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PRACTICE PAPER

## The Teaching-Research Nexus in a Sports History Module

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### Abstract

The links between research and teaching within higher education are much debated but little investigated in relation to actual practice. This paper explores the different interpretations of what is often called the teaching-research nexus and offers an example of how teaching and research can be effectively linked for the good of student learning and achievement. The case study is drawn from a final-year sports history module, where research and the research process are deeply embedded in the course design and assessment, from the Sports Studies BA (Hons) degree at St Martin's College, Lancaster. The paper concludes by exploring the benefits and challenges of such synergies between teaching and research.

**Keywords:** linking teaching and research; sports history

### Introduction

The links between teaching and research have been an issue of debate in universities across the globe (e.g. Zubrick et al., 2001) and the United Kingdom is no different (see for example, *Exchange*, 2002). The British Government's 2003 White Paper on the future of higher education argued controversially that 'the connection between an institution's research activities and its teaching is indirect, and there is ample evidence of the highest quality teaching being achieved in circumstances which are not research-intensive' (Department for Education and Skills, 2003:28). Research-intensive universities felt that the utility of their research was being attacked, while some teaching-intensive universities felt that their research activities were under threat. The flurry of debate that followed was not new, but it did refocus attention on the need to link teaching and research and achieve what is often referred to as the 'teaching-research nexus'.

However, what linking teaching and research actually means is often unclear. There are two broad and compatible interpretations. The first is ensuring that the subject matter taught is based upon primary research. This research need not have been conducted by the lecturer but might simply involve the deliberate basing of the teaching content upon a critical engagement with the published research of others. Presumably all lectures were, at some point, based upon this kind of secondary research and thus the concern here should be that teaching remains up-to-date with the latest developments within the relevant subject and discipline.

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If teaching and research are not linked in this way then one might question whether the teaching is of the standard required for higher education. Indeed, not all academics accept that critically reading the research of others actually constitutes research and suggest such activity might be better termed scholarship. Such arguments have risen to prominence in the wake of the 2003 White Paper's proposal for, what amounts to, teaching-only universities. If this were to come about, then scholarship would become the basis of these teaching universities. This potential development has been greeted with widespread hostility within the higher education sector in the UK. In particular, it has been argued forcibly that divorcing the processes of knowledge creation and knowledge dissemination would lead to a weakening of academic standards, a stifling of the teaching of research methods and a dilution of the breadth of knowledge and expertise within disciplines. Such perspectives are not opposed to linking research and teaching, but simply maintain that teachers in higher education should also be researchers in their own right.

The practice of non-researchers teaching research methods is often regarded as particularly worrying and introduces the second interpretation of linking teaching and research: ensuring that students conduct their own research. Of course, any higher education lecturer would hope that his or her students would always produce essays that were based upon secondary research (i.e. a reading of published research rather than raw uninterpreted primary data), but through dissertations and the like students can also conduct their own primary research, especially in their final year. However, achieving the full potential for such work is difficult when students are not taught by staff who themselves are active researchers.

The LTSN Generic Centre has argued that teaching-research links should be developed by focusing on the student experience and course design (Jenkins and Zetter, 2003). This short paper offers a case study of a final-year module where research and the research process are deeply embedded in the course design and assessment, thus achieving a close synergy between teaching and research according to both of the above interpretations of the teaching-research nexus. The paper concludes by exploring the benefits and challenges of such synergies between teaching and research.

## **The context**

'The Making of British Sporting History' is a third-year core module within the Sports Studies BA degree at St Martin's College, Lancaster. Within this degree, students are required to take at least three of six core modules in the second and third years of their degree. Second-year core modules introduce students to the key concepts and theories of the relevant discipline, while third-year core modules involve students applying that knowledge. Within the module discussed here students apply this knowledge by executing their own research project. To help them in this, it is an aim of the module to develop students' subject-based knowledge and abilities in research methods.

## **The content**

Subject knowledge is developed within the module not by offering a general survey of the social history of sport within the UK but rather through an exploration of select key themes that have emerged from the historiography of sport. The selection of these themes is guided by both my personal judgements, and by my own research interests and activities. The result is that there is a clear emphasis on, for example, individual and collective identities, whereas topics such as public schools and the ideologies of amateurism receive less prominence than they do in the general historiography of sport. An emphasis is placed upon local sporting case studies in order to illustrate, explore and analyse wider historical concepts such as the meaning of class, local identities and the experience of the 'everyday'. This emphasis on using the local to understand the wider collective experience lends itself perfectly to the process of encouraging students to engage in their own local research projects, and then to extrapolate and relate the data they generate to the wider literature.

Where themes and case studies are taught they are closely related to the actual research process that has enabled historians to make the analyses that form the basis of subject knowledge. Thus, alongside

the discussion of actual historical topics, attention is constantly played to the question ‘how do historians know that?’ In answering this question, reference is made to the primary sources that are the historian’s raw data. Students are encouraged to consider whether such sources are likely to be biased, complete, or representative. Drawing detailed attention to the raw data is possible because the themes under study are specifically chosen for their closeness to my own research experiences.

This integration of teaching students about actual sources and the analytical findings that historians have derived from them is fully developed in a week where the set reading is one of my own journal articles (Johnes, 2000). As well as discussing the article’s content, students are taken through the processes that were undertaken to research, write and publish the article. They thus develop a familiarity with how research questions are derived, where sources are collected from and how an article is actually constructed, written and then published. I talk about the challenges and problems that I faced in researching the piece. This includes the practicalities of conducting oral history interviews, the challenges and methods of locating sources, the holes in the historical record and the process of constructing that fractured information into a published piece of research. Students are able to see the file of notes that I took from the primary sources. This enables students to look behind the published façade and into the research activities that normally remain hidden. They are able to read the data that did not make it into the final article and to assess the volume of notes that are taken by historians when reading sources. Students therefore see the actual research process, rather than just its outcome. This helps prepare them for the task of conducting their own research. An important aspect of this session is that research is not held up to be a straightforward or easy exercise. In this way, students should be reassured that they are not the only ones who sometimes struggle to locate and interpret data.

## **The assessment**

As many studies have concluded, assessment is at the heart of the student experience. It defines how they judge what is important within the curriculum and thus where they place their efforts (Brown and Knight, 1994; Brown et al., 1997). Integrating the research process into the module in the ways outlined above is pointless unless students can see how it relates to the module’s assessment requirements. Given the research focus of the module, it is assessed via a 4,000-word project, for which the generic learning outcomes require the students to conduct their own primary research and relate it to the historiography of sport. The rationale for this project is that they follow a similar substantive research process to the ones they have been learning about on the course and develop their own research, writing and analysis skills. This requirement to conduct their own research, and constant reference to it throughout the module, hopefully makes the students take note of why learning about the research process is important. Thus, the methods and output of history are constructively aligned, as is the topic of the module and its assessment.

Generic learning outcomes, based upon research skills and engagement with historiography, allow students the freedom to set their own topic and question, although this must be cleared with the module leader to ensure that students are setting themselves realistic targets. Examples of successful previous projects include sporting biographies of relatives, histories of a local sports club or organisation, analyses of sports reporting in the inter-war local press and examinations of specific events such as a Football Association (FA) Cup final. Such ideas and possibilities are highlighted to students and, throughout the course, student attention is drawn to where there is potential for research on a topic under discussion.

In order to give the students’ research a clear focus and direction, they are required to devise a list of aims for their projects. These should include an aim that links their study to a specific wider body of knowledge and literature that has been studied on the course. For example, an aim of a project on a 1930s cup final might be to critique the existing literature on the socio-economic structure of inter-war football crowds. Making such connections should be obvious to the ‘better’ students but are highlighted to ensure that all students understand that their own research and the subject matter taught are not separate, but, rather, form a nexus.

Historical research, of course, requires the availability of historical sources. Contemporary newspapers offer an easily accessible source of sporting information for most localities and have perhaps formed the basis of most published research on the history of sport. Yet the subject has been criticised for an over-reliance on the press for source material (Beck, 1999:vii-viii). This criticism is discussed in class and students are encouraged to seek other forms of primary data. Here they are aided by existing published bibliographies of sports archives. Yet, what at first appears to be a good source can be frustratingly uninformative when it is actually consulted. Thus, to aid students in their selection of projects, I have begun my own research into the social history of sport in the local district. This ongoing research has helped me to develop a familiarity with the actual content of some local sources, making me better placed to advise students on project topics that will have informative and easily accessible data. Thus, not only is my research informing my teaching, my teaching is also beginning to shape my research.

## **Challenges and benefits**

Encouraging students to engage in research on one's own ongoing research area brings a benefit that might also be a pitfall. New data are generated by students, saving the lecturer time and effort, but this raises ethical questions about how that data are employed and credited. As the students on this module are from an interdisciplinary sports studies degree, their confidence with and knowledge of historical topics is probably not as strong as students from history degrees. They can often require much guidance and support in designing their research projects. This might take place within class discussions or on an individual basis, but it can lead to the situation that, while the student might have collected the data, the actual research design originated from the ideas of the lecturer. This, of course, is not unusual in all final-year dissertations and in the sciences it can lead to the best students' dissertations being published under the joint authorship of the supervisor and the student. In history, however, it is not so straightforward. Where intellectual ideas or analysis, or substantial pieces of data originate from the student then they must be credited by authorship within any resulting publication. However, the experience of this module is that more often, students generate the occasional piece of useful data that might serve as a single example or source within a much wider research publication. Here, it is difficult to reference the project that the example came from since undergraduate essays are not available to any reader who might wish to follow the reference up and consult the original source. A better solution might thus be to credit the student's efforts with an acknowledgement. Having only run for two years, no publications, by either myself or any of the students, have yet arisen from research conducted specifically for this module. However, when publications do emerge from it, then the key ethical consideration will be how to credit students' efforts. (For a discussion of such issues and guidelines on authorship, see British Sociological Association, 2001.)

Despite such potential ethical pitfalls, the course has clear benefits for students. It avoids the situation noted elsewhere where students value staff research but perceive it as an activity separate from them and in which they have no stake (Jordan, 2003). This module hopefully makes students aware, not only of the research conducted within their department, but also how engaging with it can enhance their learning. Furthermore, they appear encouraged by the opportunity to actually contribute to that research, and subsequently, knowledge within their subject.

Engaging students with the research process within the context of more traditional teaching also allows students to further engage with the constructed nature of knowledge. They are encouraged to see how what we know is based not upon what was important in the past, but rather on the questions we ask about it. If teaching fails to address where the knowledge that is being imparted actually comes from, then students are unable to assess its validity and appreciate the subjectivity and limitations of what is being taught. Higher education is about critical thinking, but that can only be developed properly if students understand the source of the knowledge that is being critiqued.

Student feedback, gathered both informally and through module evaluations, suggests that students find the module challenging, as is appropriate for their final year, but also appreciate its research base and the opportunity to research a topic of their own choice. In 2002/03, 81.1 per cent of student

module evaluations said that they found the assessment 'very' challenging (5 on a Likert scale of 1 to 5), while 72.7 per cent said that the content was 'very' useful (5 on a Likert scale of 1 to 5) in adding to their understanding.

Many students choose to study histories of their local communities or teams. Students appear to appreciate and be motivated by the opportunity to study a topic that has personal relevance to them, such as the history of their village cricket team or a moment of glory for the football club they support. As one student wrote, "I found this assignment interesting to write therefore I enjoyed completing it". Another welcomed the way the project "lets you write about something that interests you". These greater efforts are especially important within the context of sport degrees where there is often an anti-intellectual culture amongst students, many of whom have come to university to play sport and are not fully stimulated by more traditional academic tasks.

## **Conclusion**

Of course, developing the research-teaching nexus is not sufficient on its own to ensure quality teaching. Courses still need to be delivered and managed using long-recognised teaching and administrative skills. Nonetheless, it is important not to see research and teaching as separate activities, and for teachers to also be researchers. Teaching, reading recently published work or conducting my own primary research all feed into one another. The products of both my primary and secondary research are employed in my teaching, whilst the discussions in my classes can influence my research. It is this seamless relationship between research and teaching that should differentiate higher and further education.

Studies have suggested that there is no correlation between teaching quality and research productivity and at 'best, research and teaching are [only] very loosely coupled' (Hattie and Marsh, 1996; Marsh and Hattie, 2002). While this may often be true in practice there is no reason why it should be the case. If the teaching and research are integrated then student learning should develop, from both the perspectives of subject knowledge and generic skills. A research-teaching nexus should also encourage student motivation and, as a result, student achievement.

Integrating teaching and research effectively means not seeing the two activities as separate. Thus, arguing for the need to link teaching and research emerges from a false dichotomy that should not exist in the first place. Teaching and research are different parts of the engagement with knowledge that is at the centre of higher education. Research is pointless unless other people are taught its results. Teaching is useless unless something worthwhile (i.e. research-based) is being taught.

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