

PSYCHOLOGY: Structured Research on Topic Booklets

Abstract

The supported research undertaken by the Psychology teachers was to examine the effect of introducing Topic Booklets for the A2 options in the Psychology of Health and the Psychology of Crime. This was prompted by students' requests for more discussion time in class. We thought that introducing topic booklets would leave us more flexibility to talk about psychology in general. We used our knowledge of psychology in terms of teaching and learning to develop the booklets. The quantitative results showed that students did find the booklets useful and this was mirrored by the results of the focus group discussions. The teachers also found them extremely effective. The conclusion was that Topic Booklets were successful in terms of learning and teaching and that improvements could be made for next year.

(The research results will be analysed after A2 results (2004) and compared with Target Minimum Grades, and these will then be compared with results and TMG's of 2003 A2 students.)

Introduction

The research was prompted by Woodhouse College and time was allowed for development of the research. The evaluation of the A2 Psychology course from students was that they would like more time spent on the topics in terms of discussion and exploration - as opposed to concentrating on evidence, concepts and theories required by the OCR Specification. As teachers we agreed that the A2 Psychology of Health and Psychology of Crime had become too exam driven - 4 essays are required - which could make very exciting topics become monotonous to teach and leave less time for exploring the sub-topics in a broader context.

Stephen Covey suggests in 'The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People' that a habit is formed whenever a person knows **what to do**, knows **how to do it**, and **has a good reason for doing it**. The **good reason** is to pass A Level with as high a grade as possible. The **what to do** is to follow the Specification. The construction and development of the Topic Booklets answers the question of **how to do it**.

New practice is only sustained according Paul Ginnis (in The Teacher's Toolkit) when people have:

- **A motivation** to keep doing it, which comes from conviction
- **An understanding** of the principles that underpin the practice so that new methodology can be continually refreshed and reinvented

In order to accommodate these points and improve students' learning and our teaching, the Psychology team used the time allotted for research to develop Topic Booklets for each of the 8 areas of Health Psychology and 8 areas of Criminal Psychology.

The booklets would be developed to shift the more structural side of the work more towards independent study by students in order to leave more teaching time on the more general areas allowing for more class discussion. Underpinning this are the ideas of Carl Rogers and other humanistic psychologists that teaching and learning must be **student centred** (meeting the individual needs of students), providing the need for **emotional safety** (the absence of intimidation and fears) and putting **self-esteem** (feelings that an individual has about himself or herself) and personal responsibility central to the learning process. This also provides the student with **control** over their learning which increases **motivation** (the internal state that drives or encourages an individual to act) and **engagement** e.g. use of mark schemes, exam questions, articles, essay plans and evidence grids in a bid to increase their perceived sense of control over their work (internal locus of control) and belief in their abilities (self efficacy).

In order to evaluate the results, we decided to have two focus groups of students after completing the first topic - Health Psychology, and to have a further focus group after Crime Psychology. We also revised the end-of-year Student Evaluation Forms to explore their views on the Topic Booklets. (As well as this qualitative and quantitative data it is proposed that we do a correlation on these students' A2 results and their target minimum grades and compare these with last year's students A2 results and their target minimum grades for essay work.)

Hypothesis 1

That the introduction of Topic Booklets will be beneficial to both students and teachers in terms of improved teaching and learning.

Hypothesis 2

There will be a significant difference between 2003 A2 results of students who did not use Topic Booklets and 2004 A2 results of students who used Topic Booklets. (2004 will get higher results on essay papers.)

Method

The Booklets were developed by the Psychology team of 3 for each sub-topic in Health and Crime.

The front covers of the Booklets contained a relevant image to the topic, and the titles of each sub-topic required by the OCR Specification. Each Topic Booklet was photocopied in a different colour. This was intended to aid students' memories by structuring information and provide cues for retrieval of information adding to students' organisational skills - 'chunking' information for ease of access from memory.

The Booklets provided Evidence Grids with researchers given and page numbers of text book or photocopies of research for students to read and fill in the boxes describing the evidence and evaluating the evidence in terms of issues. This was intended to help students structure their essay writing skills by providing scaffolding and to foster their independent study skills - providing a more student centred approach. Also to provide all the information needed in one place for revision.

The main psychological concepts were also included and these were revisited in each topic covered - reflecting Bruner's spiral curriculum.

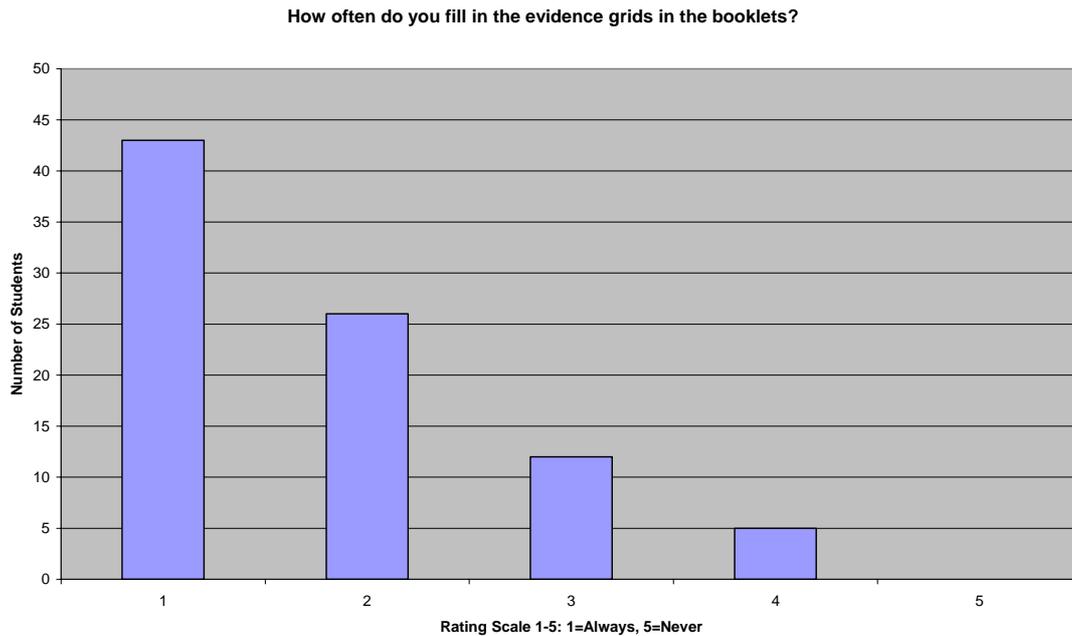
Newspaper and journal articles relating to the topics were added in order to give background information and stimulate interest in students on the wider subjects of Health and Crime - providing links building on students' developmental skills.

Past exam questions were added and blank essay plans for each type of essay required for each sub-topic. Mark schemes were also added. This

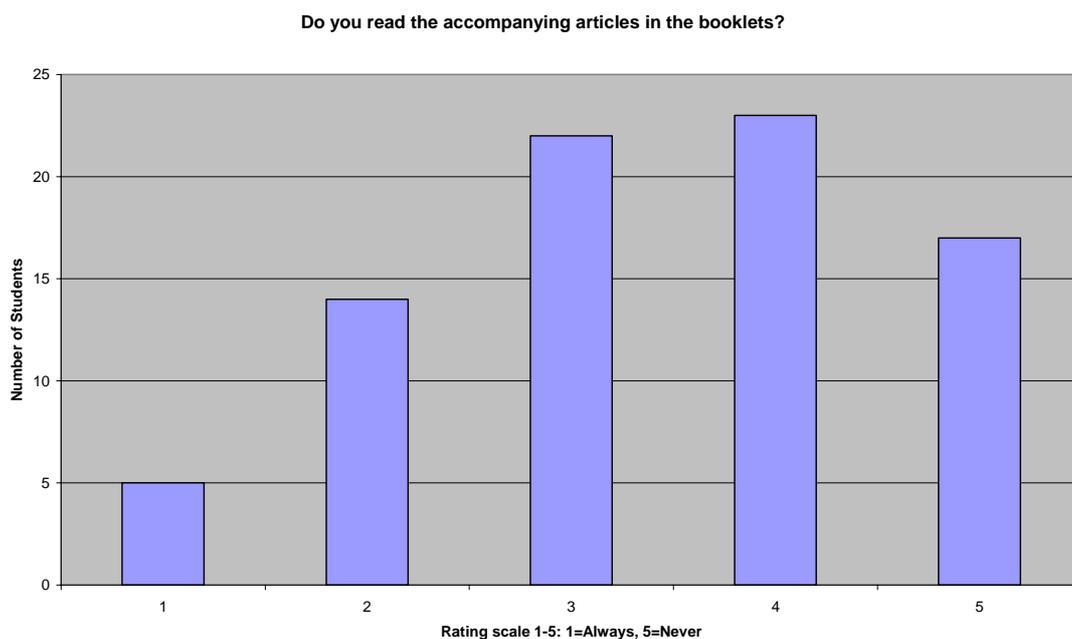
was intended to provide students with mastery skills and fostering an internal locus of control coupled with self-efficacy.

Results

Quantitative results were obtained from rating scale questions about the use of the Topic Booklets using bar charts as follows:

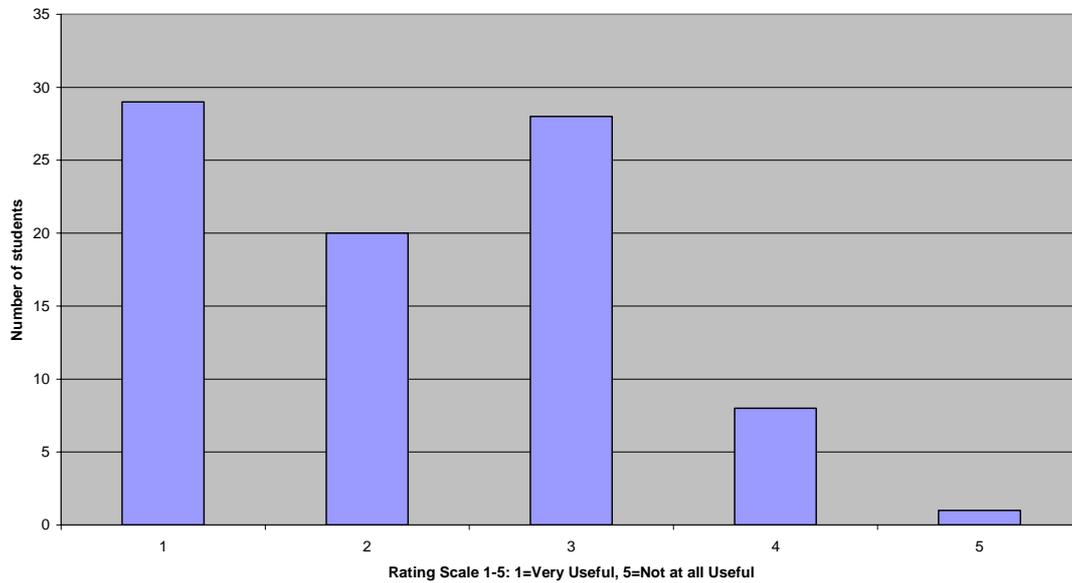


This shows that the majority of students did complete the evidence grids, with 50% saying they completed them always.

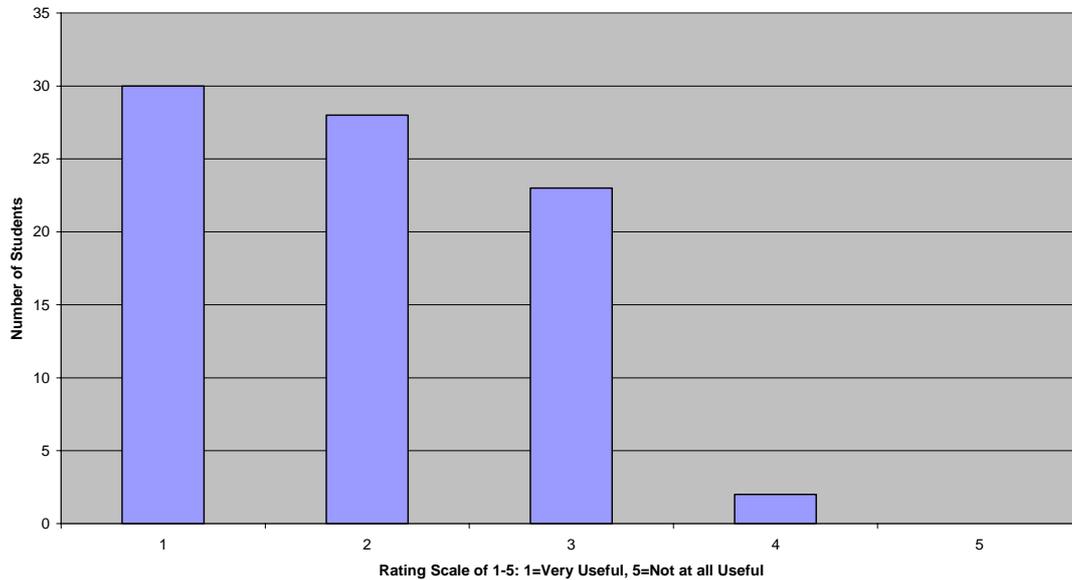


This shows that the accompanying articles were not read as much as they could have been by a lot of the students, with 21% never reading them.

How useful are the Section A essay plans?

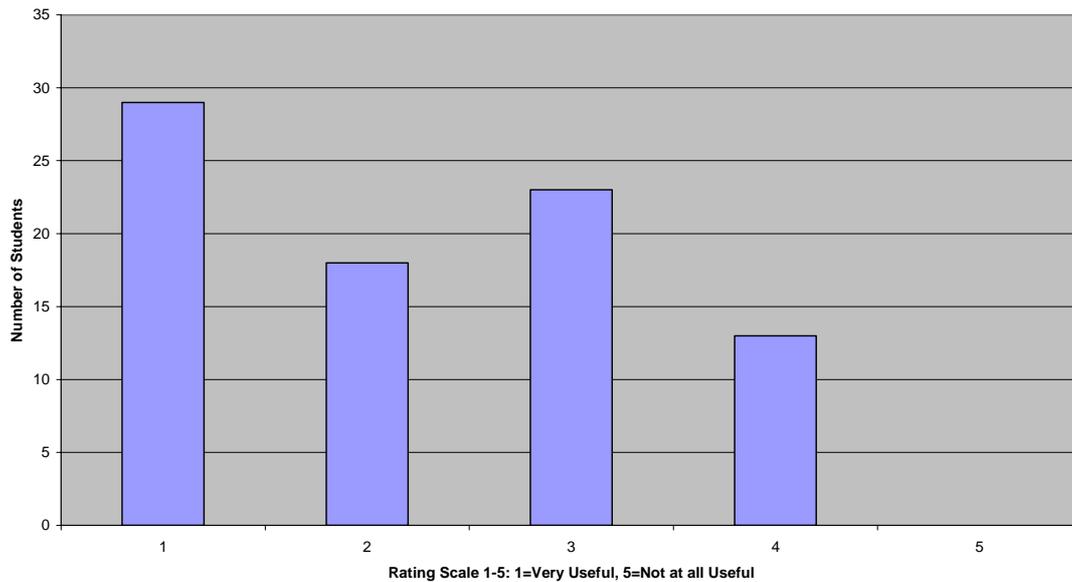


How useful are the Section B Essay Plans?



This shows that in the main students did use the essay plans provided, with 34% finding Section A plans very useful and 36% finding Section B plans very useful.

Would you find Concept Sheets for each sub-topic useful?



Students had mixed views about the usefulness of the Concept Sheets, but 34% said they would find them very useful.

Qualitative results were obtained from open-ended questions and focus groups:

Results from Student Evaluation Forms:

1. What did you find most helpful about the Topic Booklets?

Theme 1: Manageability & Organisation

- "helps spread the work out and makes it easy to remember."
- "grids for studies, essay plan grids"

Theme 2: Visual Layout

"...layout different colours of booklets"

2. What did you find least useful about the Topic Booklets?

Theme 1: Limited Grid Space

- "needed to make extra notes as space was limited"
- boxes were a bit small so couldn't fill in all the information"

Theme 2: Additional Literature (articles)

- "a lot of articles not read"
- "articles - didn't really use them"

3. Please give us ideas of how to improve the Topic Booklets?

Theme 1: Extra space

- "small space to write in"
- "make boxes bigger"

Theme 2: Study Skills

- "Have some studies with evaluation points filled in and others blank for students to have a go at"
- Better studies, which have more evaluation issues"

Results from Focus Groups:

Practical Suggestions

- The boxes in the grids need to be larger
- Colours are too dark to write on
- Some requested more space to add research studies found by themselves
- Section A Essay plans were found to be confusing
- They requested more newspaper articles
- Fresh copies of the booklets needed for revision
- All evidence to be titled (only some were given prompts as to the content of the research)
- Concepts to be included on the evidence grids rather than separately

Positive Feedback

- Evaluation points box on grid useful
- Evidence grids were generally found to be useful in class and for revision

Further Suggestions for improvement

- Students would have liked more discussion time
- Booklets to be tied into Revision Programme more

Results from Teachers' Focus Group

- Include blank sheets for 'mind maps'- useful as both an introduction to the topic being studied and as a revision tool
- Use one relevant article per booklet and interesting newspaper articles. The benefits of this will be two-fold, firstly it will encourage and promote wider reading around a subject and secondly it will act as preparation for the assignment coursework
- Topic booklets useful to provide basis for preparation, downside is that more able students completed them at home and in class, but weaker students benefited from that-include extension tasks for more able students
- Rewrite Section B essay plan sheets to include ie part (a) PEC (point, evidence, conclusion) and part (b) the 3Ws (what, where and why) and writing frames ie "from this evidence it can be concluded that..."
- Students brought in relevant booklets to class.
- Include 3 blank boxes on grid for each subtopic so that students can fill in research evidence of their choice.
- Include space for concepts in grid

Discussion

The Topic booklets were found to be useful by both staff and students as it helped to structure and organise the specification and break it down into usable chunks that the students could access individually.

We noticed from our teaching and discussions in the team that there are a number of improvements to the booklets and the delivery of A2 that can still be made.

First, the downside to the Topic Booklets was that more able students completed them at home and in class and may have found this repetitive, but weaker students benefited from class work. It is proposed that more emphasis will be placed on individuals completing the booklets at home and teachers checking completion at the end of the topic as opposed to going through in class time. Thus more class time will be freed up for discussion (which was the original aim of the booklets) and creativity. By creativity we mean that lessons can be less focused solely on the A Level

Specification and take a more holistic approach to students' learning and experience of psychology.

It was also noted that the more able students require extension tasks and that there could be more differentiation included within the booklets to achieve this. This could take the form of including blank grids for students to fill in research that they have found interesting.

Second, the booklets could be opened up more to include styles that meet the needs of 'right brained' students - i.e. those that see topics more holistically and visually. One suggestion is the use of mind maps that could be included as both an introduction to the topic being studied and as a revision tool.

Third, as it appeared that the booklets contained too many articles, it is proposed that we include one relevant journal article and a couple of interesting newspaper articles. The benefits of this will be two-fold, firstly it will encourage and promote wider reading around the subject and secondly it will act as preparation for the assignment coursework - involving analysing a newspaper article in the light of extrapolating the psychology behind the text.

Finally, although the essay planning sheets were viewed as useful, they could be more effective in helping students to structure work and also to improve the language that they are using. For example, in the longer essay (which includes three parts) it would be beneficial to include mnemonics to aid memory and structuring information, e.g.

Part (a) **Point, Evidence, Conclusion = PEC**

Part (b) the **3Ws = What, Where and Why**

And

Writing frames - so that the students can see the kind of language appropriate, e.g. linking sentences - "from this evidence it can be concluded that" or "an alternative view is"

It is our intention that the improvements to these booklets will serve to enable students to access the specification fully and gain more skills, as well as a better and more rounded understanding of psychology and how it can be applied to themselves in particular.

Following the A2 results this year we hope to analyse the impact of this new way of delivering the specification more fully.