

'You don't have to stay within the barriers'

Ian Florance interviews Nick Perham,
Senior Lecturer at Cardiff Metropolitan University



On being asked how he would describe his job, Nick answers 'I'm a lecturer. That's what I do a large amount of my time. My underlying academic interest is in cognitive psychology.' In these interviews we tend to feature more practitioners than academics; yet without our discipline's teachers, there wouldn't be psychologists. Let's hear more about the role.

Nick was 'one of the brightest kids at junior school, but when I went to secondary school the year group was much larger... suddenly I was no longer as bright in comparison. I was always good at Maths, but I never really had to work hard at school... in some ways I've always fallen into things rather than having a specific goal in mind.'

Taking Pure Maths, Applied Maths and Chemistry for A-level, Nick's tutor commented 'He needs to spend less time with his girlfriend'. He re-took Chemistry and took Sociology A-levels at a college, then applied to Wolverhampton through clearing for a modular degree of psychology with sociology. That seems a big change from the hard sciences and maths, I say. 'It seems funny to think of it now, but my view of psychology was through the TV series *Arthur C. Clarke's Mysterious World* and reading about serial killers. It quickly became apparent as I started my degree that I was quite naïve about what psychology entailed.'

The final impetus for Nick's interest in psychology and an academic career came when his Nan loaned him the money to do his Masters. 'After my degree I'd wanted, like many people, to specialise in clinical or forensic. In fact I went back home to Bristol and worked voluntarily for Mencap for 18 months and undertook paid work in a residential care home for two days a week. I had no contact with psychologists during that period. Luckily, I was accepted onto the Master's course and it gave me a real confidence boost: I realised I was better than I thought I was. I did my Masters in Psychological Research Methods at Plymouth, then spent two years on an ESRC-funded project on representations of probabilities in cognitive tasks.'

Then came a PhD at Cardiff – 'fortunately I had funding from Plymouth and Cardiff, and I chose Cardiff. As an undergraduate I had always been interested in how emotion affects cognitive processing and the PhD allowed me to explore this in reasoning behaviour.' Undergraduate knowledge and his friend's PhD also gave Nick an interest in distraction. Nick's papers list several papers related to this issue. 'Yes, I did a project on office and call centre noise and in 2006-7 did another project on attentional selectivity and semantic memory.' Nick has written on the role of music in a variety of areas and, since I have music

playing all the time while working in my office, I was particularly interested in his paper in Applied Cognitive Psychology on 'Disliked Music can be better for performance than liked music'. This led to a discussion of my (mis-?)use of baroque composers and prog rock to improve my attention, and Nick's liking for heavy metal.

'Modern students are much better prepared'

After this period, Nick got a job as an Associate Lecturer at Cardiff Metropolitan University where he is now a Senior Lecturer. 'I'd never really given lectures before I got this job: I'd given a few talks during my undergraduate and postgraduate career which were, in the early days, terrible, and I had also given some conference papers which thankfully were much better. So I'd argue that despite what a lot of people say, you don't always have to drive towards a goal to get a job you like. Luck definitely played a part in my career.'

If someone was thinking of becoming a lecturer, what would you say the rewards are? 'The buzz of interacting with an engaged group. You don't always connect with the students throughout a lecture, but when you do it's exciting. It is a wonderful feeling to see the penny drop, when a student suddenly understands something that previously they didn't. Then you're always learning. You can see that I lecture in cognitive, research and statistics modules which are pretty central to my experience. But I've also had tutees and taught on modules relating to subjects as wide as chronic illness, stress and pain, psycholinguistics and individual differences. We end up researching these new topics for the lectures as well as integrating stuff from our memory and current events then link things together. And this learning often sets off new ideas for articles, papers and projects.'

I wondered if there were real differences between the students he lectures to now and the ones he studied with. 'Modern students have to take in a lot more information than we ever did: they are much better prepared. They go into much more detail in areas such as research design and statistics than I did on my degree. We were simply given tables to try to understand ANOVA. In fact I talked my way out of an assistant psychologist job a year after qualifying because I didn't use the word spreadsheet!' But a lot of students are initially focused on forensic and clinical applications – as I was – and don't realise that without stringent research, the applications they're interested in wouldn't exist. You often hear "I was no good at Maths" which they think will hinder their understanding of statistics. But by the final year it's pretty 50:50 who chooses quant/qual research methods for their project. Finally there is so much more support offered to students regarding assessments, academic writing, finances, possible dyslexia, mental health etc.'

Are there other differences? 'More students are sure of what level of degree they are looking to get to achieve the next stage in their education or career: a

first or a 2:1, although not getting these grades is not the end of their academic career. And they're much more knowledgeable about what particular careers entail and what's needed to get into them. A lot of students are gaining work experience in parallel to their degrees rather than leaving it till after graduation: people who want to go into clinical work are more aware of what they need to do, I think. The money weighs heavily, so they're rightly engaging with their coursework feedback more and providing feedback for future students.'

Some interviewees have mentioned that they see a lack of diversity in those studying psychology, which can result in a mismatch between qualified psychologists and their clients. 'I'm no expert in this but Cardiff Metropolitan has an excellent foundation course specifically designed to support widening access for those students from non-traditional backgrounds, just missing out on A-level grades or coming back into education for whatever reason... These students tend to flourish on the degree programme and provide us with some of our proudest moments.'

Nick describes moving to Cardiff as 'probably the best decision I've ever made: I met my wife... we were both doing our PhDs in the same department... and we're bringing up our three kids here. It is a great city. One of the things I like about my work at Cardiff Met is that you can follow your own interests: you don't have to stay within the barriers set up by a particular interest area.'

An example of this is Nick's article on 'Why people are religious' in *The Conversation*, which I'd come across during my researches. 'I got more interested in religion in the early 2000s: I read Richard Dawkins and others,' he tells me. 'From a scientific perspective it's fascinating that something with seemingly so little evidence supporting it can be so important to so many people: it's also worrying in terms of how we understand the world and what we teach our future generations. The reaction that the article has got stresses that this whole area – the cognitive processes behind religion – is important to people. I don't know if other departments allow staff the freedom to follow such an interest... I'm fortunate that I'm able to do so.'

And what does the future hold? 'Continuing to lecture and I'm involved in a lot of university issues: I'm chair of the ethics panel, organise the participant panel where students take part in psychology studies, organise final-year projects as well as being an external examiner at other universities. I regularly jot down research ideas but don't have too much time to initiate a lot of them. Sometimes a student will come up with an idea and I can contribute to it – particularly introducing a cognitive dimension.'

I took a lot from my conversation with Nick: that it's not necessary to decide too early on goals or specialisation: that careers depend as much on openness and flexibility as on drive. And he is living proof that teaching and lecturing is as critical a role in tertiary education as is research.