

BUILDING A BRIDGE TO PEDAGOGIC RESEARCH: TEACHING SOCIAL SCIENCE RESEARCH METHODS TO HUMANITIES PRACTITIONERS

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Abstract

DISCIPLINARY differences in approaches and methodologies to research present an important challenge to humanities practitioners wishing to engage in pedagogic research. This article outlines the development of a social sciences research methods workshop as an example of an intervention to provide a bridge for modern languages practitioners to engage with pedagogic research. The workshops have also raised questions about the capacity of UK higher educational institutions to provide research training for their staff at introductory levels, as well as identifying barriers to languages practitioners contributing to ‘generic’ pedagogic research. Overcoming these barriers is a long term process, but in the shorter term the workshops are good way of raising awareness of social science research methods and offering a possible route into publishing pedagogic research which has an audience beyond the languages community.

Key words: Humanities, modern languages, pedagogic research, research methods.

Introduction

DISCIPLINARY differences present an important challenge for those researching teaching and learning in higher education. In view of these differences in teaching on the one hand and research practices on the other, it is highly likely that these differences will be amplified when discipline-based academics attempt to undertake research into teaching and learning. Moreover, much of the educational research which is viewed as ‘generic’ has its roots in social science disciplines (Mills, 2005). This is particularly true of research methodology employed in the field of higher education, which is not a neutral space in disciplinary terms but is one in which ‘established’ disciplines have differing amounts of cultural capital (Canning, 2007). In our experience, language teachers do not generally have experience of social science research methods (including interviewing and questionnaire design and analysis). They are therefore not as ready to contribute to the higher education literature or to conduct their own pedagogic research as their colleagues within the social sciences.

This article has two main objectives. Firstly, we briefly draw attention to the disjunctures between the humanities and existing research into teaching and learning in higher education. Our second and primary objective is to give an example of a particular intervention—running social science research methods workshops for practitioners working in one particular humanities field (modern languages)—as a way of attempting to bridge this gap. The aim here is to develop “commonly understood discourses” about teaching and learning in higher education (Trowler and Cooper, 2002, p236) and to avoid the view of pedagogic research being “...disconnected to broader theoretical issues” (Peseta *et al*, 2007, p229).

Context in UK higher education

THE VIEW that pedagogic research in higher education should be embedded in pedagogy of the discipline (Healey, 2000) is widespread and clearly a reasonable one. There are many dis-

cipline-based educational research journals in the humanities, for example, *Language Learning Journal*, *Arts and Humanities in Higher Education*, *Discourse: Learning and Teaching in Philosophical and Religious Studies*. However, pedagogic research is perceived to be of a low status in many disciplines (Yorke, 2000; Huber, 2002), a tendency coupled with an increased professionalisation of research and development in higher education (Mills and Huber, 2005; Canning, 2007). This professionalisation is possibly the key point here; whilst in theory the boundaries between social sciences and humanities are largely porous and ambiguous, it would seem to us that the research published in journals such as *Teaching in Higher Education* and *Journal of Further and Higher Education* is very distant from most research in the humanities. One possible course of action for humanities researchers who wish to conduct research into teaching in higher education is to conduct research in this emerging professional arena. In our own subject community, there is a further challenge; those who teach the language element of modern languages degrees in higher education are rarely (in current parlance) research active.

On a practical level, pedagogic researchers in the humanities are often competing with those in the professional arena for funding, under schemes such as the Fund for the Development of Teaching and Learning (FDTL). MacDonald Ross (2005) has addressed the failure of humanities subjects to secure any funding under phase 5 of FDTL. Whilst FDTL was, strictly speaking, for development within disciplines rather than pedagogic research, the view has been expressed that over the five phases, FDTL evolved from a funding scheme focused on development within the disciplines into a scheme orientated towards furthering generic pedagogic research. This has led to a fear that humanities researchers will be “left behind” in developing discipline-based pedagogic research (Saunders, 2006, p12).

The following question then arises—could humanities disciplines legitimately develop their own methods for carrying out pedagogic research such as those espoused by MacDonald Ross (2005) in a way which would be considered valid by their own discipline community and by the higher education research discipline? This is highly contested, both from within the humanities and amongst educational researchers. In the United States context, Kelly (2000), a historian, highlights the danger of early career researchers engaging in the scholarship of learning and teaching when they ought to be undertaking the kinds of research which will enable them to earn tenure.

As well as being committed to the scholarship of teaching and learning, humanities scholars like Kelly and MacDonald Ross wish to maintain fidelity to their disciplines (Shulman,

2000). Therefore the first difficulty facing humanities scholars is not the acceptability of humanities research to educationalists, but the acceptability of teaching and learning scholarship within their own disciplinary teaching and learning regimes (Trowler, 2002).

A second problem facing the humanities practitioner is the acceptability of humanities ‘methods’ to educationalists. It is true that many notable researchers of teaching and learning in higher education emanate from humanities backgrounds (Bath and Smith, 2004), although in our view such individuals are ‘bilingual’ in the different languages of humanities and social sciences, and are not employing a hybrid approach to pedagogic research. Whilst tacit knowledge and intuition have been recognised as important components of action research in particular (McNiff, 2002), such methods may not be seen as credible to those wanting their research:

[A]ccepted by their colleagues or the wider teaching and learning community... This might mean that they have to adopt more rigorous approaches to evaluation and reflection, involving the use of questionnaires, interviews, document analysis, diaries, field notes, analytical memos etc.

Greenbank, 2007, p99

The issue is further complicated in languages by the fact that second language acquisition (SLA) research is an established interdisciplinary field which is broadly part of the social science tradition. Tension already exists around the position of SLA researchers in foreign language departments since they are often less respected than their colleagues:

Their association with language instruction tends to devalue their field of research a priori in those departments that consider language study to be but the mere acquisition of skills with no intellectual content.

Kramsch, 2003, p70

In view of these tensions between humanities and social sciences research approaches, promoting the learning of, and subsequent use of social science research methods to humanities practitioners, would appear to offer a potential bridge towards researching (and publishing) pedagogic research.

Whilst SLA researchers ‘bridge the gulf’ through applied linguistics masters courses (many will have studied a humanities-based modern languages bachelors degree), other languages scholars wishing to undertake pedagogic research have fewer opportunities to learn social science methodology in any depth. The intervention described in the next section aims to bridge this gap.

Research methods workshops: building a bridge

THE RESEARCH methods workshops described in this section are run under the auspices of the Higher Education Academy's Subject Centre for Languages, Linguistics and Area Studies (LLAS). LLAS is one of 24 such subject centres. Funded by the four UK higher education funding councils its remit is to provide support for teaching and learning in these disciplines throughout the UK.

The first workshop for pedagogic research in languages, linguistics and area studies was held in 2002. LLAS had set aside funding for a series of small-scale pedagogic research projects. The pedagogic research projects from this first round of funding were published in January 2004. The quality of research produced varied, both from the point of view of LLAS and the researchers themselves, though there was little articulation of what the projects were supposed to achieve. There were also wide discrepancies in report length and format (no guidelines were issued beforehand), which made gauging the overall quality of the outputs difficult. The shortest report was around 3,000 words and the longest over 50,000, so it was hard to present the projects together as a coherent whole.

A second round of projects was funded during 2005-2006 and a similar research methods workshop for successful bidders from these projects was held. This was the first workshop led by the authors of this paper, after which LLAS agreed that it would be useful to open the workshops up to the whole subject community.

The workshop was set up to cover themes such as formulating research questions, designing and carrying out questionnaire surveys and interviews, and considering research ethics. Places on the workshop are restricted to 16 and on all occasions the workshop has been full within a couple of days of being advertised for the first time and a waiting list has been set up. This is obviously regarded as highly positive, as it demonstrates both that practitioners want to undertake pedagogic research and that LLAS is addressing a need that is not being met at an institutional level.

The workshop rests upon two important principles. Firstly, it is for beginners. It is emphasised at the beginning of the day that students on social science undergraduate and masters degrees will spend a significant proportion of their courses studying research methods and issues surrounding their use and that there is a considerable amount of literature (including devoted journals) about research methods. Therefore, participants are made aware that, like any foreign language,

neither competence nor fluency can be achieved in a short space of time. Oral feedback from participants has revealed that they are (or feel) unable to access this sort of development in their own institutions.

The second principle is that the methods are taught using examples drawn from the subject areas covered by the LLAS Subject Centre. This enables participants to draw on their existing disciplinary knowledge and experiences to address issues raised by the methods. Moreover, the workshops emphasise the practical, rather than the philosophical, aspects of research methods. However, emphasis is placed on the need to embed one's own research into the broader research context. We also provide lists of 'generic' higher education journals and pedagogic research journals in languages, linguistics and area studies (for example, *Language Learning Journal*, *TESOL Quarterly*). It is hoped that this will ensure that researchers will not make unsubstantiated claims that 'nothing' has been written about a specific issue in language teaching.

Reflection and evaluation

EVALUATION of the workshop is carried out through a standard (anonymous) workshop evaluation form and informal discussion with participants after the workshop. These onsite evaluations are overwhelmingly positive—this is largely due to the workshops being aimed at beginners who are conscious of a large amount of knowledge acquisition in a small space of time. Additionally, unlike students, practitioners are neither assessed nor compelled to attend (Edwards and Thatcher, 2004).

Participants have commended the workshops on a number of fronts. Firstly, the workshops have encouraged many to either start or continue doing pedagogic research, despite a lack of institutional encouragement to do so in many cases. Secondly, many participants discover during the course of the day that the workshop will help them to advise students on their projects. This resonates strongly with the reported experience of inexperienced researchers teaching on large undergraduate research methods courses alongside more experienced researchers (Edwards and Thatcher, 2004). Thirdly, participants welcome the opportunity to reflect on their existing research and possible ideas for future research.

From our viewpoint, the workshops have gone from being conceived as 'training' and 'awareness-raising' to something much more complex. Seeking to be reflective practitioners, the actual content and structure of the day has always been under continual review. However running the workshops has fundamentally challenged assumptions we previously held. The first (in many respects explicitly stated) assumption relates

to the comments made by MacDonald Ross (2005). It was assumed that the audience would be humanities practitioners, possibly research-active, who specialise in a non-pedagogic aspect of the humanities. Therefore, we assumed that all participants would be aware that any research ought to be situated in the existing literature and that those teaching in higher education recognised that research with little or no reference to that which had already been done was unlikely to be viewed as good quality research in the academic community. After all, referencing existing work is a key part of studying in higher education as an undergraduate. However, an examination of the research projects reveals that not all researchers recognised the need for (or the extent to which) research ought to be situated in the literature; some projects contained just three or four references which in one case consisted mainly of websites. Such research would usually be branded as low-level for an undergraduate. It certainly would not be accepted as pedagogic research as defined in the Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) (2005 Annex C) (Baume and Beaty, 2006, p4) which stresses that "pedagogic research is firmly situated in its relevant literature, and high quality pedagogic research makes a substantial contribution to that literature".

Since this discovery, more emphasis has been placed on the need to embed in a research context as well as providing lists of 'generic' education journals and pedagogic research journals in languages, linguistics and area studies (for example, *Modern Language Journal*, *TESOL Quarterly*). It is hoped that this will ensure that researchers will not make unsubstantiated claims that 'nothing' has been written about a specific issue in language teaching.

A second assumption was that participants would be from departments of languages, linguistics or area studies or working in language centres. In practice, this has turned out to be true, but there have been participants from education departments and 'service units' of institutions (for example, widening participation officers). The attendance of participants from outside LLAS subject areas raises a number of interesting issues; it provides evidence that these participants are unable to access development that meets their particular needs at a departmental or institutional level. Informal discussions after the workshop revealed that some participants have found that existing provision makes too many assumptions about what participants already know; therefore the workshop provided by LLAS was very much welcomed.

Criticisms about the workshops are virtually always concerned with what is absent or what is not sufficiently covered. For example, the first workshops did not include sessions on classroom observation which have since been incorporated. Whilst the request for a session on observation has been

accommodated, time spent on data analysis had to be cut back to accommodate a longer session on considering the research context. However, a second workshop has now been developed, and was delivered for the first time in 2007. This includes a session on philosophical approaches to research methodology and a greater concentration on quantitative and qualitative analysis. The philosophical overview enables participants to build a bridge back to the theoretical frameworks which resonate both in humanities and in the social sciences, including educational research (for example feminism, postmodernism), as well as intensifying their knowledge of social science research methods. Despite the epistemological distance between the humanities and social sciences, social science methods are widely accepted in the languages community as the methods of choice for pedagogic research. The use of interviews and questionnaires as appropriate 'tools' for pedagogic research is undisputed by participants.

The workshops originated as a somewhat pragmatic solution to ensure that those who obtained funding from LLAS for a pedagogic research project had the 'tools' to do it well. In practice we realise that the workshop is wholly inadequate if its aim is to turn beginners into good pedagogic researchers after one or two workshops. In fact, we are keen to impress upon participants that the workshops are just a beginning. We provide a reading list about the methods discussed (and some that aren't really discussed) during the course of the day. These also remind us, as the conveners of the workshop, that there is a vast literature with which we have engaged or could engage. Additionally, we want to raise awareness among our participants that the whole field of research methods is highly contested, for example, different philosophical paradigms and the choice of methods.

The continued demand for the workshop demonstrates that it is meeting a need in the languages higher education community that was not being met previously. Participants report a lack of such development opportunities within their institutions, and that those which do exist assume too much previous knowledge. We are not suggesting, however, that following the workshop participants are 'trained' and ready to practice pedagogic research or that the research methods necessarily equip participants with 'tools' or 'toolkits' to perform a job or task.

The outcomes and implications of the workshop in terms of facilitating the actual practice of pedagogic research are more difficult to judge. As Baume (2003, p79) proposes, this kind of staff development is undertaken "in order to have effects, on the practices and perhaps also on the knowledge and understanding and world-view of colleagues". Moreover, there is no reason to believe that difficulties translating learn-

ing research methods as a subject into future study (Benson and Blackman 2003, p39) is a problem confined to undergraduate students. The lack of formative or summative assessment makes it much harder to identify the existence or the extent of such a problem. However, we are in contact with many people who have attended the workshops and we look out for research presented and published by those who have attended. Whilst some have published articles in language-specific education journals, we are not aware of any who have published in higher education journals or presented at education conferences. The challenge, therefore, remains for us to encourage pedagogic research as a worthwhile endeavour in our subject communities.

Conclusion

THERE IS an urgent need for further research to be done in the area of increasing the capacity of pedagogic research in the humanities subjects. Recent UK government-funded initiatives in pedagogic research and development have been unfavourable to the humanities, placing the responsibility more firmly onto subject centres and educational development units. This paper has attempted to draw attention to some of the issues concerned with educational research in the humanities and to illustrate one of the means by which

we have attempted to build a bridge between humanities practitioners and educational research.

Though largely beyond the scope of the paper, the question of whether humanities practitioners will establish a different way of doing pedagogic research is unclear. If this happens, we suspect that it is likely to be a change over a generation rather than a change that disrupts the 'discipline' of teaching and learning in higher education in the shorter term.

In our view, building pedagogic research capacity in the humanities is a two-fold task. First, pedagogic research in the humanities needs to be in a scholarship which is accessible and acceptable to humanities colleagues. Second, this research must inform, and be informed by educational literature and pedagogic research in other disciplines. Whilst we regard the first task as much longer term we feel that the pedagogic research workshops make an important contribution towards the second, by bringing researchers to a point at which they can recognise the need to become familiar with, and contribute to the education literature as well as disciplinary-based educational research. Increasing capacity in pedagogic research is a process which requires support from educational development units, subject centres and other stakeholders.

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