

# Situating Pedagogies: Researching the Teaching and Learning of Advanced Qualitative Research Methods

Sarah Lewthwaite<sup>1</sup> and Melanie Nind<sup>1</sup>,

<sup>1</sup> National Centre for Research Methods, University of Southampton, UK. s.e.lewthwaite@soton.ac.uk;  
m.a.nind@soton.ac.uk

**Abstract.** This paper reports developments in new research investigating the teaching and learning of advanced research methods in the social sciences. Based on expert panel interviews with international expert teachers of qualitative methods, we observe pedagogic approaches that characterize advanced qualitative teaching and discuss methods designed to both examine and spur development of pedagogical culture in this nascent field. This paper reports our early findings, elucidating the connections between pedagogy, method, processes, approaches and reflectivity. We argue that through analysis of expert responses to the distinct pedagogic challenges of the methods classroom, the insights generated can form the knowledge and understanding required to enhance pedagogical culture and practice. Whilst qualitative methods might dictate pedagogical structure to some extent, we find that methods alone are insufficient as a pedagogic guide.

**Keywords:** research methods, teaching and learning, pedagogical culture, expert panel method.

## 1 Introduction: Research Capacity in the Social Sciences

Building research capacity in the social sciences is dependent on effective training: the teaching and learning of advanced methods. However, despite significant investments in increased training capacity by national and international research councils, funders and other stakeholders, the pedagogies involved remain under-researched. Indeed, reviews of the empirical research into the teaching and learning of research methods identify a fragmented and underdeveloped literature (Wagner, Garner, and Kawulich, 2011) and an evidence base founded largely on the reflections of individual teachers, or a single cohort of students (Nind, Kilburn, and Luff, 2015). These, amongst other limitations, gesture to a lack of ‘pedagogical culture’ in the teaching of advanced methods (Wagner et al., 2011). The research discussed here is a response to this situation, using qualitative research to explore how such research is taught and learned for the benefit of the methods community.

This short paper reports from ongoing research at the National Centre for Research Methods into the pedagogy of advanced methods teaching intended to widen the focus of research from individual experiences of methods teaching to empirical evidence that bridges disciplines, schools of method and international contexts. The ultimate aim is to stimulate the development of a pedagogical culture and to involve methods teachers in interrogating their pedagogical content knowledge (Shulman, 1986). To this end, we have established meta-themes from our analysis that characterize methods teaching activities. In this paper, we explore the distinctive nature of teaching qualitative methods and describe the challenges of developing analytic coding that adequately recognizes the complexity and situated nature of this pedagogy. Thus, we focus on two key aspects of the research. Firstly, insights into qualitative methods teaching from our first wave of analysis. Secondly, what these insights into qualitative methods teaching have to tell us about qualitative methods more broadly.

## 2 Methodology: Expert Panel

Our research takes the valuing of dialogue as a guiding principle, with a view to encouraging and deepening conceptual exchange, rather than evaluating teachers or seeking the 'best practices' or other standardizing or normative approaches that can suppress, rather than encourage, pedagogical culture. To express this dialogic commitment we used expert panel method (after Gallier and Huang, 2012), conducting two expert panel studies, the first, with eight experts in methods and the teaching of methods in the UK (2012-13) and the second with an international focus (2015-2016). In this second panel of 13 experts one of our concerns was to understand how methodological and pedagogical cultures vary internationally. For this reason, we purposefully targeted different geographic regions and experts with international experience across Europe, the Americas, Africa, Asia and Oceania in order to provide a more nuanced approach to the research. Amongst the participants in the two panels, 14 experts represented qualitative and mixed methods specialisms. Panellists were engaged based on methodological excellence, publications and significant teaching experience at a postgraduate level. The status and specialisms of these experts meant that retaining anonymity before a social science audience would not be possible. With advance ethical approval and their explicit agreement, panellists are therefore referred to by name: In the UK, Amanda Coffey, Pat Sikes, Harry Torrance, Julia Brannen, Pauline Leonard; and internationally, Bagele Chilisa, César Cisneros-Puebla, Yvonna Lincoln, Johnny Saldaña, Richard Rogers, Pat Bazeley, Manfred Max Bergman, John Creswell and Sharlene Hesse-Biber.

Semi-structured interviews of 60 minutes were conducted in person or via phone/Skype. Audio recordings were then transcribed in full. An initial thematic analysis was conducted by two independent researchers by hand or using NVivo. From this point, emergent themes from the UK phase were discussed by other methods teachers and learners in three face-to-face focus groups comprising a total of 15 methods teachers representing substantive methodological teaching specialisms (qualitative, quantitative, narrative and so forth) and an online forum of 18 PhD students and early-career researchers. In this way we instigated dialogue across the various groups involved in both teaching and learning, to understand the resonance of the identified pedagogic challenges, approaches and issues and how these were realised and expressed in other contexts.

Within the second international phase, experts were again interviewed individually, by phone/Skype or face-to-face, and the lens of interest was expanded from a national to an international level. Following an initial analysis of the resulting transcripts, experts were invited to respond to and discuss six emergent themes. Themes comprised pedagogical approaches, the roots of pedagogical approaches, pedagogical resources, pedagogic challenge, controversies and gaps in pedagogical culture, and the international context for methods teaching. Due to geographic dispersal, this panel stage was conducted via a password protected online forum which was open for a four-week timeframe.

Across both panels, we used member checking to establish the credibility of our interpretation of important themes with participants (Lincoln and Guba, 1985) and checked with others the credibility of the ideas for them (Creswell and Miller, 2000), also thereby generating a collaborative lens and further data (Bloor, 1983) to enrich subsequent in-depth analysis. This approach promoted the dialogue and debate essential to pedagogical culture, reciprocally deepening insight within a community in which participants and ourselves occupy the multiple roles of researcher, methodologist, teacher and learner of methods. The methodological process helped us to validate the credibility of our themes and thinking.

The first phase produced an overview of the challenges, approaches, innovations, and teacher and learner characteristics, which informed the progressive focusing in the second phase on alal content knowledge and its situated roots. In the most recent wave of analysis, we have inductively and iteratively pursued lines of inquiry critical to the study and to our participants (e.g. pedagogic challenge, pedagogic approach, innovation in pedagogy). Themes within these leitmotifs (e.g. unprepared learners as a challenge, project-based pedagogic approach, risk-taking in innovating) were generated through a more grounded process and were labelled using experts' own terminology. We were interested not just in recurrent themes, but in the importance these held for individuals, and responses to them in dialogue.

We are continuing to use excerpts from the dataset as provocations for a series of face-to-face focus groups comprising teachers deeply immersed in teaching particular methods, or teaching in particular contexts such as on-line, to test out the resonance of identified pedagogic challenges, approaches and issues. The method is thereby generating data through interactive dialogue across groups with pertinent expertise.

### 3 Findings: Reflectivity and Qualitative Teaching

We selected three prominent meta-themes from the data that map closely to the themes observed by Kilburn, Nind, and Wiles (2014) in the pedagogic literature pertaining to methods teaching. First, methods teachers recognize the importance of making research visible to learners; they seek to connect learners to a world of methods through active engagement with methods. Second, methods teachers value giving learners first-hand experience of conducting research. Third, and most crucially for qualitative methods, methods teachers value pedagogic approaches that encourage reflection on research practice. While these meta-themes constitute substantial findings communicated in a separate paper (Lewthwaite and Nind, forthcoming), here we focus solely on what we can learn from data generated and stimulated from experts in qualitative and mixed methods.

Reflexive language was embedded in the accounts of teaching practices of teachers concerned with qualitative methods - accounts that also attended strongly to the socio-cultural frame within which teaching and learning occurs. Expert panel interviewees identified and elaborated on the ways in which they facilitated learning whereby learners reflect upon their own understanding of research. Supported reflection on methods was a key strategy to promote a deeper knowledge in learners. However, the modes of reflection, and the pedagogy deployed vary. These were articulated as: attention to critical standpoints (Hesse-Biber); promoting the evaluation and adoption of multiple perspectives (Coffey, Creswell); critical engagement in peer groups (Coffey); engaging understandings of paradigms and critique (Chilisa); reflexivity (Coffey, Leonard, Sikes, Hesse-Biber, Chilisa, Lincoln) including the reflexivity which seeks to recognise the role of identity politics (Hesse-Biber, Chilisa, Lincoln, Saldaña) or embodied approaches (Saldaña). These pedagogic strategies overlap considerably rather than form discrete practices, but they provide a core coherence between the substantive content (qualitative methods) and the approach to fostering competence in understanding and using them.

An essential aspect of reflexivity in advanced qualitative methods teaching was found to relate to the realities of conducting research in a sociocultural context; this aspect is arguably underserved in current literature (with notable exceptions, e.g. Hernández-Hernández and Sancho-Gil, 2015). The geopolitics of international working was critical amongst the international panel: John Creswell noted

‘there’s a discipline differentiation and there’s an international differentiation that I think a person teaching methods needs to be sensitive to’. Max Bergman stated the need ‘teach them first of all: you have to realise how political research methods actually are and secondly learn the rules of the game within your field’. He located this political awareness within geo-political boundaries as critical knowledge, essential to the articulation of methods in emergent methods cultures where undertaking new forms of research can be fraught with difficulty. In a Central American context, César Cisneros-Puebla emphasized pedagogical inheritance, citing participatory pedagogies and connections to Vygotsky and the fundamental influence of Cuban teachers connected to the USSR from the 1970s onwards. An African perspective on the geopolitics was articulated by Bagele Chilisa, who highlighted graduate mobility and the need to ‘satisfy... the international expectation of what a graduate student who has done research should be able to do’ alongside the pressing need for critique and the development of a new generation of social researchers in a context where researchers are scarce.

Within international classrooms, the composition of the student body required reflexive (and cross-cultural) practices. Experts (Bergman, Creswell, Lincoln) highlighted the necessity of orientating teaching to learners’ particular contexts in terms of their expertise, discipline, background, nationality, standpoints and so forth. Reflexivity was characterised most clearly as an ability to locate and situate oneself, and one’s decisions about methods within a wider methods landscape. Like Kilburn et al. (2014), we found approaches that promoted reflection were deployed strongly in qualitative and mixed methods, but not neglected in advanced quantitative teaching. This suggests that the substantive focus of methods teaching is important but not alone in determining pedagogy.

#### 4 Conclusions

This research has been designed using dialogic methods that seek to foster pedagogical culture whilst investigating the approaches that methods teachers deploy in the classroom. This has not been an effort to evaluate or prescribe ‘best practice’ as these normative discourses might obscure the plurality of approaches that constitute the generative discourses of pedagogical culture in qualitative methods teaching. As we develop our work, we necessarily move from thematic analysis designed to observe and describe, to a more theoretical mode with a view to mapping and interpreting pedagogies of methodological learning. Going forward, we remain alert to the need to balance the abstraction and structure necessary to make new teaching and learning practices accessible to teachers and learners of methods, whilst retaining a sensitivity to the deeply located, embodied and socio-cultural practices of the classroom. This balance, between abstraction and ‘messy reality’ is one that is familiar to qualitative research, but within an educational context, the vigilance necessary to manage this relationship in the documenting and articulation of new pedagogical insights highlights the power of categories as both a sorting and learning tool. In this respect, the generative power of categories gestures to the research/teaching nexus – the iterative relationship between research and teaching – in both the construction and application of knowledge. We recognize the need to situate these practices, and in doing so, anchor our approach in the qualitative locus of ‘reflexivity’ that is axiomatic of advanced qualitative pedagogy.

**Acknowledgments.** We would like to thank our participants for their generosity in contributing to our project. We would also like to thank Dr Daniel Kilburn and Dr Rose Wiles for their substantial work in the first phase of this project. This research was funded by the UK’s Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) grant ES/L/008351/1.

## References

- Bloor, M. (1983) Notes on member validation, in R. Emerson (ed.), *Contemporary Field Research: a Collection of Readings*. Boston: Little Brown.
- Creswell, J. W. & Miller, D. L. (2000) Determining validity in qualitative inquiry. *Theory into Practice*, 39(3), 124-30.
- Galliers, R. D. & Huang, J. C. (2012) The teaching of qualitative research methods in information systems: an explorative study utilizing learning theory. *European Journal of Information Systems*, 21, 119-134.
- Hernández-Hernández, F. & Sancho-Gil, J.M. (2015) A learning process within an educational research group: an approach to learning qualitative research methods. *International Journal of Social Research Methodology*, 18(6), 651-667.
- Kilburn, D., Nind, M. & Wiles, R. (2014) Learning as Researchers and Teachers: The Development of a Pedagogical Culture for Social Science Research Methods? *British Journal of Educational Studies*, 62(2), 191-207.
- Lewthwaite, S. & Nind, M. (forthcoming) Teaching research methods in the social sciences: Expert perspectives on pedagogy and practice. *British Journal of Educational Studies*. Tbc.
- Lincoln, Y. S. & Guba, E. G. (1985) *Naturalistic Inquiry*. London: Sage.
- Nind, M., Kilburn, D. & Luff, R. (2015) The teaching and learning of social research methods: developments in pedagogical knowledge. *International Journal of Social Research Methodology*, 18(5), 455-461.
- Shulman, L. (1986) Those who understand: Knowledge growth in teaching. *Educational Researcher*, 15, 4-14.
- Wagner, C., Garner, M. & Kawulich, B. (2011) The state of the art of teaching research methods in the social sciences: towards a pedagogical culture. *Studies in Higher Education*, 36(1):75-88.