

Daniel Kilburn, Melanie Nind, Rose Wiles
University of Southampton, UK

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**Capacity building in advanced social science research methods:
Researching teaching and learning processes**

A paper proposed for the SRHE Annual Conference 2013, in the domain of academic practice, work, careers and cultures.

The UK HE/research community is paying increasing attention to the ways in which research methods are taught and learnt, in response to broader concerns regarding skills and capacities within the social sciences. These concerns are exemplified by the recent announcement of the Quantitative Methods Training Initiative for undergraduates, with sizeable funding from the ESRC, HEFCE and Nuffield Foundation (see British Academy 2012). To-date, however, there has been comparatively little empirical engagement with the processes involved in the teaching and learning of research methods amongst those already working in (or towards) a career in HE or non-academic research. As researchers from the hub of the ESRC National Centre for Research Methods (NCRM), we are especially interested in how advanced or innovative social research methods are taught and learnt within the UK social science community, in concordance with the remit of the NCRM to build methodological skills and capacity (NCRM 2009). In this new research, we engage methods teachers and learners with us in elucidating the distinctive pedagogical challenges, demands, knowledge and processes involved in this particular field. The early findings presented here offer insights into the forms of social research methods capacity-building that are increasingly prioritised for the UK academy in an era of global change.

The Global Context

The capacity to produce world leading or internationally competitive research, deploying innovative methodologies, and achieving international impact, is increasingly framed as a crucial area in which UK HE must respond to the rapid pace of global change (as exemplified by the REF 2014). In turn, the ESRC (2009:25) has highlighted the need to 'strengthen the capacity' of social science researchers to undertake more complex forms of analyses (e.g. involving cross-national, longitudinal or 'big' data – or deploying innovative qualitative and mixed methodologies). New technologies also pose

additional challenges here, whether in the case of data sourced from social media, the increasing use of digital audio-visual data, or new software and techniques for analysis.

In this context, concerns have been voiced regarding a perceived skills deficit in UK social science research, especially in terms of the potential to produce and critically engage with quantitative outputs. The ESRC's Strategic Advisor on Quantitative Methods Training recently described 'alarming' deficiencies in the development of undergraduates' quantitative skills as 'deeply prejudicial to the future health of the social sciences' (MacInnes 2012:2). Similarly, a recent international review of UK sociology concluded that the discipline's research methodologies must urgently be brought in-line with 'international state-of-the art standards' in order to maintain its 'global standing' (HaPS 2010:40). Rigorous, sophisticated and innovative methods of research and analysis do, of course, continue to be developed and deployed across the social sciences. Since 2004, NCRM has drawn upon these resources in co-ordinating training in a range of social research methods, alongside programmes such as the ESRC Researcher Development Initiative and work by NatCen and others. A key question remains, however, as to how this model of capacity-building is experienced by teachers and learners – a question towards which our research responds.

The Study

This research engages with the pedagogical challenges, processes and experiences associated with the form(s) short-course training that are posited as a means of building capacity in response to the issues outlined above. While some have argued that many of the skills associated with rigorous and in-depth social research simply cannot be 'taught' (Hammersley 2004), others have suggested that the issue instead lies with a lack of attention to pedagogy in this field. Indeed, Garner (2012:3) argues that to-date there is 'no evidence' of an 'exchange of ideas within a climate of systematic debate, investigation and evaluation surrounding all aspects of teaching and learning in the subject.

In response to this call for more systematic and empirically-informed pedagogical engagement in this field, our research offers what we understand to be one of the first in-depth explorations of the processes involved in teaching and learning research methods (beyond the confines of any particular course, institution or discipline). While the majority of existing research has reflected on the teaching of under/post-graduate programmes (for a systematic review of this literature, see Wagner et al. 2011), our study focuses on the teaching of advanced, specialist or innovative methods on short courses aimed at a diverse groups of learners. And unlike much of the existing research, we do not aim to evaluate standards, measure outcomes, or establish best practice – rather, we are concerned

with better understanding the distinctive pedagogical processes and experienced involved in the teaching and learning of these sorts of research methods.

Our research design includes; firstly, expert panels (after Galliers and Huang 2012) in which UK and international practitioners in the field of research methods teaching engage in individual interviews and collaborative analysis of pertinent themes arising from these; secondly, a focus group interview with doctoral researchers who have experience in short-course methods training; and thirdly, the use of video-stimulated reflections on training sessions as a basis of group interviews with teachers and learners (Lyle 2003). Through an iterative and detailed analysis of these data, we seek to explore the demands, challenges, and opportunities associated with this particular form of learning and elucidate its associated pedagogical content knowledge (Shulman 1986). This analysis will also examine the potential relationship between innovative or advanced research methodologies and innovations in teaching and learning.

In response to the Conference theme of how HE experiences are evolving in light of global trends, this paper will present our initial findings to the wider HE research community. These insights will reflect upon the challenges associated with teaching and learning in this field, explore the nature of pedagogical knowledge embodied by practitioners, and address the role of potential innovations in teaching and learning. Crucially – and in-line with our commitment to engaging with, rather than researching on, the communities concerned – we will involve Conference delegates in a critical dialogue regarding both these findings and the broader question of how this emerging area of pedagogical discourse and practice might respond to the global trends and challenges facing higher education and social science research.

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