

# **Staff Perceptions of First Year Psychology Lecture Format**

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## **Background**

For first semester 2001, a new lecture format for first year psychology students was trialed. Rather than offer the traditional content lectures based largely on the text book, the new format allowed for the first lecture in a module to provide a review of the topics and learning objectives, while subsequent lectures were to be of an applied nature, though still linked to learning objectives. The rationale for moving to this format was that students tended to rely too much on rote learning of content presented in the text and re-iterated in lectures. They often did not understand how psychology principles and practices were applied in real life. Furthermore students had complained that they didn't want lectures that 'regurgitated' the textbook. It was anticipated that the provision of applied lectures based on the research and experiential knowledge of academic staff in the discipline would address the problem. To gather data on issues arising from this changed format, 20 staff were contacted by email to arrange telephone interviews. Of these, 16 were subsequently interviewed, 2 were unavailable because they were on leave, and 2 did not respond.

## **Appropriateness of model for first year students**

### **Findings**

On balance, **8** staff believed the new format was appropriate for teaching first year psychology for the following reasons:

- The new format provided an opportunity for students to understand the breadth of psychology, to realise it is about how to solve problems, and find answers to questions, and to have a sense of the complexity of the discipline.
- Applied lectures provided opportunities for students to see some real world applications of the theoretical concepts presented in the text and Study Guide.

- It was a waste of time re-iterating the content in textbooks; students were expected to read it before attending lectures.
- The previous lecture format tended to encourage too much rote learning of the content, sometimes without understanding what it all meant in an applied sense. *The way we approach our teaching encourages (students) to be passive and demanding and to try and avoid taking responsibility for their learning*
- The new format encourages students to learn to think for themselves rather than be spoon-fed concepts for exam purposes.
- The broader expertise of academic staff in the school can be utilised to elaborate on basic content.
- Staff found it more professionally rewarding to lecture on their research interests or experience rather than on textbook content.

**Six** staff believed the model was inappropriate for the majority of first year students.

Various reasons were given for this.

- The introduction of so many concepts and learning objectives in one session tended to overwhelm and confuse many students. Although staff were advised to only cover concepts that students generally found difficult, they found that students subsequently focused on those areas to the exclusion of others.
- It was thought that students need a good grounding in understanding concepts before they can appreciate how they might be applied.
- There was a feeling that the format is budget-driven and easier for staff rather than in the students' best interest. It was thought that students need more intensive teaching, and the most desirable way of achieving this is to increase tutorials and decrease lectures because students have to actively participate in order to learn.
- Staff noticed that attendance at the applied lectures was less than attendance at the concept/review lectures. In some cases, some students walked out of the lecture when they found out it was not focused on examinable material.
- In terms of the student cohort there was a difference between the 'ideal' and 'reality'. Ideally, students will be motivated, self-directed learners who are so intrinsically interested in the content that they will appreciate being extended and challenged. The

new lecture format would be most appropriate for this cohort. However, they are thought to be in the minority. Most students want to know what they have to do to pass their assignments and examination. As one staff member commented: *Students say they don't like regurgitation from the text book. In reality they do – they complain if we don't focus on it. Students need some hand holding in first year and we have to do what works best for them.*

Two of these staff members supported the new format in a philosophical sense. However, for pragmatic reasons, they thought it was inappropriate as it is for first years. They believe this cohort need more direction, and more focus on basic concepts.

**Two** lecturers thought it was difficult to know whether the new format was appropriate because there are advantages and disadvantages. They would like to see systematic feedback gathered from students.

### **Dilemmas associated with the new format**

Staff who supported the new format recognised the issues raised by those who thought it was inappropriate. Other dilemmas that arose included:

- The first year student cohort is so diverse in background, experience, motivation levels and ability that it is difficult to find a single approach that suits all. Staff believed that some students welcomed the challenge provided by the new format, but others were less interested in being challenged.
- Some students were confused about the point of the format. While staff acknowledged that many students just want the basics, they believe it is preferable to persevere with the new format and ensure that students are made aware of the relevance of applied lecture material.
- In regard to the traditional format, students were either handfed if they hadn't read the text prior to lectures, or bored if they had read it, making it difficult to cater for all.
- The approach taken by lecturers varied, as did the extent to which they focused on learning objectives, so students did not always grasp the relevance of applied lectures.
- There was a sense that some staff in the School are not very interested in lecturing first year students. Also, there were differing levels of commitment on the part of staff to the new format. In this situation, it was difficult to implement the model as intended.

- With only two staff members on the Warrnambool campus, it was impractical to implement the format in the way intended. A hybrid approach was used there whereby students received both the concept/review aspect of the model and applications of the content in the same lecture.
- The point was made that the format may be more appropriate for some modules (e.g. PDT) than for others (e.g. Cognition), particularly if the research presentation is based on concepts that are too difficult for first year students. *If students don't know about particular theories, the idea of applying them is not sensible.*

As demonstrated in Appendix 1, the range of responses indicates there were no significant differences between variables. Trends suggest that staff who delivered concept/review lectures, and staff who taught BBB were slightly less supportive of the new format. Campus-based differences were not so apparent other than the impractical nature of the model in the Warrnambool situation.

### **Implications**

Half the staff agreed with the new lecture format despite the difficulties associated with implementation. It was thought to be a bold strategy that attempted to engage students more deeply in their study of psychology. However, if students could not discern the relevance of applied lectures and decided not to attend them, the reasons for this need to be investigated and addressed. In many discipline areas, it is common for some students to miss lectures. This could be due to the lecture content, and/or presentation, or could be due to a lack of motivation for study, illness, outside work commitments, and so on.

### **Recommendations**

- Teaching staff need to ensure that the format is implemented in the way intended, and students grasp the relevance of all lectures.
- Teaching staff need to consider reducing the amount of material to be learnt in order that students have time to reach deeper understandings.

## Lecture preparation

### Findings

Ease of preparation: Ten staff presented applied lectures. Of these, 9 found it easy to prepare their lectures and one found it difficult to simplify research work so that it would be presented at a level appropriate for first years. Eight staff presented concept/review lectures; 6 had no problems with preparation, while two found it difficult because there was so much material to cover. The following issues arose in respect to preparation.

- Some research areas undertaken by staff are more interesting and relevant to first years than others. Lecturers used their own judgement about whether to focus on their own research, other research (e.g honours students), or whether to draw on their consultancy experience.
- Some staff members did the kind of thing a visiting scholar would do in delivering a guest lecture. They were concerned with engaging and challenging students to think beyond the textbook content.
- Most staff found that lecture preparation was more interesting because it enabled them to talk about their own research and/or experience and link it more broadly with other examples and module content.
- Some lecturers found they didn't have to spend as much time preparing because they were so familiar with the content. However, there was a suggestion that while preparation is satisfying, it will involve more work over time because different case studies will have to be used to protect confidentiality.
- As advised, most staff assumed students would read the textbook, so they modified old content-based lectures to present another slant on the topics.

Use of TopClass, Study Guide and additional links: Ten staff used the material in the Study Guide accessed through TopClass, 6 did not. All staff who gave concept/review lectures looked at what was covered in TopClass to ensure that all topics were introduced in the lecture. They also referred students to activities in TopClass. Five staff referred students to the additional links available through TopClass while 11 did not. Most of the links provided

extra resources for students to follow-up if they were interested. It was not essential for students to use them. Moreover, the material was not relevant for all lectures.

The learning objectives for the course, available in the online Study Guide, influenced lecture preparation in 10 cases. Staff presenting concept/review lectures gave an overview of what students were expected to learn and spent more time on the difficult concepts. Staff presenting applied lectures attended to the learning objectives and textbook content to varying degrees.

Six staff did not see the learning objectives because they did not access TopClass. Two of them spoke to the Unit Chair to find out what they should focus on. Staff who gave just one specialist lecture were not particularly connected to other aspects of the unit, so accessing TopClass was not a high priority for them.

Use of Text book: Eleven staff used the text book when preparing their lecture and found that it covered the concepts to support students' understanding of their lecture. Two staff did not receive a copy of the textbook. Other staff did not see the textbook, but were familiar with the kind of material in it.

### **Implications**

Most staff found it easier and more satisfying to prepare lectures for the new format than for the previous format. They were also more enthusiastic about delivering lectures based on their own research interests. This should have had a motivating effect on learners. However, the success of this relied on two things. First, lecturers needed to be very clear about what concepts and learning objectives their lecture was contributing to. This did not occur in all applied lectures. Second, students were expected to have read the text as preparation for the lecture. It is not known how many students actually did this, but staff believed that many were unprepared.

### **Recommendations**

- Unit chairs should communicate with lecturers at the beginning of semester and again just prior to the lecture delivery date to discuss preparation issues.

- Unit Chairs should ensure that every lecturer receives a copy of the learning objectives for the course, and has access to the textbook.
- Unit Chairs should request that all lecturers explicitly attend to learning objectives and textbook chapters relevant to their content.
- In preparing lectures, staff should ensure that content of applied lectures is explicitly linked to learning objectives and textbook content in order that students can more clearly understand the relevance. It cannot be assumed that students will make the links themselves.
- Quick feedback should be sought from students about the usefulness and relevance of individual lectures.
- Unit Chairs should inform students that they would derive maximum benefit from lectures only if they read the relevant textbook chapters beforehand.

## **Assessment issues**

### **Findings**

Staff were asked to give their views on the fact that the content of applied lectures was not examined directly. Nine do not have a problem with this because they believe learning to be the important focus. There is a considerable amount of material presented in the course, and it is not possible to examine everything. However, as one staff member pointed out:

*The key to being successful here is making the applied lectures relevant to the learning objectives – if the material reinforces the core curriculum, then in a sense, it is examinable.*

Five staff believe that all lecture material should be examinable, particularly the general themes and issues. They believe it is inappropriate to present lectures on something unrelated to the course. They also believe that lectures should be used essentially to assist students understanding of concepts to be examined.

The requirement to standardise assessment across three campuses restricts the ability to examine the detail of what is included in applied lectures that differ across campuses. Students noticed that not all lectures were on examinable material and some complained about that.

One staff member was indifferent about whether the content of applied lectures was examined, and another didn't know because what was or wasn't examinable was not explained.

### **Implications**

If implemented as intended, applied lectures should have been a way of indirectly helping students to better understand examinable concepts. However staff believed many students did not see it this way – hence the issue with lecture attendance. There is a need for staff to clearly inform students how applied lectures will assist understanding and help them prepare for assignments and examinations. To do this, applied lectures should be clearly related to particular concepts and learning objectives.

The new format should allow for students to be given the basics they need for passing the exam (because that is what the majority want), and should also allow for extending and challenging the basics.

The format appeared to be more helpful when applied lectures were closely linked to learning objectives. Some staff did not access TopClass therefore did not look at the learning objectives. It is probable that their applied lectures were deemed to be less relevant to students.

### **Recommendations**

- Unit Chairs should inform students that all lectures contain material that is relevant to learning objectives and concepts in the textbook, and is therefore examinable in some way.
- The unit team should consider ways of ensuring that some of the material presented in applied lectures is examinable. Different but equivalent assessment options could be campus-based.
- Lecturers should be informed about the content of examinations.

## **Perceptions of students' reactions to lectures**

### **Findings**

Five lecturers felt reasonably confident that their lectures were well received because students appeared to be attentive and interested and some made positive comments after the lecture. Seven staff felt that students seemed interested in their lecture though they were not sure whether it was because of its applied nature, its delivery, or the particular topic being explored. It was not known how students perceived the lectures subsequently when they found that the material in them was not directly examinable.

Two staff presenting concept/review lectures believed students were overwhelmed with the amount of material covered. There was also an issue with the length of lectures - doubt was expressed about students ability to concentrate for two hours.

Most staff were unsure whether student interest was affected by the fact that the lecture content was not directly examinable, but three noticed that attendance was less than in previous years, and a couple mentioned that some students walked out of the lecture. There was also anecdotal feedback that suggested fewer students attended applied lectures after they began to understand the format.

### **Implications**

Given the diverse cohort, it was difficult for staff to know exactly how students reacted to the new format. Clearly it appealed to those students who continued to attend and engage in the lectures, but it is not known how many stopped attending lectures because they were dissatisfied with the format.

### **Recommendations**

- Systemic, representative feedback needs to be gathered from students to find out their views on the new lecture format. This should be done at the end of each module rather than end of semester. These findings should be correlated with data on the extent of students' preparation for lectures, that is, whether they read the relevant parts of the text and Study Guide before lectures.

## **Retention of the format**

Eight staff believed the format should be retained as is, with greater emphasis on ensuring that applied lectures indicate explicitly the learning objectives relevant to the lecture content. A further two staff like the format but think it could be modified. For example, the suggestion was made that there be two concept/review lectures and one applied lecture for each module. Another suggestion was that every lecture use a combination of concept/review and applied elements. This would alleviate the problem of trying to cover all the important concepts in one lecture.

Six staff think it should not be retained. Two believe lectures should revert to dealing with text book concepts and what students need to know to pass the examination. Others expressed reservations about lectures as an appropriate learning activity—they suggested interactive tutorials are a more effective way for students to learn. However, this would require more teaching resources.

## **Conclusion**

The implementation of the new format caused some disquiet for students and some staff, but that is not uncommon when trialing new ideas in educational situations. Innovations take time to implement—difficulties usually arise and change almost always draws negative comments.

Despite the dilemmas that arose, most staff believe it is worth persevering with the format providing some of the underlying problems are addressed. The point and relevance of the applied lectures needs to be clarified for students. At the same time, lecturers must ensure that lecture material pertains to learning objectives and important concepts that are examinable.

## APPENDIX 1: Appropriateness of the lecture format

**Table 1: Appropriateness of format by presentation type.**

Staff presentation	Appropriate format	Inappropriate format	Don't know
Applied only	4	3	1
Concept/review only	2	3	1
Both types	2		

**Table 2: Appropriateness of format by campus**

Campus	Appropriate format	Inappropriate format	Don't know
Melbourne	3	2	2
Geelong	4	3	
Warrnambool	1	1	

**Table 2: Appropriateness of format by module**

Module	Appropriate format	Inappropriate format	Don't know
BBB	2	3	1
PDT	2	2	
Soc Psych	2	1	1
Dev Psych	1		
Soc/Dev Psych	1		

**Table 4: Retention of the new format**

Retention	Number
Retain format as is	8
Retain with modifications	2
Change the format	6