

PAPER  
**15**

---

## Venusian report

---

Dick, Bob (1995) *A Venusian anthropologist's report on the teaching of psychology*, with the preface "On being a Venusian anthropologist." Nathan, Qld: Griffith University, School of Behavioural Science.

First written in 1990 while on secondment to Griffith University to assist with course development.

### **On being a Venusian anthropologist <sup>1</sup>**

At Focus 2000, a meeting primarily of change professionals in Brisbane a few years ago (1990), I lightly suggested in an aside in a plenary session that the role of court jester better fitted change agents than the serious approach we were taking. Perhaps I was just a little overwhelmed by the number of suits and ties, but the comment was offered without thought.

---

1. Copyright © Bob Dick, 1990, 1995, 2002. It may be copied in part or whole without restriction if it is not included in material sold at a profit, and this notice is clearly shown.

Over the course of the conference, a number of people came up to me and said that they liked the “court jester” remark. By the end of the conference, I was more attached to the comment than I was when I had made it.

As I understand it, a court jester was given licence to say in the presence of a king or queen those things that needed saying but were too dangerous to say. In short, court jesters, in the guise of offering smart or amusing remarks, could comment on issues of state or the behaviour of those with power and privilege with relative impunity.

I think that is a valuable role. And if you can’t do it at universities, where can you do it? From time to time, as the Faculty considers its teaching program, it may be that there can be encouragement for people to adopt that role.

In the present context, however, there is another role which I think may be even more valuable.

The role I have in mind is that of Venusian anthropologist. (I should warn you, however, that “Venusian anthropologist” is a misleading translation of the untranslatable Venusian term. Venusian beliefs in Venus, or in any of the professions, are not easily described in English — or, I suspect, in any of Earth’s many tongues).

To illustrate the use of the role... At the University of Queensland I had a third year class in social consultancy. One of the greatest barriers to its effectiveness, I think, was that people come into it with strong expectations about university education. Those expectations got in the way of learning.

So, in the first or second class, when people were sitting quietly in rows listening to me, I would say something like this:

*“I’m speaking to you, individually. Just forget for the moment that there are others in the class, and think of this as a conversation the others can’t hear.”*

---

*“You are a trainee Venusian anthropologist. You have just been beamed down to Earth as part of your first field project, and you find yourself suddenly seated here in amongst all these earthlings. Obviously you can’t announce yourself as a Venusian anthropologist — it might create an interplanetary incident.*

*“You have been told nothing about Earth. This project is to give you practice in observing and understanding an interplanetary culture without any prior information or exposure. Your task is to understand Earth culture and behaviour, and write an assignment on it when you return safely to Venus.*

*“As a trainee Venusian anthropologist, what do you make of the behaviour you experience around you right now? What will you have to say about Earth behaviour? This is your first sample of Earth behaviour, and you have no way of knowing how typical it is. But you have to start somewhere. What notes will you take on this sample of Earth.”*

Let me play Venusian anthropologist for a while, and invite you to do the same. As a Venusian anthropologist, what sense do you make of the behaviour you observe at Griffith University, and in the applied psychology stream within the Faculty of Health and Behavioural Science?

More importantly, as a Venusian anthropologist, what advice would you give the Faculty on the teaching of psychology?

## **A Venusian anthropologist’s report on the teaching of psychology**

Hello there. Before we begin, perhaps we have to tell you a little more about Venusian anthropologists. We’ll keep it brief. The most important thing for you to know is this: in our consulting work, we have taken to heart two issues about history.

---

On the one hand, we recognise that all of us “stand on the shoulders of our predecessors”, as one of your own scientists put it. Our own advances build on the advances others have already taken.

On the other hand, we recognise the insidious influence of history: how much it channels our thinking, constrains our choices, blinds us to valuable opportunities.

Now, we Venusians, whatever our tribe or profession, are strongly anti-compromise. We are firm believers in “best-of-both-worlds” combinations.

This shows in our approach to consultancy. When we study a situation, or plan a new structure or whatever, we try initially to do it with fresh eyes, without presumptions. Only when we have completed our design do we draw upon the knowledge which history offers us.

We then try to combine the best of the old and the new. We respect history. But it is the future we plan for, not the past.

Of course, we are unable to escape our history entirely. To the task, inescapably, we bring our prior experience. For example, we find it hard to escape the belief that more often than not, form follows function. This influences our very perception of both form and function. (We were pleasantly surprised that Earth science in many fields accepts this important principle, at least in espoused theory.)

So let us begin by defining the functions of universities, and Griffith in particular, and especially the behavioural science programs.

## **The functions of university**

We note first that universities serve a boundary function in society. They help a culture to manage its relationship with its entire environment. They are both curators of what is already known, and seekers after what is not yet known.

---

(We note in passing that in psychology, tradition is in some ways not well respected. Students and researchers vie with each other to have the most up-to-date reference lists. The older literature is seldom accessed. Consequently much reinvention of wheels take place. [Yes, Venusians do know and use the wheel.]

As part of this boundary function, we note also, universities do not themselves do much to *manage* the relationship between culture and environment. However, they “train” people to do so; that is, they help others to prepare. In fact, many of the resources provided to universities are provided by the culture at large (through the mechanism known as “the state”) specifically to resource this preparation.

Apply this view to the current case study. The behavioural science programs, then, are part of the preparation for some of the people who will help the culture manage its relationship with the environment.

This is something of a bother to the Venusian mind. [Yes, Venusians have minds.] It appears that different people actually prepare themselves to manage different parts of the culture-environment interface. [This would sound much simpler in our native Venusian tongue]. This presumes that each piece of the culture-environment interface is a closed system. And that, as everyone knows on even minimal reflection, is absurd. But there you are.

However, our present brief is to discuss effective behavioural science programs. So let us content ourselves with mentioning the bigger picture, and then doing as well as we can within our brief.

The program is a preparation scheme for psychologists, or at least seems to be so. “Registration” as psychologists, that is, acceptance by the state as psychologists, is a goal for graduates. The course is to be designed in such a way that the Australian Psychological Society will accredit it. That is, the APS will state that it is an appropriate course for psychologists to prepare themselves.

---

These are disturbing constraints to a Venusian-prepared anthropologist. But for the moment let us assume that they are real. [On Venus, the onus would be on the APS (if we had one) to justify *its* position. But, in Rome .... Here it seems to work the other way around.]

Back to the story. We are to design a preparation program within the constraints. Illogical as it may seem, these constraints include the requirements of registration board and APS. So be it.

But let us not overlook the goals. To define these, it seems to be important to understand what a psychologist is. We can take this as the beginning of our next step.

We note that this is a difficult concept: psychologist. Many years ago, we've been told, the state of Queensland set out to define what psychologists do. It failed. Finally, after variously offending such groups as parents, teachers, counsellors and clergy, it gave up. It decided that psychologists are people who call themselves psychologists. (A curious strategy?: for example "Intelligence is what intelligence tests measure.") Only those who have taken an accredited course in psychology, it seems, may call themselves psychologists.

There is distressing circularity in this. But let us ignore it for the moment and press on. We will ignore the question of why anyone would wish to call themselves a psychologist, and deal with easier questions. We can always study what it is that psychologists *do* as they help a culture manage its interface with its environment.

Here we strike another difficulty. It turns out that psychologists fill an enormous variety of functions. (We begin to wish we had been posted to Mars!) Further, a majority of them *don't* call themselves psychologists. Could it be that earthlings, too, find "psychologist" hard to define?

---

Fortunately, however, on analysing the work of psychologists, some themes emerge.

The most prominent seems to be that psychologists work with people. Yes, so do many other professions; so it may be important to understand the difference between psychologists and these others. But this at least is a promising starting point.

Secondly, psychologists have a strong belief that each earthling is unique. [Much less unique, we note in passing, than Venusians. But perhaps Earth cultures are more conformist than those we are familiar with on Venus.] Therefore, the work done with people often takes into account the uniqueness of those people.

(We note, with some surprise, that sometimes it doesn't. We especially note that the institutions which prepare psychologists pay less attention to individual uniqueness than we would have expected. Perhaps we will have to treat earthlings as poor informants on Earth culture. This may complicate our investigations; but provided we use observation as our key tool, it should not matter too much.)

Despite the uniqueness, there is also a strong belief that there are general principles which govern behaviour. These principles are applied, to some extent, in the work which psychologists do.

## **Psychologist roles**

Perhaps some specific examples will help us in our task. Among other things, graduates of psychological preparation programs...

- 1 ... help other intending psychologists prepare to be psychologists. Beyond noting the inbreeding which this risks, we are not surprised.
  - 2 ... research an astonishing variety of phenomena. This research spans what are elsewhere regarded on earth as biological sciences, health sciences, social
-

sciences, mathematical sciences, and others. This is usually done in the same institutions, and by the same people, as the first role.

(When we first stumbled across this phenomenon, we imagined that here was an instance where the usual boundaries between earth disciplines had broken down. This was a pleasant surprise. Imagine our disappointment, then, to find that in psychology the sub-disciplines don't have enough of a shared language to talk to one another. Further, our early observations suggest that they have almost no contact with other disciplines which are studying the same phenomena. This is a puzzle. Perhaps our understanding will improve as our study continues.)

- 3 ... help those people whose uniqueness causes them some problem with other earthlings. The term used is "deviate", though this has different connotations than has the nearest Venusian equivalent.

Sometimes this is done on behalf of the others, to help them cope with those who are unique. Sometimes it is done on behalf of those who are unique, to cope with the others. (Why not more often both of these at once, we wonder.)

These are common roles, sometimes performed in institutional settings and sometimes not. It appears that psychologists may have a more tolerant view of uniqueness than have many other people (though we have already mentioned, as contrary evidence, that there is little of this tolerance shown for students in the preparation institutions such as universities).

- 4 ... deal with non-coping "normal" people. This is a similar role to the previous one, for people having trouble coping, though less for reasons of uniqueness. It is again common, and is a role shared with people who seem to do rather similar things, but call themselves by different names.
  - 5 ... help organisations choose people with the "right" uniqueness. Sometimes this means a particular uniqueness. Sometimes it means not very much uniqueness at all. The local term is "employee selection". In some parts of this area, and in diagnosis of individual uniquenesses generally, psychologists have almost succeeded in establishing a monopoly.
-



- 6 ... help organisations and other groups of people to set goals, improve relationships, and the like. A large subset of this role is to do with helping groups introduce change, which terrifies most earth people. Again, many people who do not call themselves psychologists also fill this role.

While not a complete list, this will probably serve our purpose sufficiently.

It appears that the first two of these roles form one grouping, sometimes labelled “academic”. The rest of them form a second grouping, sometimes called “practitioner”. It is not yet apparent why one preparation program is used for both. Perhaps it is because of beliefs that only psychologists can help people prepare as psychologists. And could it be that people believe that only researchers can do this well? (A similar phenomenon has been reported in the literature for other earth arenas too: see “apostolic succession”.)

## Practitioners

Let us deal with the “practitioner” category.<sup>2</sup> This is by far the larger, though by no means the most influential, of the two categories.

We might summarise the job responsibilities of most psychological practitioners as

*“helping people individually and/or collectively to improve their enjoyment and effectiveness”.*

- 
2. We realise that this is not the usual emphasis. But so far our studies have not explained why practitioners have to learn to be scientists, yet scientists don't have to learn to be practitioners. Our tentative hypothesis is that this is because the decisions are being made mostly by scientists rather than by practitioners. But perhaps we are mistaken here. We would have thought that, *prima facie*, scientists could make good use of practitioner skills in their life and work. On the evidence so far before us, practitioners make very little use of the skills of science which they are taught. Many of them even appear to have something of a reaction against them (a “conditioned aversion”, I think some might call it).
-

On some occasions the help is direct, by providing solutions. On others it is indirect, by developing the necessary skills-and-understandings for the clients to do this for themselves.

At this point, we face an embarrassment. It seems there are no concepts in common use on earth which allow us to acknowledge the *combinations* of “skills-and-understandings”. We expect there is such a term. After all, combinations of skills-and-understandings are what practitioners use.

Until we find the appropriate term we may just have to talk as if skills and understandings are separate. This is unfortunate in the extreme, and potentially very dangerous. For example, it leads to memorised knowledge being treated as if it were understanding. But provided we keep this caution constantly in mind, perhaps we can avoid being too misled.

## **Skills-and-understandings**

First, practitioner psychologists spend a very great deal of their time in interaction with others.

Obviously, skills-and-understandings are required for this. If there are core skills-and-understandings, such interpersonal skills are clearly included. (It should be admitted that we have noticed that in the recent past it was possible to be accredited as a psychologist without acquiring them. Could it be that we have overestimated their importance?)

Second, practitioners are often in a position of using “process” skills-and-understandings. [This would be more easily said in Venusian.] Practitioners *help others* to do such things as improve their life, set goals, enhance their relationships, reach decisions, solve problems, and all manner of other things.

---

(It appears that without special training, earthlings are unable to use process skills. This, too, is a puzzle. We would have thought that millions of years of evolution must have equipped earth people with such often-used skills.)

Third, practitioner psychologists spend most of their working hours in groups or organisations of one sort or another. It is self-evident, we think, that they require skills-and-understandings to do this.

Fourth, in much of what they do, they are required to develop methods or processes for the specific situation they are in. This arises because of the uniqueness-principle:<sup>3</sup> there is no guarantee that a method or process which worked in one setting or for one group will transfer without modification to another. General opportunity-seizing skills-and-understandings seem relevant here. (“Problem-solving skills”, is how earth people seem to think of them).

Creativity is also needed, but on the evidence so far collected, it seems all earth people have it. (This is despite courageous efforts during pre-adult education to stamp it out).

Fifthly, we have not so far mentioned the underlying skills-and-understandings of numeracy and literacy which almost all earth citizens require (though we have noticed that some, a small minority perhaps, contrive to survive well without them).

We take it as self-evident that skills-and-understandings are acquired by *exercise*, often under guidance. (There is no close equivalent of the Venusian term which may be roughly represented by “using-skills-and-understandings”.) Therefore, a clear aim of the teaching program, we believe, must be to create situations where this can take place.

---

3. We acknowledge that “uniqueness-principle” is an awkward term. We suspect that, were my English better, I would know of some simpler term meaning the same. Surely such an important concept has a term which is in common use.

---

Fortunately, this is no great difficulty. Learning takes place in very nearly the same group and organisational settings which characterise most of the working life of the practitioner-psychologist — or most other people for that matter. It is a simple matter to capitalise on this. People can learn to operate in this environment in ways which they can later use to operate in their working environment (and their life).

We mention in passing our surprise that this is almost never done. We suspect some religious reason. In fact, we have begun to suspect that it arises from the religion known as “science”. To be honest, though, our studies have not yet advanced far enough for us to offer this view with any assurance.

## **Constraints**

At this point it is useful if we take into account some of the constraints under which the course has to be run.

The most important of them appear to be the requirements of the Australian Psychological Society (APS) and the Queensland Psychologists’ Registration Board. As accreditation by the first appears to influence the second, the APS requirements will be given most of our attention.

In the first place, there appear to be requirements that a sufficiently broad coverage of “psychology” should be attained in the foundation years of the program. This is strange: to a Venusian eye, psychology seems to be more of a historical accident than anything else. It is apparently adequate for the APS that this coverage be intellectual, without touching skills-and-understandings. Perhaps this requirement too is religious in significance.

Second, there is a requirement for a substantial but surprisingly-narrow component of opportunity-seizing skills-and-understandings. This component take the form of instruction on certain specialised research methods and statistics in all or most years.

---

Curiously, in this area the program *does* seem to be aimed at the development of skills-and-understandings. This is especially true in the later years. It seldom succeeds well, we believe. We have been shown evidence that most practitioners don't read research, let alone do it. But that is a different story, as we say on Venus. In any event, we commend the effort. If it were broader, and led to better outcomes, our commendation would be greater.

Third, there is a requirement that the fourth year consist exclusively of psychology. This, we presume, is another primarily religious requirement. To our mind it illustrates the closed-system thinking of the Earth professions generally.

Fourth, the APS insists that at least one-fifth of the fourth year be spent doing research and statistics, and includes a substantial research project. We understand that this is expected to be individual (more closed-system thinking?). To our astonishment, we have even heard cooperation labelled "plagiarism".<sup>4</sup>

Let us try to compile a program which achieves the goals we have stated within the identified constraints. We will then compare it to actual programs, and try to compile a best-of-both-worlds combination.

The constraints are severe. To be honest, we doubt their necessity. We think a better program could be prepared by ignoring them. But that is not our brief.

In any event, it seems that psychologist academics will not even entertain the thought of examining the constraints. This appears to be deliberate blindness. But that is absurd, and so we imagine we have some more study to do.

On the clear understanding that the following proposal is less than it might be, let us proceed.

---

4. The term "plagiarism" describes two different phenomena. One is representing another's work as one's own. This is clearly unsuitable behaviour and we agree with the dislike with which it is viewed. The other is sharing the responsibility for developing work. We would have thought that this developed valuable skills.

---

## The program—a first approximation

We take this as our starting point: that the main function of the behavioural science courses is to help intending psychological practitioners to equip themselves with the skills-and-understandings they need to practise their profession.

Given the variation in jobs this may be too ambitious. At the very least, however, the course might attempt to address those skills-and-understandings which are common to all or most areas of psychological endeavour. In this event it is clearly necessary to include those which allow the graduate to acquire more specific skills-and-understandings on the job.

Any particular selection of skills-and-understandings begs the question about the categorisation used. To have a starting point, however, we have decided to avail ourselves of an earth-originated classification. Edgar Schein (personal communication) classifies skills-and-understandings into three categories: technical, interpersonal, and emotional.

Where psychologists are concerned, the technical skills-and-understandings are also for the most part interpersonal skills-and-understandings. The emotional skills-and-understandings are about the ability to take constructive action under conditions of ego-threat. We think they may be defined as the skills-and-understandings of “courage”. It seems that earth people have a fragile ego. Certainly, they invest enormous effort in psychological self-defence.

The interpersonal skills-and-understandings are those for operating with individuals, groups and larger social systems. Included here are communication skills-and-understandings, and process skills-and-understandings.

A further crucially important category can be rendered as “skills-and-understandings-for-enabling-learning”. There is no equivalent term, so far as we can tell, in earth’s vernaculars. On earth the terms “teaching” and “training” are commonly used for this purpose. But they so misrepresent the reality that we

---

believe they are too dangerous to use. They encourage “teachers” and “trainers” to assume that their task is to transfer information from themselves to learners.

The technical skills-and-understandings, as well as including the interpersonal, also cover the administration and interpretation of psychological tests, and skills-and-understandings of diagnosis, the skills-and-understandings of intervention, and skills-and-understandings of opportunity-seizing (or problem-solving). Some of these could as easily be classified as interpersonal.

It is interesting that most of the communication skills-and-understandings are taught as *technical* skills-and-understandings. Therefore people use them only in their work, not in their life. So far we lack an explanation for this.

For convenience we briefly repeat our earlier summary of psychological practice:

*“helping people individually and/or collectively to improve their enjoyment and effectiveness”.*

As the learning takes place in a variety of structured social systems or collectivities, this goal is very easily achieved. The learners can learn about groups, organisations and other collectivities by participating in them. They can also, to everyone’s advantage, apply the fruits of their learning to further enhance these collectivities. In doing so, they are practising all of the skills identified earlier. And the courses they are engaged in will get much better over time.

We are assuming, reluctantly, that this has to be done in such a way that the constraints are observed. Here, in more detail, is a possible example (there are, of course, other possibilities). We have followed the Venusian practice of providing “umbrella” style courses in the first and final year. Specialisation occurs in the intermediate years. We believe this should achieve the best combination of both specialisation and generalism...

---

## First level

We recommend a broad coverage to meet APS requirements. Using issue-oriented learning methods turns this general approach from a liability to an asset. (We mention in passing that since the first draft of this report was written, the term “problem-based learning” has come into wide use.<sup>5</sup> And some people actually practise it. It is closely related to what we are suggesting.)

A further constraint becomes obvious at this point. Academic psychologists (and academics generally) value highly the notion of academic freedom, and insist on being able to decide their individual behaviour. Some coordinating structure is therefore required which provides automatic links across subjects without unduly constraining those who are responsible for each subject.

Having “themes” which apply across subjects may achieve this end. The themes then provide the “issues” for the issue-oriented learning. Provided the lecturing staff decide the themes by consensus, this will not severely constrain individuals in the exercise of their academic freedom.

The first level would also include a methodology component with opportunity-seizing (problem-solving) as its focus. This will then provide people with the tools to understand the questions that arise in the other components of the course.

All or most of the courses at first level would include a field component. To avoid the danger of too great a need for supervision, or too great a threat either to the students or the systems they observe, these would be observational studies only. (We have decided, reluctantly, that earth people don’t trust each other. So anything else would probably not be acceptable.)

---

5. As we understand it, problem based learning is the use of written case studies presented as problems to be resolved. In finding the appropriate information and applying it to the problem, learners acquire both knowledge and skills at using it. Of course, it doesn’t develop the actual skills needed to do psychological work in the “real world”. But, if we understand it properly, it seems to be a substantial step in that direction.

---



As far as possible, the field projects might be chosen to allow the observational requirements of several different subjects to be undertaken in the same situation. We would expect this to help to overcome the closed-system thinking which is so common. There are a number of similar courses at other universities — though none, as far as we can tell, in psychology.

### **Second and third level**

It seems desirable to include subjects which are appropriate for organisational, community and social settings in the courses. It is also necessary to bear in mind that the same core is used for occupational health students. We recommend the following arrangement...

core	the more general skills-and-understandings which underlie most of what are sometimes called the helping professions; this will also provide a valuable opportunity for academics from different specialisations to cooperate with one another;
concentration area	the somewhat more specialised skills-and-understandings which characterise much psychological work, but are not so common elsewhere in the helping professions;
electives	the most specialised skills-and-understandings, which are to be found only in some narrow areas of psychological practice.

There would again be a methodological component, again linked to the themes of the course. The themes might or might not be common to several or all courses.

The emphasis would be on methods which can be used to aid observation, diagnosis and intervention. This suggests qualitative methods and a continuous-improvement philosophy. (There are earth terms for this. "Action research" is

---

one which fits the situation. It might be acceptable to some academics provided it does not violate their religious scruples.)

As far as possible, all second and third level subjects would be chosen to assist students to understand and improve the learning system within which this takes place. (We mention in passing that there are a number of developments which provide the same goal of continuous improvement. Among them are action research itself, short-cycle evaluation, and total quality management.)

#### **Fourth level**

Fourth year would again be designed as an integrative program. The emphasis would be on those subjects which provide the most encouragement for students to draw on many different aspects of the work they have done in earlier years.

Substantial field work seems highly desirable. Some informants have protested at the thought of unqualified people doing field work. Our view is that they will be doing it in the following year, often under conditions of much greater risk, and with much less support. To use an old Venusian metaphor, why not let them learn to swim when there is still someone around to throw them a flotation device.

[No, Venusians don't actually swim; but we fear you would not understand a literal translation of the metaphor we had in mind. "Swimming" is a good translation, we think.]

Some of the practical work could be done on campus, helping earlier years with their work. Helping others learn is a great learning device. We were at first surprised that so little use was made of it. (We are learning: we are now not so easily surprised.)

Given the breadth of the earlier program, it also occurs to us that it may be useful to provide enough choice in the program to allow some specialisation. If team

---

work is encouraged, there are substantial opportunities for people to learn from one another.

A methodological and research component is required to meet APS requirements. But this is in any event desirable.

In this regard we note again that most psychological practitioners carry out almost no research. We notice also that the little bit that is done is often qualitative. We recommend a research component which is so closely designed to fit psychological practice that students will recognise its value, and actually use it after graduation.

---

