Creative research methods in a college-based higher education setting

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Teaching research methods in the Social Sciences

In June 2012 HEA Social Sciences held its first learning and teaching summit, which focused on teaching research methods in the Social Sciences (Further details of this summit, including papers and presentations, can be accessed via: http://blogs.heacademy.ac.uk/social-sciences/2012/09/10/teaching-research-methods/)

In December 2012 we commissioned 11 projects that were designed to explore further the issues identified at the summit. All the outputs from these projects are available via: http://bit.ly/1jZe0Ft.

The role of assessment in teaching research methods: A literature review
Anesa Hosein (University of Surrey) and Namrata Rao (Liverpool Hope University)

Count: Developing STEM skills in qualitative research methods teaching and learning
Graham R. Gibbs (University of Huddersfield)

Creative research methods in a college-based higher education setting
Alex Kendal (Birmingham City University) and Helen Perkins (Solihull College)

Developing applied research skills through collaboration in extra-academic contexts
Andrew Kirton, Peter Campbell, Louise Hardwick (University of Liverpool)

Developing innovative support structures for students undertaking small-scale research projects in work settings
Paula Hamilton, Peter Gossman and Karen Southern (Glyndŵr University)

Developing peer assessment in postgraduate research methods training
Hilary Burgess, Joan Smith and Phil Wood, assisted by Maria Scalise (University of Leicester)

Engaging students in quantitative research methods: An evaluation of assessment for learning strategies on an undergraduate social research methods module
Ciaran Acton and Bernadette McCreight (University of Ulster)

Innovation in the assessment of social science research methods
Luke Sloan (Cardiff University)

LSE100: An innovative, multi-disciplinary approach to assessing research methods learning
Jonathan Leape (London School of Economics)

Mapping, understanding and supporting research teaching within college-based higher education (HE) networks
Claire Gray, Rebecca Turner, Carolyn Petersen, Carole Sutton and Julie Swain (Plymouth University)

Northern Ireland by numbers: new open educational resources for teaching quantitative methods
Emma Calvert and Paula Devine (Queen’s University Belfast)
1. Project overview

This summary is complemented by a dynamic e-case study that can be found at http://heacreativeresearchmethods.wikispaces.com/home.

The project aims to re-think starting points for research in professional education by putting practitioners’ stories at the centre of teaching about research processes. Taking an Early Years Foundation Degree as a context for the work, the project draws on auto-ethnographic, investigative approaches to pedagogy. This approach engages the student in a range of data collection, including visual and sensory approaches, analysis and presentation activities, so that they may position themselves thoughtfully and reflexively in relation to their field of study. This means that students learn about research through doing rather than as a set of abstracted concepts; as such learning is embodied and experiential. This method facilitates easy access to primary data for novice researchers, since they come to see themselves as data worthy of study, and opens opportunities for tutors and students to co-construct meanings around identity, purpose and processes. Development of research skills, such as writing development, are organically embedded in the process as the production of early personal narratives liberates new researchers from impersonal writing enabling them to build confidence as they find their academic voice.

Through an ongoing process of reflection and refinement, this approach helps students and tutors expand their understanding of qualitative research in a way that is practical, accessible, creative and innovative. At the same time through the sharing of the texts, artefacts that they produce, students as novice researchers are introduced to the complex processes and dynamics of peer review in the social sciences.

2. Aims and objectives

This project aimed to achieve the following objectives:

- dynamic exchange of knowledge and experience between disciplines and higher education (HE) and further education (FE);
- students experience a more innovative and creative curriculum;
- increased student engagement with research methods curriculum;
- assessment for learning approaches embedded;
- students begin level 6 research projects with greater confidence and explore a wider variety of methods in their work;
- facilitating sustainable collaboration through the regional post-'92 education research forum.

3. Activities

The journey of our project is narrated through an open access public wiki http://heacreativeresearchmethods.wikispaces.com/home. The wiki represents a dynamic case study and provides an overview of the contextual reading that informed the project design, the reading that informed our thinking during the project, the project workshops and their outcomes.

The project was undertaken in four phases.

3.1 Phase one: preparation

In this phase the wiki was set up and two knowledge-exchange workshops between staff at Birmingham City University and Solihull College were held to undertake curriculum mapping and to develop contextualised resources and templates. Key reading was identified:
The aim of these sessions was to plug the group in to new ways of thinking, doing and being with research.

3.2 Phase two: teaching

In this phase, two workshops were undertaken with second-year students studying a Research Methods module on the second year of their programme. In this phase we introduced the project, taught key concepts, generated data and undertook analysis processes.


We introduced the idea that learning about research would be experiential and structured around a piece of collaborative research about becoming an early years practitioner. We explored the idea of turning research in on ‘ourselves’ as students/subjects always already entangled in practice and ‘becoming’, and auto-ethnography as a strategy for the production of empirical material.

A qualification of what we want auto-ethnography to mean in this context is important here. We turn in on itself the criticism from writers like Delamont (2007) that auto-ethnography is too experiential, cannot fight familiarity, and that it focuses on the wrong side of the power divide (2007: 3) and instead positively embrace these characteristics as driving motivations for putting it to work. Auto-ethnography here is mobilised as an act of subjective story-telling through which the student constructs an autobiographical personal narrative – a petit récit. This narrative is not understood to be ‘truthful’ in any totalising sense, but is of interest because it represents a temporary projection or moment of textualised identity. Taking post-structuralist notions of ‘self’ as a starting point where ‘self identity is bound up with a capacity to keep a particular narrative going’ (Gauntlett 2002: 54), these narratives articulate the expressed trajectories of ‘individual identities’ in relation to the possible textual field. Important here are not the realities or truth of experience or action, but the process, the selection and mobilisation of particular discursive positions to do particular sorts of identity work.

Through our discussion of auto-ethnography we opened up and expanded definitions of what might be ‘counted’ as data and the curatorial, productive role of the researcher as an agent of, rather than conduit or receptacle for, meaning-making and -taking. We would, we suggested: make objects; tell stories; listen to stories; discuss our object- and story-making; curate and share symbolic objects; take pictures and audio recordings; and discuss our thoughts and feelings uninhibited by research conventions, interviews, structure or systematisation, along the way. We would ‘count’ all of this as empirical material offering ways in to grappling with our own entanglement.

We read Nutbrown’s (2012) A box of childhood: Small stories at the roots of a career and explored the work of a range of academics and practitioners that plays self-consciously/reflexively with issues of identity and representation: Kelly Clarke-Keeffe’s on visual arts, poetics and subjectivities (2008); David Gauntlett’s (2002) work on the use of ‘identity boxes’; Bonnie Soroke’s (2013) ‘zipper’ workshops; and Kendall’s work (Bennett et al. 2011) on the use of artefacts in professional education.
We then held two workshop sessions. In the first the group produced and shared identity boxes to explore their trajectory towards the foundation degree programme and becoming an academic (examples of the students’ identity boxes are shown in Figures 1 – 4).

This was followed by face-to-face discussion about conceptualising and doing research and being researched. This was followed up with further discussion on the (pre-existing) group blog. In the second workshop students chose symbolic objects around/through which to assemble their own stories of/about becoming a practitioner.

Again this was followed by face-to-face reflection and discussion, including a consideration of how these methods could be put to work in the project proposals they were producing for their module assessment and the projects they would go on to do in the BA ‘top up’ most were going on to complete.

3.3 Phase three: collaborative writing
The final ‘writing about’ stage of the project was voluntary and an open invitation was issued to students and teachers to come together to ‘plug in’ theory to the amassed empirical material. A group of us attended a writing retreat on 9 July 2013 to take this forward.

Extract of collaborative writing from the writing retreat

We attempt for our ‘writing about’ to run counter to notions of ‘writing up’ and to be homologous with the theoretical milieu from which the project was imagined, that is to say exploratory rather than representational. We contest the conventions of ‘writing up’, and ‘the static writing model’ criticised by Richardson (2001: 924). Richardson locates this model within a viridicular truth discourse; ‘given to science [in the 19th century] was the belief that its words were objective, precise, unambiguous, noncontextual, and nonmetaphoric’ (ibid. 924-5). Within this model writing is not only conceived but practised in very particular ways ‘I was taught, however, as you were too, not to write until I knew what I wanted to say, until my points were organised and outlined’ (ibid. 924). She goes on to argue:

No surprise that this static writing model coheres with mechanistic scientism and quantitative research. I will argue that the static writing model is itself a socio-historical invention that reifies the static world imagined by our 19th-century foreparents…. The model has serious problems: it ignores the role of writing as a dynamic, creative process; it undermines the confidence of beginning qualitative researchers because their experience of research is inconsistent with this writing model; and it contributes to the flotilla of qualitative writing that is simply not interesting to read because adherence to the model requires writers to silence their own voices and to view themselves as contaminants. Social scientific writing, like all other forms of writing, is a sociohistorical construction, and, therefore, mutable…(ibid. 924)

Rather a description is a “gloss”, a typification of the presumed meaning of such events’ (Stanley 1993: 214). Such understandings conceive a ‘crisis of representation’ (Beach 2001) in which ‘writing about’ is necessarily and inevitably a complex, arbitrary, subjective, and partial, practice
that works not to describe the 'real' but rather to
‘police, produce, and constitute a field’ (Lather
1999: 5). In these terms we recognise that writing
about research is ‘not representing the world but
writing it’ (Usher 1997: 33) and researchers are,
like literary writers, ‘world-makers’ (ibid. 35).

We approach our writing very much as other to
this account of scientific representational writing,
using writing and thinking with writing as an
opportunity to find ways in to our empirical
material that affect us. We write instead like
Richardson ‘I write because I want to find out. I
write in order to learn something that I did not
know before I wrote it’ (ibid. 924).

We borrow Jackson and Mazzei’s (2012) reading of
Deleuze and Guattari’s (2000) notion of ‘plugging
in’ to think through a self-conscious attention to
working with/in theory. In A thousand plateaus (2000) Deleuze and Guattari write ‘when one writes, the
only question is which other machine the literary machine can be plugged into, must be plugged into in
order to work’ (2000: 4). Jackson and Mazzei mobilise plugging-in ‘as a process rather than a concept’
(2012: 1), a putting to work to produce something new. Foucault urges us to use his ideas like

...little tool boxes. If people want to open them, or to
use this sentence or that idea as a screwdriver or
spanner to short-circuit, discredit or smash systems of
power, including eventually those from which my books
have emerged...so much the better. (Foucault 1975
cited in Foss and Morris 1979)

Similarly Massumi recognises a similar invitation from Deleuze
and Guattari to 'lift a dynamism' (Massumi 1992: 8) out of their
work and put their concepts to work as a ‘tool box’ so as to
‘pack a potential in the way a crowbar in a willing hand
envelops an energy of prying’ (ibid.). In what follows we plug in
ideas from a number of theorists in ways that have enabled us
to grapple with our own entanglement and to problematise and
re-think the processes of professional education. We seek not
resolution in our promiscuous play with theory but revolution
(Massumi 1992: 8).

3.4 Phase four: dissemination
The team have engaged in dissemination throughout the project both through social media and
presentation at conferences and seminars. By the end of July the project will have been disseminated
locally at the Birmingham City University Centre for Research in Education conference, regionally
through Worcester University’s research and seminar programme (by invitation) and nationally at the
Higher Education Academy Social Sciences conference in Liverpool (http://blogs.heacademy.ac.uk/social-
sciences/category/cluster-conference-2013/). The abstract of our academic paper has been accepted for
the International Professional Development Association (IPDA) international conference in November
http://www.ipda.org.uk/conferences.html) and we hope to submit for publication soon afterwards. See
Next steps below.
4. Outcomes

The project has met its intended outcomes in the following ways:

- the project wiki offers a ‘how to’ model for other colleagues and students interested in collaborative approaches to teaching creative research methods and co-constructed writing;
- evaluations (templates included as Appendices 1 and 2) suggest that students valued the experience; six students outlined very specific proposals for their ‘top up’ year project, and the project team will continue to work with them and track their development over the course of the next year;
- sustained knowledge exchange between FE and HE academic staff: the project team are continuing to write and present together as an outcome of the project;
- this new approach is now embedded in the research methods curriculum.

Additionally, it has been very encouraging to find that members of the student group have been keen to participate in dissemination events and to collaborate in the writing activities which are above and beyond what is required of them on their course. This perhaps suggests that engaging in ‘live’ research with ‘real’ audiences offers a more meaningful approach to learning about research for professionally orientated learners.

5. Impact

Evidence from the first round of evaluation indicated that the work has had a significant impact on the way students understand the research process, their ethical responsibilities as researchers and their positionality as practitioners within the wider context of knowledge-making about practice. Students reported in their written evaluations:

- new sensitivities toward participants;
- that they were surprised at the sometimes intimate nature of the stories;
- that they found the experience of listening to others ‘humbling’;
- that they felt more attuned to the complexities of ethical issues: ethics had come alive as being about more than a process but about people;
- that research can be difficult and emotive and that researchers have a responsibility toward participants to exercise a duty of care;
- that research processes can be provocative and challenging;
- that the notion of representation is a crucial one for the researcher: ‘making/doing enables stories to be shared without just words’;
- a complexity of responses suggesting that research is not a ‘surface’ activity;
- that they felt that the use of symbolic artefacts enriched and enhanced data collection;
- that the process had taught them the importance of ‘honouring and respecting’ participants;
- that the work had allowed them to focus on the small, individual stories and to recognise the differences as well as the moments of resonance;
- a new sensitivity to the sensitive and intimate nature of data recognising that it is not in fact ‘objective’ and distinct from lived lives but very much entangled with experience;
- that research is not cold and objective but embedded in practices and social life.

The process also raised some unexpected questions about the relationship between issues of accessibility and credibility. Some students found themselves ‘instinctively’ questioning the legitimacy of a process that felt accessible and meaningful – surely research and scholarship should feel ‘difficult’ and ‘alien’ otherwise was it ‘real’ research? This opened up interesting questions about the nature of scholarship that we are continuing to explore in our academic paper.
Whilst the project delivered significant impact for direct participants, the 'next steps' will be important in securing further reach.

6. Next steps

1 The thinking that we've undertaken about the relationship between research methods and research practice and forms of professional learning is being formally developed in a collaboratively produced academic paper by the project team and student participants. This work will, as indicated above, be shared at the IPDA conference in November. The accepted abstract appears below:

In this paper we share the outcomes of an HEA funded project to take up Nutbrown’s challenge to ‘push out from the safe(er) boundaries of established methodologies’ (2011: 241) in Early Years research to explore the value of auto-ethnography and the telling of small stories, what Lyotard (1992) calls ‘petits ecrits’, to the processes of doing and learning about research in the context of professional learning in the Early Years. We offer a rationale for the use of creative methods in professional learning and describe the process of working with identity boxes and symbolic objects, to produce a collection of auto-ethnographic narratives, the old wifes tales of the title, through which to explore practitioners’ experiences of professional identity formation. We go on to consider the opportunities these methods, which facilitate a dual identity of researcher and participant, offer for reflexive learning about practitioner positionality within the knowledge-making practices of Early Years professional education. Towards a conclusion we reflect upon and theorise about, the meanings that participant-researchers make about their career trajectories and make the case for auto-ethnography and para-ethnography as useful pedagogic modalities for dynamic and reflexive professional learning in the Early Years specifically and the professions more widely. We mobilise Patti Lather’s notion of methodological proliferation to re-think professional learning as a ‘wild profusion’ of possibilities.

2 The project team is presenting to the regional post-'92 research forum and will convene a regional HE in FE research in professional learning group.

The work will feed in to a new national Reflexivity in Research special interest group (SIG) convened by Kendall in collaboration with colleagues from five other universities (Central Lancashire, Hertfordshire, Bedfordshire, Sunderland and Northumbria). Two workshops, funded via the HEA Social Sciences workshop and seminar series, will be held in November 2013 (http://bit.ly/1aQ9mmQ) and March 2014 (http://bit.ly/1cuR0Lt).

References


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