

# European perspectives on psychology teaching and learning: Tension between didactics and educational psychology?

Wednesday 3 September 2025 09:00 (1h 30m)

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**Organisers:** Ingrid Scharlau & Lenka Sokolová

**Discussant:** Maria Tulis

This symposium will focus on a topic that, as of yet, has hardly been addressed: the tension between the (emerging) didactics of psychology and its overlap with and differentiation from educational psychology. In order to systematically support psychological thinking in challenging times, approaches and concepts are needed that cultivate good teaching and learning. We will examine the implications of educational psychology research and the didactics of psychology as two approaches to teaching and learning psychology from different national perspectives.

As a very general definition, didactics of psychology is the science of psychology teaching and learning in education. Compared to other subject-specific didactics (such as the didactics of physics, mathematics, chemistry within the sciences, or history and politics within the arts and humanities), the didactics of psychology is, as yet, not particularly well developed. Various reasons contribute to this situation. Both as a school subject and as a university study program, psychology is relatively young, and it is not very widely taught in schools across Europe.

In the symposium, we will investigate a further potential cause, the existence of two different approaches to psychology learning and teaching: subject didactics on the one hand and educational psychology on the other. Coming from different traditions and contexts, these two perspectives are not necessarily compatible. For instance, the educational psychology perspective is rooted in an understanding of psychology as a science and its high appreciation of evidence-based procedures whereas didactics comes from a more humanities-based background with a high sensitivity for normativity.

The symposium will bring together representatives from four countries (Germany, Norway, Slovakia, Sweden). They will describe the situation within their countries, discuss how specific problems are dealt with (or not dealt with) and explore opportunities for cooperation between the two perspectives as well as obstacles that may stand in the way.

## **Tension between psychology didactics and educational psychology in Germany and German-speaking countries**

Ingrid Scharlau, [Ingrid.scharlau@uni-paderborn.de](mailto:Ingrid.scharlau@uni-paderborn.de)

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The presentation addresses the situation in Germany where psychology has been a part of secondary education since the 1970s. Psychology is included in parts of vocational education. It can furthermore be offered as an elective course in grades 11-13 (and in lower grades in two federal states). However, few schools provide psychology courses.

As of yet, there is hardly any systematic involvement with psychology didactics ("Fachdidaktik Psychologie"; subject didactics of psychology) at German-speaking universities. This lacking involvement applies equally to secondary education and university education. If at all, questions related to didactics are dealt with via typical approaches of empirical psychology, i.e., developing interventions and testing their effects in empirical studies. Didactic considerations in the stricter sense, that is concerning not only the how, but also the what and why of teaching psychology, have mainly been put forward and implemented by schoolteachers.

The presentation will describe the situation, trace its historical roots, attempt to distinguish between the respective contributions of educational psychology and didactics and suggest lines of future development. I will also compare the situation of psychology didactics to that of the didactics of pedagogics. Though with roots in the same situation and time and a similar, considerable overlap in terms of two approaches, the latter can look back on a more successful development.

## **Implementation of a new Norwegian psychology curriculum: An interaction between educational psychology and subject didactics**

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Psychology has become an increasingly popular subject among students in Norwegian upper secondary education (ages 16-19). However, research shows that many psychology teachers in Norway lack formal training in subject didactics of psychology, whereas they often have formal didactics training in their other teaching subjects. Furthermore, many teachers have limited formal education and teaching experience in psychology. Another challenge is the implementation of a new psychology curriculum. This curriculum replaced a topical organization of the psychology subject (e.g., biological psychology, social psychology, developmental psychology) with broader overarching themes: 1) Thoughts, emotions, and behavior, 2) Human development and interaction, and 3) Scientific and critical thinking. These themes provide a more flexible structure compared to the more rigid organization of the previous curriculum. To ensure that psychology becomes a formative educational experience, it is necessary with specific teaching skills provided by psychology subject didactics. While educational psychology offers valuable insights into general teaching methods and instructional design, subject didactics in psychology is crucial for understanding subject specific teaching. To think critically about psychology as a scientific subject, it is not enough to have subject knowledge and general pedagogical knowledge. Teachers also need subject-specific pedagogical expertise, which subject didactics in psychology provides. This presentation will explore key concerns regarding the interaction between the new Norwegian psychology curriculum, how students learn psychology, and how teachers use didactical skills to educate students. It will explore this interaction by means of educational psychology and subject didactics in psychology.

#### **The roots and current position of the subject didactics of psychology in teacher training in Slovakia**

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Psychology as a school subject has a relatively long tradition in the Slovak educational system. Beginning in lower and upper secondary education, pupils are exposed to psychological knowledge and topics from psychology through other school subjects such as ethics or citizenship education. In secondary schools, psychology is also represented in the curriculum as a separate subject. In grammar schools, it is an elective subject. In vocational education, psychology is taught primarily as a compulsory or elective vocational subject. Despite its long-standing tradition, the subject didactics of psychology as a scientific discipline has been underappreciated and underrepresented compared to the subject didactics of other school subjects, especially in terms of research or publications. On the other hand, didactics of psychology is separated from educational psychology, even if there are overlapping topics (such as effectiveness of teaching methods). While educational psychology is widely taught to future psychologists, teachers, and other help professionals as a 'psychological study of learning and teaching', the subject didactics of psychology is provided to psychology teacher trainees (currently at four universities in Slovakia). This means that the target scope of the subject didactics of psychology is considerably narrower and more specific. The primary topics of the didactics of psychology are the didactic analysis of the content of psychology courses, teaching methods, ethical issues, and other specific topics in the teaching of psychology as a school subject. Currently, the focus is on developing psychological and scientific thinking and psychological literacy too.

#### **Psychology in Sweden –introducing a transformed school subject to teachers**

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Psychology has been a part of the Swedish school system for a long time, primarily taught to students aged 16 to 19. Since 1965, the subject of psychology has been part of the national curriculum for upper secondary schools and has since undergone several extensive curriculum reforms. The latest revision, Gy25, is taking place right now and will be effective from 1 July 2025. In the new curriculum, the subject has changed in several significant ways including a stronger emphasis on scientific foundation and current scientific development within psychology. These changes may be perceived as unfamiliar to psychology teachers who were trained under previous curricula. One national undertaking, for the National Agency for Education (Skolverket) and teachers of subject didactics in psychology in Sweden, has been to communicate to teachers how they can teach psychology in accordance with the new guidelines, the new organization of the subject and the partly new subject content. And furthermore, what they should cover in their psychology teaching. The main focus of the presentation will be on the curricular changes of the subject psychology in Sweden. Didactic aspects of teaching experienced psychology teachers about the new psychology curriculum will also be addressed. And finally, how these teachers can, in turn, teach the subject in new ways will be explored.

### **Is the first author also the speaker?**

Yes

**If first author is not the speaker, please indicate speaker's name here:**

**Please indicate up to five keywords regarding the content of your contribution**

didactics, subject didactics, psychology teaching, European perspectives

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**Session Classification:** Parallel Session 6