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Psychological Literacy: Review and The Path Ahead (In Indian Context)

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ABSTRACT

Aim of the study was to find out the extent to which present day teaching of psychology (basically at graduation level) fulfills its objective of creating real psychological literacy and also, finding ways that can truly enhance the skill-set of students that opt for psychology. While most Indian teachers genuinely put in efforts to equip their students with practical aspects of everything they teach, it was found that there are mechanisms by which the whole experience of studying psychology can be taken to next and/or higher level(s). It's suggested that these methods be adopted and incorporated into curricula, though with certain cautions.

Keywords: Psychological literacy, skill-set

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INTRODUCTION

The journey of psychology as an independent academic discipline in India began with the establishment of the Department of Experimental Psychology, in 1916, in Calcutta University. Prof. Narendra Nath Sengupta who had his education at the Harvard University with Hugo Munsterberg, a student of Wilhelm Wundt, was appointed the first chairman of the Department. Both undergraduate and post graduate courses were initiated in the university department. (caluniv.ac.in) (Seminar brochure, University of Calcutta, 2015)

Today numerous universities and colleges are offering the subject after 10th, at graduation level; post-graduation, PG Diplomas, M.Phil and doctoral. Even within these courses, there are many options for specialization. Though the most widely known application of psychology, even today, is counselor-counselee session; there is plethora of new and newer areas emerging – all within the realm of psychology. The core value of this subject lies in the fact that it has diverse applications across multiple fields since it deals with a very basic entity i.e. a human being. However, when we look at graduates of this discipline, it's not always, that we find them equipped with basic skills and repertoire of values as expected.

The term "psychological literacy", to encapsulate these skills and values, was first coined by Alan Boneau in 1990. The current conceptualization of psychological literacy was operational zed as the graduate attributes (knowledge, skills, attitudes) or learning outcomes of the undergraduate psychology degree program. Further, Cranney and Dunn (2011) simply defined psychological literacy as the capacity to intentionally apply psychological science to achieve personal, professional and societal goals. (psychliteracy.com)

In a country like India, with high rates of unemployment, psychological literacy gains even more and altogether different importance – that of enhancing employability. Psychology

graduates need psychological literacy, for their own as well as societal betterment, and for finding and sustaining employment; as, it won't be an understatement to say that psychological literacy forms the basics of working in the field of psychology.

Advantages of psychological literacy

Generally, society expects a psychology graduate to be a higher level advisor than any other discipline graduate. To actually equip the graduates with such desired skills, even if at a beginners' level, psychological literacy plays a crucial role.

McGovern et al (2010) provided a definition of psychological literacy, including the following elements:

- Understanding the basic concepts and principles of psychology

- Thinking critically

- Having problem-solving skills

- Understanding scientific research practices

- Communicating well in different contexts

- Applying psychological principles to personal, social, ororganizational problems

- Acting ethically

- Having cultural competence and respecting diversity

- Having self and other awareness and understanding. (Douglas 2016)

A simple look itself, at these nine broad categories, is sufficient to bring fore the advantages of psychological literacy. To have a basic knowledge and vocabulary for psychology concepts, to be able to analyze the ins and outs of different situations effectively, correct moral and ethical practices, productive interactions are only a few significant of the many benefits of psychological literacy.

Psychological Literacy – Present status

One of the strengths of teaching of psychology presently is that every teacher associated with this subject attempts to replete his/her teaching with examples, and, connecting subject matter to real life. That is good, but definitely not enough or complete in purpose. For inculcating psychological literacy, additional techniques and methods are advisable. These techniques, along with helping students imbibe psychological literacy, should take them to higher –order objectives of learning [which, as per Bloom's Taxonomy (1956) are analysis, synthesis and evaluation or even creation].

These ends, to some extent, are met when a teacher adopts different techniques for imparting education like asking questions before going into subject matter, discussions, organizing declamations & debates, quizzes, poster-essay-slogan-painting competition, educational trips, field visits, flipped learning etc. These modes stimulate the students' thought process. However, more innovative and involving procedures are being called for. The more reflective these procedures are made, the better it is. Evidence for the contribution of reflective practice to the development and application of psychological literacy is offered by Coulson et al (2016). So it is advisable that extra readings and assignments concerned with developing one's thought processes are embedded in the curriculum. Instead of relying totally on understanding and recall of psychology concepts presented in psychology text-books, ideas and suggestions evolving from general readings-books-podcasts etc (after familiarity with the psychology concepts) should be encouraged.

These reflections and insights can then be applied to one's life also. Indeed, more complex levels of reflection, such as that required for psychological literacy, may involve consciously thinking about or challenging past and present action, beliefs or knowledge with the intention to learn or to inform future practice (Dewey 1933; Richert 1990). (Coulson et al, 2016)

Further suggestions for enhancing psychological literacy

Following are the steps already being undertaken to enhance psychological literacy as per Taylor & Hulme (2015). These can be implemented in Indian institutions as well.

- Students can be guided to select an organization, do an in-depth research cum analysis about it, and propose solutions and recommendations to the organizational representatives. This is will contribute to the psychological literacy of students, acting as a pathway to enhanced employability.

- Students can work in groups and analyze case studies, both about individuals with and without mental conditions. Famous personalities or volunteers can also be picked up by students for the purpose. This will enhance their theoretical knowledge, team-ability, co-operation and communication skills.

- Students should be encouraged to write 'Psychology in every day' kind of articles and submit to blogs, magazines and other publications.

- For experiential learning, peer-mentoring can be introduced as mandatory whereby senior students coach fresh students.

- Volunteering in schools, hospitals and old-age homes should be explored more than is being presently done.

- Clubs can be initiated by psychology students to work with 7-14 year olds who display early signs of mental ill-health.

- Students can choose any one social problem, existing or future-possible, and make a presentation about it with potential solutions.

- Students should be supported through lectures and discussions to apply theoretical models of psychology to improve peoples' well-being.

➢ In addition to all this, as is required in every field, students must become competent in using and evaluating information and technology.

➢ They should always be on the look-out for internships, additional workshops, seminars and conferences.

➢ Students have to be made aware of international scenarios to enable a global citizenship with cross-cultural competence.

It must be highlighted that this is not an exhaustive, nor representative of all psychological activities worth suggesting or being already undertaken. The dimension of 'empathy' and 'supporting and caring' is also necessary as psychology is viewed as a helping profession; and novel ways are required to develop and nurture this quality among youngsters.

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. (Taylor & Hulme, 2015)

Challenges

We know that psychology has a wide-ranging impact on society. The potential benefits of a psychologically literate citizenry in improved parenting, better business practices, enlightened legislation, and many other areas make this a desirable goal. However, certain challenges can also crop up as one tries to introduce psychological literacy into curriculum. It would be difficult to separate psychological literacy from generic student-learning outcomes. Secondly, lines between teaching and therapy might become blurred. For example, will a course in child development become a course in parenting? Thirdly, if we are in fact encouraging students to apply their psychological literacy in their everyday lives and communities, does the university then become liable for any misapplication of psychological knowledge by their students and alumni? Also, there could be practices bordering on indoctrination, where educators might

unknowingly or knowingly pass their convictions to the student population. Further challenges include over analysis of one's personal and occupational life, and over application of psychological concepts are also dangers of an overly zealous push for psychologically literate student citizens. (Douglas, 2016)

As a final year student of BA Psychology (Honours), I myself experienced such over-analysis where some responses relating to black magic on Thematic Apperception Test were given by a subject, and the teacher had analyzed with conviction that the subject was practising black magic!

Another important challenge, perhaps even the most important, is teachers' own job satisfaction levels. A teacher who is not satisfied with his/her job might not feel motivated enough to inspire and guide the path towards psychological literacy.

Lastly, the focus should not shift from content of the subject and preparation for higher education/degree. For this, the psychological literacy has to be an option, not compulsion.

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