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Overview

Research methods are a core element of student learning within Master's level study in education. As individuals make the transition from undergraduate to doctoral study, Master's degrees have become increasingly important not only in laying the foundation of criticality and a deepening and widening subject knowledge but also in ensuring a basic understanding of research design. As such, research methods modules at Master's level are extremely important in ensuring a positive and critical grounding in both the theoretical and practical aspects of designing and undertaking primary research. However, it is sometimes the case that research methods modules are perceived as sterile and detached from the main elements of course provision at Master's level. If research methods are taught in a decontextualized vacuum, it is unlikely that students will see how this links to the other parts of their Master's programme. Several recent review contributions (Wagner, 2011; Earley, 2014; Kilburn et al, 2014) highlight the lack of research available which critically assesses the pedagogies which are deployed by lecturers in helping students to make sense of this complex area of study, or which consider the progression of research methods education as students progress from level to level. Kilburn et al (2014) state that in a period since 2007 only 24 papers have been published which focus on how teachers facilitate learning in research methods courses. Of this sample, only 10 focus on Master's level study.

If research methods pedagogy is poorly understood, this can be particularly detrimental for groups which are international in nature. There are added issues which need to be considered in international student groups due to the wide diversity of cultural, linguistic and disciplinary backgrounds.

This project used a mixed methods approach across an experimental Master's level research methods module:

1. To understand the learning experiences of a group of MA International Education Master's students within a research methods module
2. To critically assess the use of an experimental approach to a research methods module and the pedagogies which are used therein.
3. To assess the degree to which a 'thick descriptive' mixed and multiple methods approach has utility in fostering critical insights into student learning and course pedagogy within a Master's setting.

Methodology and Methods

The project made use of a mixed methods exploratory and evaluative methodological design as a way of capturing different perspectives of the 'research methods pedagogic system'. The elements which allowed for a rich data set to be collected involved:

1) Baseline data: focussing on prior learning about research methods, and on expectations and pre-existing knowledge and conceptualisation.

2) Lesson Study: used with four sessions throughout the course. This allowed us to consider in detail what we are attempting to develop in terms of concepts, knowledge and application. It also reflected back to us our assumptions and viewpoints in terms of planning, execution and evaluation of learning in the module.

3) Staged capture of experiences: at three points over the course of the module, we ran a questionnaire focusing on the concepts, content and application of research methods within the course and student confidence in each of these areas. These were supplemented by the use of general stimulated recall interviews with individuals to gain deeper insights.

4) Participatory focus groups: we held three participatory focus groups at the same time as the 'staged capture of experiences'. These were in the form of discussions to give the students an opportunity to help shape the form and detail of the module as it unfolded so that their insights became part of the ongoing planning process.

5) Documentary evidence: the collection of assignment work, our planning and resources documents and eventually, copies of dissertations were used to compare student outcomes against other data channels.

6) Self-explanation videos: At the end of each session within the module, students were asked to draw a concept map summarising what they believed they had learned. To help interpret these concept maps, we all asked them to record short (< 5 minutes) audio explanations.

The data capture approaches described above resulted in a very large volume of data giving what we are currently referring to as a 'thick description mixed methods action research' approach.

Conclusions, Expected Outcomes or Findings

The project has helped us to begin to understand the complexities involved in the learning of international students in research methods. A major insight relates to the importance of language in developing the understanding and application of research methods concepts. Research methods has a rich and complex conceptual framework which needs to be engaged with but which requires effort and application to begin to use with confidence. The results support a view of research methods training which simultaneously develops three elements of learning; the importance of helping

students to build a strong conceptual understanding of research methods to act as a framework for understanding how research methods fit together; the development of knowledge and understanding of the subject content of research methods, central to the development of a clear and critical research language; the development of a practical strand in student work so that skills and confidence in practical application can emerge across a module.

References

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