

# **The Psychologically Literate Citizen**

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**Foundations and Global Perspectives**

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# Psychological Literacy and the Psychologically Literate Citizen

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## New Frontiers for a Global Discipline

JACQUELYN CRANNEY AND DANA S. DUNN

Today's students must prepare themselves for a world in which knowledge is accumulating at a rapidly accelerating rate and in which old problems such as poverty, racism, and pollution join new problems such as global terrorism, a health crisis created by alarming increases in obesity, and the growing gap between the poor and very rich. All of these problems require psychological knowledge, skills and values for their solution.

HALPERN (2010, p. 162)

Although the psychology major remains very popular (88,000 bachelor's degrees in 2006)—and an increasing percentage of our citizens attend college—most students will not major in our discipline. However, psychology is second only to basic English composition as the most frequently taken course by college graduates, and our potential to affect our future citizenry is enormous. Yet I sometimes wonder how much of what we teach is based on what we want to teach about our discipline (our favored theories and concepts to those we hope to recruit to our field—a most worthy endeavor) and how much is based on what the average person needs to know to be a psychologically literate citizen.

BELAR (2008, p. 56)

As educators and psychologists, we believe we have a mandate to prepare students to adapt and survive in their current and future world. Moreover, we believe that both the teaching and learning of psychological knowledge can serve in this pressing capacity. To this end, we discuss and develop further McGovern and colleagues' (2010) concepts of "psychological literacy" and the "psychologically literate citizen," in particular by making reference to the common understandings of the concepts of literacy, citizenship, and global citizenship.

To begin, we will provide some historical context. In the northern summer of 2008, about 80 professors of undergraduate (UG) psychology gathered for the National Conference on Undergraduate Education in Psychology at the University of Puget Sound. Under the leadership of Diane Halpern, the conference aim was to undertake the core work in developing nine chapters for the volume *Undergraduate Psychology Education: A Blueprint for the Future of the Discipline* (Halpern, 2010). This book was in some sense an update of the 1991 St. Mary's Conference, which had resulted in McGovern's (1993) *Handbook for Enhancing Undergraduate Education in Psychology*. The *Blueprint* book also acknowledged some core developments since the McGovern work, including *The APA Guidelines for the Undergraduate Major* (APA, 2007), which listed five psychology-specific and five liberal education-related capabilities, and associated student learning outcomes (SLOs), for the UG psychology major in the United States.

McGovern and colleagues (2010) introduced the unifying concepts of "psychological literacy" and "the psychologically literate citizen." Psychological literacy means:

- "having a well-defined vocabulary and basic knowledge of the critical subject matter of psychology;
- valuing the intellectual challenges required to use scientific thinking and the disciplined analysis of information to evaluate alternative courses of action;
- taking a creative and amiable skeptic approach to problem solving;
- applying psychological principles to personal, social, and organizational issues in work, relationships, and the broader community;
- acting ethically;
- being competent in using and evaluating information and technology;
- communicating effectively in different modes and with many different audiences;
- recognizing, understanding, and fostering respect for diversity;
- being insightful and reflective about one's own and others' behavior and mental processes" (p. 11).

In essence, psychological literacy encapsulates the common graduate attributes or capabilities that students should acquire while undertaking a major in psychology, as exemplified by guidelines and lists of SLOs delineated by many national psychology organizations (e.g., United States: APA, 2007; Australia: Cranney

et al., 2008; Europe: Lunt et al., 2001). Although psychology educators internationally have been working toward helping students to acquire these attributes for at least the past 50 years, it has been only recently that educators have explicitly delineated attributes and SLOs and have sought to develop appropriate teaching and assessment strategies, including whole-program approaches. From some perspectives, psychological literacy becomes the most important outcome of undergraduate education in the discipline.

The concept of the *psychologically literate citizen*, however, is more controversial than that of *psychological literacy*, for at least three reasons. First, it raises the issue of the real purpose of UG psychology education (and perhaps higher education generally). Whether stated or implied, the aim in most Western countries is for UG education to provide the foundations for graduate professional training in psychology. Yet in North America, Australia, and Britain, only about one quarter of psychology majors enter graduate professional training programs (e.g., Landrum, Hettich, & Wilner, 2010), so there must be other viable outcomes for psychology major graduates. One purpose that fits particularly well in the North American context is that of liberal education. Indeed, many have argued that the psychology major is possibly one of the best forms of liberal education (e.g., McGovern, Furumoto, Halpern, Kimble, & McKeachie, 1991). The purpose of liberal education is to teach people to write well, reason logically, identify connections among diverse sets of information, recognize what they know and what they still need to learn, engage in critical thinking, and rely on research and data analytic skills to verify observations and conclusions (Dunn & McCarthy, 2010). This notion fits well with the recently stated purpose of universities in many countries to create the so-called “global citizen,” which has been simply defined as “anyone who works to make the world a better place” (Victoria International Development Education Association, n.d.), while global citizenship “involves understanding the forces that affect cross-cultural connections and being committed to a global community based on human interdependence, equality, and justice” (Franklin Pierce University, n.d.). We explore these concepts further below.

A second reason for controversy is a reaction by many within and outside of universities against the word “citizen,” and the implication that higher education institutions should be promoting and encouraging citizenship. We argue, however, that the purpose of colleges and universities is to provide students with the kind of education that enables them to participate and provide leadership in both their communities and their nations, whatever form that may take. Indeed, for democratic societies, education is one of the cornerstones of citizenry.

A third reason for controversy is that McGovern and colleagues (2010) do not really define “the psychologically literate citizen,” but rather give the sense of a complex process that evolves over time:

Psychologically literate citizens intentionally build upon their own psychological literacy, integrating it with the interdisciplinary and extracurricular lessons learned during their undergraduate experiences. They try to grow

more sophisticated as ethical and socially responsible problem solvers. It is an achievable outcome when faculty provide students with opportunities to use their psychological literacy outside of formal learning environments, and they begin to do so of their own initiative to accomplish goals that are important to them, their families, their colleagues, their communities, and to the larger society, state, nation, or world. (p. 20)

McGovern and colleagues (2010) clearly see this concept as an aspirational but achievable outcome of UG education that builds upon psychological literacy, and that also “pulls in” transdisciplinary and other “real-life” experiences. They further discuss the notion of “intentional learners” as those who are “empowered by intellectual and practical skills, informed by knowledge and different ways of knowing, and ethically responsible for their personal actions and civic contributions” (p. 21); the notion of integrative learning is also described as connecting skills and knowledge from multiple domains, and as applying theory to practice in various settings. Although McGovern and colleagues do not offer a discrete definition of the psychologically literate citizen, Halpern (2010) does, in her introduction to the *Blueprint* book: “Psychologically literate citizens have basic knowledge of psychology and can and will apply their knowledge of psychology to a broad range of situations” (p. 7). We expand on this concept in a later section as well.

### THE CONCEPTS OF “LITERACY” AND “PSYCHOLOGICAL LITERACY”

If students encounter a concept or term that they know little about, they are very likely to seek more information on the open-source community-driven encyclopedia, Wikipedia. Thus, as educators, we decided to embrace the role of student as learner and approach the term “literacy” in the same way. Wikipedia states that literacy has “traditionally been described as the ability to read and write. It is a concept claimed and defined by a range of different theoretical fields” (see <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Literacy>). Interestingly, the entry then draws on a document authored by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), which defines literacy as the “ability to identify, understand, interpret, create, communicate, compute and use printed and written materials associated with varying contexts. Literacy involves a continuum of learning in *enabling individuals to achieve their goals, to develop their knowledge and potential, and to participate fully in their community and wider society*” [italics added] (UNESCO, 2004). It is well documented that this kind of literacy is associated with better life opportunities and better physical health outcomes—which is why UNESCO has a focus on such “basic” education in developing countries and also why, in Western countries, we generally take this kind of literacy for granted (despite the fact that a significant percentage of our populations remain illiterate). In a similar way, we argue that, in the face of global problems that are the result of maladaptive human behavior (Marsella, 2007), psychological literacy may well

become essential to the psychological health of both Western and “developing” nations—that is, it may be necessary to purposefully increase the psychological literacy of our citizens, either through formal education (e.g., the psychology major) or through informal education media (e.g., “edutainment” formats; or the “critical thinking” game being developed by Halpern and others; see [http://www.cmc.edu/pages/faculty/dhalpern/index\\_files/Page792.html](http://www.cmc.edu/pages/faculty/dhalpern/index_files/Page792.html)).

Returning to the formal literature on “literacy,” we do not pretend to be experts in this field, but rather take as an interesting example the article entitled “Literacy Literacy” by Kintgen (1988) in the journal *Visible Language*. Therein the author examines how the traditional meaning of the word has been extended to terms such as “scientific literacy” and “cultural literacy.” Kintgen summarizes scholarly work that traces the four historical stages of development of the meaning of the core term “literacy,” concluding that we are now in the “analytic” stage, where “readers are expected to analyze and draw inferences from the material they read” (p. 154). By logically generalizing the term to other fields, he argues that “the ability to analyze material from any field, and to draw inferences from it, can be referred to as literacy in that area” (p. 154). However, he also argues that there is an evaluative element to the term that encompasses the analysis and inference aspects, and goes beyond mere descriptive aspects. In essence, literacy means the capacity to both “describe knowledge, and the ability to think, about any field” (p. 155), and also implies mastery of a traditional body of knowledge (p. 162). In his discussion of “cultural literacy,” he explicitly makes reference to psychological notions, such as mental models and schemas, as being essential to comprehension. Finally he states:

New experiences of any sort are assimilated by relating them to mental models based on previous experiences; something that is totally novel is incomprehensible. Knowledge is thus an essential component of even the descriptive sense of ‘literacy’, and this leads, almost inevitably, to knowledge as the defining characteristic of the evaluative sense. And thus the title of this paper. (Kintgen, 1988, p. 166)

What are the implications of Kintgen’s (1988) analysis for the term “psychological literacy”? First, he acknowledges the importance of the development of a “schema” regarding the discipline of psychology; we argue that his notion of “schema” overlaps with the notion of the “culture” of the discipline, including the sometimes-not-so-explicit rules about the way one thinks if one is a psychologist (or psychological scientist; Cranney et al., 2005; Ewing et al., 2010). This aspect of literacy, which acknowledges that part of the discipline knowledge is “ways of knowing,” can be related to the notion of epistemology. Second, he emphasizes the higher-order cognitive skills of analysis and evaluation, which can be related to Krathwohl’s (2002) revision of Bloom’s taxonomy of educational objectives. In terms of types of knowledge, the levels are factual, conceptual, and procedural knowledge, and the highest level is metacognitive knowledge—the knowledge of cognition in general as well as awareness and knowledge of one’s own thinking. In terms of types of processes, the lowest level is remembering, whereas the highest levels involve

evaluating and creating. Third, Kintgen refers to conceptions of scientific literacy as including the ability to evaluate the wider implications of the products of scientific enterprise on society generally (p. 157); in a similar way, we might also consider as part of psychological literacy the capacity to evaluate the past and predict the future impact of psychological science on society generally. One aspect of this capacity is being able to recognize the strengths and limitations or boundaries of disciplinary knowledge in the context of other disciplines and other knowledge—"meta-metacognition"? In a further play on Kintgen's paper title, we need to acknowledge that a particularly unusual aspect of psychological literacy (at least compared to other literacies) is that the subject of the literacy is not something external to us, but indeed is the essence of ourselves—our thoughts, feelings, and behaviors. This realization has profound implications for the importance of psychological literacy to oneself and one's fellow human beings, and may also mean that gaining psychological literacy is a particularly challenging enterprise, as it requires one to attempt to hold an objective view of self-relevant subject matter.

We argue that a simple definition of literacy is "domain knowledge that is used adaptively," or more specifically, literacy is "knowledge plus the adaptive use or application of that knowledge." Thus psychological literacy could be defined as psychological knowledge that is used adaptively. Taking into consideration the Wikipedia, UNESCO, and English scholar's definitions, however, this definition is not, for many reasons, as simple as it seems. First, use of knowledge implies that one has knowledge to begin with. Second, here "knowledge" includes not only the core content areas, but all the aspects defined by McGovern and coworkers (2010), including critical thinking, research skills, and communication. Third, knowledge also includes ethical knowledge, and we argue that a high level of knowledge acquisition in this area necessarily means that "adaptive use" translates to ethical behavior in all domains of life, not just in the workplace. Fourth, this definition of psychological literacy implies a relatively well-integrated and functional set of schemas that across individuals may show some variability in expression, but in terms of central tendency, can be recognized and assessed as "psychological literacy." Finally, regardless of the discipline students decide to pursue, opportunities to develop some aspects of psychological literacy, such as "recognizing, understanding, and fostering respect for diversity" (McGovern et al., 2010), should be formally included in their curriculum to help create truly "global citizens."

Before we move on to notions of citizenship, however, two points should be made. First, different cultures may have different conceptualizations of "psychological literacy," as Karandashev (Chapter 15) makes clear in his discussion of the concept in relation to the history of psychology education in Russia. Second, because a central characteristic of psychology is the use of the scientific method, we also need to consider the concept of "scientific literacy":

Scientific literacy is the knowledge and understanding of scientific concepts and processes required for personal decision making, participation in civic and cultural affairs, and economic productivity . . . Scientific literacy means that . . . a person has the ability to describe, explain, and predict



natural phenomena. Scientific literacy entails being able to read with understanding articles about science in the popular press and to engage in social conversation about the validity of the conclusions. Scientific literacy implies that a person can identify scientific issues underlying national and local decisions and express positions that are scientifically and technologically informed. A literate citizen should be able to evaluate the quality of scientific information on the basis of its source and the methods used to generate it. Scientific literacy also implies the capacity to pose and evaluate arguments based on evidence and to apply conclusions from such arguments appropriately (National Science Education Standards, cited by <http://literacynet.org/science/scientificliteracy.html>).

This definition of scientific literacy fits well with both Kintgen's (1988) definition of literacy emphasizing its evaluative aspects, and our definition emphasizing its adaptive application aspects. Many psychology educators have explicitly stated that scientific literacy is a core attribute that should be acquired by every psychology major (e.g., Beins, 2007). There are challenges to educators in achieving this aim, particularly with students who may not have a science background and who expect primarily to learn "how to help people" during their UG program (e.g., Thieman, Clary, Olson, Dauner, & Ring, 2009); Holmes and Beins (2009) suggest some potential solutions to these challenges.

### THE CONCEPTS OF "CITIZEN," "GLOBAL CITIZENSHIP," AND THE "PSYCHOLOGICALLY LITERATE CITIZEN"

During the week-long "camp" that produced the core drafts of the *Blueprint* book (Halpern, 2010), there was some ambivalence about the word "citizen" as it emerged in discussions from the developing chapter dealing with "The Psychologically Literate Citizen" (McGovern et al., 2010). This ambivalence no doubt reflected different meanings associated with the term (keep in mind the likely "small-L" liberal political leanings of most psychology professors present, in the context of the dominant conservative U.S. government at that time). The notion of citizenship is central in the development of Western civilization and in particular democratic societies, and so has strong cultural meanings. A comprehensive treatment of this concept is beyond the scope of this chapter (but see Trapp & Akhurst, Chapter 14). However, to introduce this section, we give the following definition: a citizen is a "person owing loyalty to and entitled by birth or naturalisation to the protection of state or nation" (<http://www.thefreedictionary.com/citizen>). Citizenship developed as a concept in the Classical era, where there were clearly significant rights and responsibilities (the former outweighing the latter, particularly when non-citizenship often meant slavery) associated with Athenian and Roman citizenry (see, for example, Scullard, 1982, pp. 16–18). Finally, we note that citizenship is one of the character strengths of the virtue of justice (Peterson & Seligman, 2004; see also Dahlsgaard, Peterson, & Seligman, 2005).

If one conducts a search for “global citizenship,” one most often retrieves university or college statements of the aspirational capabilities or attributes they hope to inculcate in their graduates. For example, Australia’s University of New South Wales recently defined global citizens as having an appreciation of (a) relevant applications of their discipline to problems in their local, national, and international context, and (b) the needs to respect diversity, be culturally aware, be socially just/responsible, and be environmentally responsible (Marshall, 2010). This definition pushes strongly into the “values” arena, and contrasts with uninformative conceptualizations of global citizenship as being merely the consequence of study abroad experiences, or as reflecting the capacity to communicate with people from around the world through Web-based social media (although there is no doubt that these experiences and capabilities have value).

If we take Marshall’s (2010) definition, then how does this relate to the “psychologically literate citizen”? We build upon McGovern and coworkers’ (2010) discussion around these issues by arguing that psychologically literate citizens use their psychological literacy to solve problems in an ethical and socially responsible manner in a way that directly benefits their communities. That is, they selflessly and sometimes courageously share their psychological knowledge and skills to directly benefit their communities, large or small. For an alternative but related conceptualization of this concept, see Charlton and Lymburner’s (Chapter 17) “psychologically literate global citizen.”

## CONCLUSION

In summary, we argue that psychological literacy is a core component of graduate literacy in general, and that the psychologically literate citizen is a core component of the “global citizen,” thus providing relevance to tertiary education in general. Psychological literacy should be the core outcome of the psychology UG major. Depending on how one conceptualizes “the psychologically literate citizen,” one might see it as the “high end” of psychological literacy, or as an essential outcome of a liberal education in a democratic society. Building upon this latter idea, we argue that we need to renew psychology education, using this concept of the psychologically literate citizen. The time is ripe (and perhaps overdue) for the psychologically literate citizen, as indicated by U.S. President Barack Obama’s commencement address at Arizona State University in May 2009:

... we’ll need a fundamental change of perspective and attitude. It’s clear that we need to build a new foundation—a stronger foundation—for our economy and our prosperity, rethinking how we grow our economy, how we use energy, how we educate our children, how we care for our sick, how we treat our environment . . . I’m talking about an approach to life—a quality of mind and quality of heart; a willingness to follow your passions, regardless of whether they lead to fortune and fame; a willingness to question conventional wisdom and rethink old dogmas; a lack of regard for all the traditional

markers of status and prestige—and a commitment instead to doing what’s meaningful to you, what helps others, what makes a difference in this world . . . Acts of sacrifice and decency without regard to what’s in it for you—that also creates ripple effects—ones that lift up families and communities; that spread opportunity and boost our economy; that reach folks in the forgotten corners of the world.

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