NCRM Bitesize Lessons for Teaching Social Science Research Methods

6: Teaching Mixed Methods Using an Open-space Learning Approach

What is open-space learning?

Open-space learning is a transdisciplinary approach for engaging learners and teachers in a shared exploratory space. The aim is to enhance the student experience of learning where the outcome is unknown. This approach has roots in the University of Warwick CAPITAL (Creativity and Performance in Teaching and Learning) and Reinvention Centres and in learning theories that are learner-centred, transformative and social. A high value is placed on pragmatic real world understanding[1], creative teaching and embodying research[2].

The challenges of teaching mixed methods research

Mixed methods research integrates and analyses qualitative and quantitative data in a single study or a program of inquiry. While relatively young, it has gained popularity owing to its utility-focused epistemology and emphasis on research-problem led methodology[3].

Teaching mixed methods research presents challenges for educators as it presents threats to previous learning. The inherent challenges make an open-learning approach suitable:

1. Challenge of overcoming barriers to established epistemologies. Existing epistemic ideas are strongly held, part of the identity of the researcher and the scientific domain, meaning than modifications may be welcome. There is discomfort surrounding leaving the confidence built up around one's methodological boundary and movement to new territory can be destabilising.
2. Challenge of confronting and recognising the distinction between summary and synthesis. Summary is a necessary step, but it is not the key outcome of interest. Instead, the goal is synthesis –

the forging of new insights from multiple, sources of evidence of different types.

Like open-space learning, mixed methods may be considered transformative in a range of ways: transgressive, transitional, transcendent, transrational, transactional and transdisciplinary. Applying open-spaced learning when teaching mixed methods involves '*an a priori agreement that this is a space in which we can get things wrong (not a space where everything is right)*'[4].

What this research methods pedagogy offers

Adopting an open-space learning mindset means that we can frame pedagogic challenges more positively. For example, while learners having an established qualitative or quantitative epistemic foundation may be an initial barrier to learning mixed methods, this can also offer insight into different views on criticality across boundaries, in this case, on the different perspectives on quality across both quantitative and qualitative traditions. Confronting those boundaries can offer deeper examination of where those boundaries lie, and when they may be more and less useful. If we encourage being transgressive when confronting traditional barriers, we can cross boundaries without being seen to be wrong or to fail.

The open-space learning approach enables teacher and learner to begin inhabiting different conceptual spaces and destabilising notions of what should dominate. Everyone is a teacher and learner, as seated in circular fashion, they work to articulate ideas and question one another in a supportive, collaborative, exploratory way. The idea is to use free and open exchange so as to collectivise learning. The group makes mistakes together as they realise and work through problematic areas. This echoes the 'craft attitude' in mixed methods that Sanscartier[5] describes involving being comfortable

with uncertainty. Teachers might facilitate this through disrupting familiar physical spaces and setting the scene for working outside of traditional norms.

Learning to design and conduct mixed methods research means getting to grips with analytical integration which is tricky even for experienced researchers. Open-space learning supports an experiential process in which everyone can be vulnerable in confronting the challenge and rehearsing ways in which they might construct a story from the data. Through rehearsing, students can gain confidence in the practise of managing uncertainty, ultimately developing their ability to identify new research insight.

Applying these ideas

While teachers of mixed methods will find their own ways of applying the ideas in this Bitesize resource and the chapter on which it is based[4], it is worth noting that adopting open-space learning can be a destabilising experience for the teacher/trainer too. It is a step away from hierarchical, traditional pedagogies into spaces of uncertainty, vulnerability to failure, and co-learning rather than the safe position of teacher-as-expert. Open-space learning is relatively untested in research methods education online but increasingly the tools are available that can make this possible.

Useful links

Open Space Learning

https://mmira.wildapricot.org

References

1. Stewart, M. 2012. Understanding learning: Theories and critique. In L. Hunt & D. Chalmers (Eds.), *University Teaching in Focus: A Learning-Centred Approach,* 3–20. Routledge.
2. Monk, N., Rutter, C.C., Neelands, J. & Heron, J. 2011. *OpenSpace Learning. A Study in Transdisciplinary Pedagogy.* Bloomsbury.
3. Johnson, R.B. & Onwuegbuzie, A.J. (2004). Mixed methods research: A research paradigm whose time has come. *Educational Researcher*, 33(7), 14–26.
4. Johnson, R. & Murphy, M. 2023. Teaching mixed methods using an open-space learning approach. In Nind, M. (Ed.) *Handbook of Teaching and Learning Social Research Methods.* Edward Elgar.
5. Sanscartier, M. 2018. The craft attitude: Navigating mess in mixed methods research. *Journal of Mixed Methods Research*, 14(1), 47–62.