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The teaching and learning of social research methods: developments in pedagogical knowledge

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EDITORIAL

The teaching and learning of social research methods: developments in pedagogical knowledge

Introduction

Social research methods have been taught in a systematic and widespread way within Western academia for much of the past century. With increasing demands facing the social research community – whether from funders, universities, or the public – building and sustaining the methodological capacity to navigate challenging and unfamiliar empirical terrain is becoming ever more important. Yet despite this, to date the teaching and learning of research methods has occupied a comparatively marginal position within broader methodological discussions in the social sciences. In this special issue on developments of pedagogical knowledge in social research methods, established researchers from a range of social science disciplines, international contexts, and methodological orientations engage with questions of how research methods are taught and learnt.

Research capacity and methods training

In recent years, interest surrounding the advancement of research capacity and the role of methods training in enhancing that capacity has grown. This is a concern shared by universities, employers, and those involved in the governance and funding of higher education and social research at a national level in the case of the UK (BIS, 2014) and at a supranational level in the case of the EU (Kottmann, 2011). Arguments have emerged around the importance of advancing training in research methods to build capacity within the workforce to undertake sophisticated research tasks in response to current social challenges. A discursive and institutional connection between research capacity, individual employability and collective competitiveness therefore appears increasingly pervasive.

The provision of teaching and instruction in social research methods has been established since the turn of the twentieth century, with the publication of instructional manuals for researchers from the 1900s (Peden & Carroll, 2009) and the growth of social science degree courses in post-War Western Europe (Bulmer, 1985). Today, some form of structured research methods training is incorporated into undergraduate and graduate education in the majority of social sciences programmes. In the past, most social science graduates might have expected a career in social research (Bulmer, 1985), but today's graduates are less likely to follow such career paths. Methods training increasingly constitutes a source of transferable skills thought to enhance employability in a wider range of sectors. Simultaneously, those seeking to pursue a career in social science are expected to demonstrate methodological capability through 'advanced' training (additional to gaining experience from doctoral or post-doctoral research). Overall, this has meant an expansion

in the provision of research methods teaching and training in structured degree and standalone short courses.

Developing and sustaining research capacity are integral to policy concerns regarding global competitiveness within national and disciplinary research communities. For example, the UK government posits research capacity as ‘a critical asset for the UK, providing a competitive advantage in the global race for prosperity’ (BIS, 2014, p. 5). This has fostered renewed interest in research methods training, particularly large-scale investments in quantitative methods. The Q-Step programme was launched in 2014 as a £19.5 million partnership between Nuffield Foundation, ESRC and HEFCE, to build undergraduate quantitative skills as a pipeline for capacity development. The ESRC’s National Centre for Research Methods (NCRM) is now in its third term of funding to develop the quality and range of methodological approaches amongst UK social scientists. Other investments include the ESRC’s Advanced Training Initiative and Scotland’s Applied Quantitative Methods Network.

Investments are working to change the formal training landscape. Yet, despite the powerful discourse, increased funding, and structural changes to training provision, comparatively little attention has been paid to the question of *how* research methods are taught and learnt. This tension has led, in part, to this special issue of *International Journal of Social Research Methodology*.

Developments in pedagogic knowledge for research methods

Despite the attention given to research methods, there has been surprisingly little academic engagement with the pedagogical dimension. Pedagogy is concerned not just with what people do in teaching and learning situations but with what they perceive to be meaningful, important and relevant. While initiatives might recognise the importance of the quality of teaching and learning, there remain few sources of detailed or systematic insights into research methods pedagogy. Researchers of pedagogy in other domains have established the need to explore pedagogy as specified, enacted, and experienced (Nind, Curtin, & Hall, *in press*). For the most part, these aspects of pedagogy have been under-explored in debates over research capacity building.

(Wagner, Garner, & Kawulich, 2011) argue that a ‘pedagogical culture’ surrounding social research methods is lacking. Their systematic review of the literature identified neither ‘a substantial research base’ nor ‘systematic discussions’ on most aspects of teaching research methods (Wagner et al., 2011, p. 75). Later reviews have echoed these findings with (Earley, 2014) suggesting that comparatively little attention has been paid to questions of *how* certain research methods are taught within higher education. With few insights to inform their practice those who teach research methods, he argues, must instead ‘rely on a network of peers, scattered research literature, and much trial-and-error’ (Earley, 2014, p. 243). From a methods learner perspective, there have been few opportunities to engage in pedagogical research.

While there remains a dearth of pedagogical discourse concerning capacity building (Nind, Kilburn, & Wiles, 2014), there have been indicators of developing pedagogical knowledge surrounding the teaching of research methods. There are edited collections on teaching methods (Garner, Wagner, & Kawulich, 2009), some focused on quantitative (Payne & Williams, 2011) and qualitative methods (Hurworth, 2008) and others which are discipline specific (e.g. Adriaenssen, Kerremans, & Slootmaeckers, 2015;

Loxley, Seery, & Grenfell, 2013). The UK Higher Education Academy (HEA) has funded a series of projects culminating in online resources and events (see HEA, 2015). NCRM has also consulted on the training needs amongst the UK methods community (Moley, Wiles, & Sturgis, 2013) and supported a growing strand of pedagogical research into advanced-level teaching and learning of research methods (Kilburn, Nind, & Wiles, 2014b) – on which one of the papers in the special issue is based (Nind et al., 2014). Explorations of novel uses of data to teach research methods (Bishop, 2012) and of the learning processes involved in working as a research group (Hernández-Hernández & Sancho-Gil, *in press*) have also featured in this journal. This expansion in the depth and breadth of engagement represents ‘cause for optimism regarding the state of pedagogical practice and enquiry’ (Kilburn, Nind, & Wiles, 2014a, p. 204). Indeed, current research within NCRM is seeking better understanding of pedagogic practices in social research methods and working to foster stronger pedagogic culture (<http://pedagogy.ncrm.ac.uk>).

One possible explanation for the lack of pedagogical research pertaining to research methods is that the disciplinary and methodological interests of those engaged in teaching research methods outstrip their pedagogical interest and expertise. In a competitive rather than altruistic academic culture, they may perceive little gain in researching and publishing on their pedagogic practice. Pedagogy is about ideas, values and traditions as well as practices; while it is an elusive concept, grasping it allows for stronger engagement with what matters in the competent application of research methods. This special issue constitutes a considerable step towards addressing the gaps in research generating pedagogical knowledge. The authors of the papers have taken up various, and often urgent calls to reflect upon pedagogical matters. We acknowledge the role of the reviewers¹ in providing feedback in this process.

The special issue considers a range of methods learners including undergraduates from Canada (Howard & Brady, 2015) and the UK (Buckley, Brown, Thomson, Olsen, & Carter, 2015; Scott Jones & Goldring, 2015), post-graduates from USA (Hesse-Biber, 2015), and researchers on short-courses (Corti & Van den Eynden, 2015; Nind, Kilburn, & Wiles, 2015; Silver & Woolf, 2015). Most of the papers are reflective case studies of pedagogical practice development, with two examples funded by the ESRC’s quantitative methods teaching initiatives (Buckley et al., 2015; Scott Jones & Goldring, 2015). One paper (Nind et al., 2015) goes beyond the authors’ own practice to address methods of researching pedagogy with teachers and learners. While the methods being taught vary across the papers, similar challenges and pedagogical themes emerge: teachers as learners; the lack of pedagogical culture to support methods teaching and learning; the role of reflection; the varied background, attitudes and approaches of learners; and the role of methods software in teaching and learning.

Hesse-Biber (2015) highlights difficulties relating to the teaching and learning of mixed methods, with a key challenge being the lack of methods expertise of teaching staff. This is echoed in the quantitative teaching papers of Buckley et al. (2015) and Scott Jones and Goldring (2015) addressing how teaching staff can lack confidence in their methods skills and their ability to teach it. Both Hesse-Biber (2015) and Buckley et al. (2015) demonstrate that the introduction of, or structural changes to, teaching teams can enhance teacher expertise. Corti and Van den Eynden (2015) describe the pressure on those teaching data management to be familiar with new data resources and agendas, largely developing teaching resources ‘from scratch’.

Similarly, Silver and Woolf (2015) elucidate how pedagogy can facilitate learners' ability to harness the increasing power and complexity of Computer Assisted Qualitative Analysis (CAQDAS) software. Scott Jones and Goldring (2015) focus on the issue of 'training the trainers', setting out a framework for staff to learn quantitative methods at same time as learning how to teach them. The deficiency of pedagogical culture to support methods teaching and learning is apparent throughout the special issue. Scott Jones and Goldring's case study of successfully upskilling methods teachers emphasises that teachers, as well as learners, require incentives, time, support and resources. The study further demonstrates the benefits of reflecting on learning and practice, both for teachers and students alike.

Reflection is both a key pedagogic theme but also the dominant research method within the set of papers, with the majority involving methods teachers reflecting systematically on teaching and learning. Nind et al. (2015) combine the reflection of trainers with that of learners through focus group dialogue supported by video playback of that day's teaching experience. This generates research data and provides teachers with the opportunity to consider their teaching experience in a way that can inform their practice. Silver and Woolf (2015) also reflect on how new pedagogies were developed in response to challenges to teaching and learning that became apparent only as CAQDAS training evolved. The focus on the teaching of advanced methods in short-course format highlights the considerable challenge in knowing how to teach a method in the face of diverse and sometimes ill-prepared learners. This challenge is echoed by Hesse-Biber (2015), with mixed methods learners perhaps being weaker in qualitative or quantitative methods respectively and finding mixed methods to be a departure from their methodological preconceptions. Once again, encouraging reflexivity, this time in learners, is argued to be key to progressing learning. Similarly, Howard and Brady (2015) propose that using self-reflection within a constructivist pedagogy can turn the scepticism of learners who may be disinterested in methods training into an asset.

The papers present the background, approaches and attitudes of learners as one of the common challenges for trainers. Corti and Van den Eynden (2015) discuss the teaching and learning of data management skills, both quantitative and qualitative, among learners from a spectrum of seniority, professional, and disciplinary backgrounds. They advocate flexible training which encourages 'learning by doing'. While learner diversity is to a greater or lesser extent apparent across the papers, in compulsory methods modules teachers face a further pressure of many students lacking interest or motivation. Scott Jones and Goldring (2015) demonstrate that this lack of interest may also be seen in teaching staff who perceive the conditions for their own methods learning and teaching as equally ghettoised and seemingly unrewarded as it appears to some students.

Importantly, this special issue does not stop at identifying challenges. Rather, it also contributes to pedagogic knowledge by providing detailed examples of engaging and motivating students through changes to pedagogic practice. Howard and Brady (2015) address the challenges of disinterested politics students, highlighting the mismatch between methods teaching and the largely post-structuralist emphasis in the rest of their substantive courses. They describe a constructivist pedagogical strategy whereby they enable and encourage students to construct their own learning experiences. Buckley et al. (2015) address the perceived irrelevance of methods teaching by embedding quantitative methods within substantive modules, moving from a transmissionist to a connectionist approach. In doing so they simultaneously support

students to apply quantitative methods to substantive research questions of relevance to them, but also elevate the profile of methods teaching in the department.

The special issue addresses the use of computer software for data analysis and the implications for learners and teachers in relation to both quantitative and qualitative methods. Buckley et al. (2015) and Scott Jones and Goldring (2015) are concerned that quantitative software can become seen as the concept or construct, rather than the tool. Their pedagogical problem solving involves helping learners to go further and gain a deeper understanding of the methodological issues rather than software procedures. Silver and Woolf (2015) describe the challenge of teaching CAQDAS, emphasising facilitation over instruction to support learners to harness and apply the potential of CAQDAS to their own research tasks. They present a pedagogic approach whereby teachers can orientate themselves with learners' research requirements by guiding them in 'translating' their knowledge from broad 'tactics' to practicable 'strategies' for achieving their research goals.

The special issue, then, takes the reader into the realms of the pedagogical knowledge and decision-making of methods teachers who are working to engage constructively with the challenges before them. These teachers address challenges that are common to any teaching context plus those that are particular to, or particularly emphasised within, the context of building methodological capacity and literacy. Working more often with resources within their teams than from pedagogic theory or research evidence, the reflective practitioners are producing their own grass roots solutions to lived problems. The issue generates a picture of praxis: the 'wise and prudent practical judgement about how to act in *this* situation' (Carr & Kemmis, 1986, p. 190) of a variety of methods teacher-practitioner-researchers. Collectively the authors contribute to the much-needed task of building the pedagogic culture around research methods.

Note

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