

Reflections on a damaged education

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As a fourth-year student in the country's largest psychology department, I have seen and known reams of students, ranging from apathetic to ambivalent to assiduous, attending classes at York University to acquire their psychology degrees.

In spending countless hours here over the years, I have a fair grasp of the methods of instruction and examination, and the efficacy of these necessary facets of student life. I would like the opportunity to express my thoughts on my education in psychology.

At York, we have a number of phenomenal professors, who have great knowledge and interest in the material that they teach. They are generally well-spoken, accessible and happy to help a student should he or she need further explanation. That being said, I have been very unimpressed with my psychological education as a whole.

The select method of examination for most courses is noncumulative multiple-choice testing. This entails memorizing material and regurgitating it on the exam without being given a reason to reflect on or critique said material. This type of testing limits one's opportunity to evaluate the material, and presents the student with the belief that education is synonymous with memorization.

In classes that generally range, at least below fourth year, from 60 to 600 students, those critical thinking skills that should be fostered in us from the beginning become

ancillary. Without discussion, without critique, without thinking, why is this education?

Given the proclivity to convert concepts into numbers in the psychological literature, I revisited the assignments I was given in my nine second- and third-year psychology classes to give an idea of the prevalence of multiple-choice testing as compared to the other assigned possibilities (this list must be prefaced with the caveat that this experience is my own; I cannot speak for the experiences of any other student, though from conversations I have had such experiences are not uncommon).

Here is a list of the types of assignments I was given (notably, this list excludes the methods of evaluation assigned in my second-year Introduction to Statistics course):

Essays: 1
Reports: 1
Proposed Research Projects: 2
Group Projects: 2
Literature Reviews: 3
Multiple Choice Exams: 26*

*This number includes five exams with an added short written-answer component, two of which were cumulative

The numbers surprised me. While I knew multiple choice tests were the evaluations of choice, I did not realize the disparity in number between those tests and assignments

of the various other methods on the above list.

Assignments in which one must reflect upon and analyze presented material promotes critical thinking skills and creativity, two vital faculties for an individual hoping to enter into the world of psychological research. Even general writing ability is eschewed in these recognition based multiple-choice exams.

Insight from memory research has indicated that faculties of recognition and recall are distinct. Recognition, in the university setting, would involve seeing a prospective answer on a multiple choice test and identifying it as correct. This is different from being able to recall a given piece of information without seeing the list of answers, such as a short answer question. (It should be noted that my distinction is a glib one. The question for a short answer task will itself involve recognition.) Seeing as multiple choice testing is premised entirely on recognition, the knowledge I have acquired over the years will likely only be accessible if prompted. If my education thus far has shed any light on prospective careers for individuals with undergraduate psychology degrees, I would have to assume that most of us end up on Jeopardy or hitting the North American Trivial Pursuit circuit.

Thankfully, there are positive notes here, and those are the fourth-year seminars: Classes no larger than 25, primary source readings and, most importantly, actual discussion and writing. One does not learn abilities or skills through rote memorization; one simply acquires knowledge. Knowledge is certainly a necessary foundation of any discipline and should never be ignored at any level, but to learn, one must actively think, engage and question material rather than passively accept it. If psychology is

about progressing our understanding of the human mind and its relation to the world, how can we psychologists of tomorrow do so without learning to think?

There are, of course, practical limitations in mind when conceiving of assignments. The number of T.A.s for a given course will influence how grades are to be determined. Multiple-choice testing is certainly the most efficient means of acquiring grades for larger classes. It is not usually feasible for a handful of T.A.s and a single professor to mark several hundred essays over the course of a semester. That being said, I spent my first-year of post-secondary education at the University of Toronto, where my Introduction to Psychology section had more than 1,000 students in it, far exceeding the largest class at York. Somehow, every exam in that introductory course managed to have a short-answer portion.

Invariably, compromises must be made when running an institution with tens of thousands of students. One compromise, which seems reasonable, is that students pay for a portion of our educational costs. Given how expensive a university is to run, and that universities run for absolutely zero profit (ahem), I should be expected to shoulder some of the financial burden (a burden, incidentally, which is increasing in Ontario by 4.5% per annum over four years, beginning this past year). I can make peace with this arrangement. What I cannot make peace with is the notion that I may be paying this money for the educational equivalent of a reference book. Had I simply bought that book, I would have saved \$500 per course, three hours a week and months of stress. Would I have read said book in absence of an exam, you ask? Likely not most of it. But what can I recall from the thousands of assigned pages I have read for these multiple-choice examinations? Very little.

After four years, more than \$20,000, dozens of assignments and examinations, and thousands of pages read, what has my undergraduate education in psychology given me? Two nifty letters after my name,

a foundational knowledge of psychology I probably could have acquired by reading an encyclopaedia and the hope that future students will not endure the same frustration I have.