exercises. Instead of a research methods course, a component of the course weight included experiential instruction (e.g., microbiology courses involved use of agar, growth of cultures, gross microscopy). There were at least a few benefits associated with this form of experiential learning:

- a practical application of the theory covered in lecture;
- multiple exposures to important course material;
- an opportunity to use other modalities to learn – sight, touch, smell;
- developing skills related to writing lab reports (resembling journal article structure) and;
- research skills training, for example, dissection methods and microscopy.

The emphasis on both lecture and experiential learning methods ensured that the curriculum paid attention to *both theory and practice elements* in the discipline of biology. Also, methods of evaluation differed according to the curriculum. Lectures (mostly theory) were examined using multiple-choice and short answer

questions. The practice component was examined using writing samples (lab reports), and experiential exams (bell-ringing exams with skills demonstrations). I estimated that I wrote approximately 120 laboratory reports during that degree – thank goodness they got easier with time, and lots of feedback.

Furthermore, the experience of participating in lab exercises and writing lab reports encouraged problem definition, describing a method, and presenting results in tables. As you can guess, experiments often didn't work out – we learned how to write about, and account for, mistakes. It was possible to identify the limitations of the work based upon experience. I believe the report writing assisted with critical thinking skills – critically thinking about how research is actually conducted in practice.

Should psychology educators consider including these kinds of experiential learning components, there would need to be a great deal of curriculum reconstruction. Also, the cost and infrastructure to deliver such services is high. Experiential curricula require program coordinators, and laboratory materials cost money. Given this model isn't currently applied in Ontario, or maybe Canada, the space for classes might not exist.

As I draw toward the conclusion of this article, I can't help but think about some of the criticisms around including experiential methods. For example, psychology has so many research methods, it would be impossible to select a few. With the paradigms of research so different, how can any common elements be found and taught? Well, maybe you'll have to trust me when I tell you that the genetics and biochemistry majors didn't see the value in learning

microscopy either. Somehow, we all managed.

Take a moment to imagine these kinds of changes, and maybe consult the York U

website for inspiration (www.yorku.ca). There we'll all be reminded to "redefine the possible."