

Relations between undergraduate students' accounts of sociology and their approaches to sociological research

Ashwin Paul¹, Abbas Andrea², McLean Monica³, ¹Lancaster University, UK,
²University of Lincoln, UK, ³University of Nottingham, UK

Abstract

*Advocates of close of the research teaching nexus argue that engaging students in research offers them an important way of developing more critical relations to knowledge. However, this argument is based on the assumption that engagement in research will in some way transform students' understanding of their disciplines. In this paper, we examine this assumption by analysing the relations between sociology students' accounts of sociological knowledge (what they think Sociology is as a discipline) and their approaches to conducting sociological research (how they report the outcomes of a research project). This is based on a phenomenographic analysis of interviews with sociology undergraduate students over the course of their undergraduate degrees, and their approaches to research exhibited in the texts of their final year, research-based, dissertations. Our initial findings suggest that students' engagement in research **in itself** does not transform their relations to sociological knowledge. This has important implications for the research-teaching nexus.*

Introduction

One of the advantages identified by advocates of the research teaching nexus is that engaging students in research offers an important way for students to develop more critical relations to knowledge (Jenkins and Healey 2005; Brew 2006). However, how is students' engagement in research informed by their current understandings of their disciplines? Does engagement in research transform these understandings of research or do these understandings place a limit on what students can achieve by engaging with research?

In this paper, we examine these questions by analysing the relations between sociology students' accounts of sociological knowledge (what they think Sociology is as a discipline, which we have reported in Ashwin et al. 2014) and their approaches to conducting sociological research (how they report the outcomes of a research project, which we are currently analysing).

Conceptual framework

Bernstein's (2000) notion of the pedagogic device offers a potentially fruitful way of thinking about this process for two reasons. First it brings together the contexts in which knowledge is produced (distribution rules), made ready for transmission through the recontextualising of that knowledge into curriculum (recontextualising rules), and is reproduced through teaching-learning practices (evaluation rules). In this way, pedagogic device can be seen to highlight three different forms of disciplinary knowledge: knowledge-as-research, knowledge-as-curriculum, and knowledge-as-student-understanding (Ashwin 2014). Second, what Bernstein (2000) makes clear is that the transformation of knowledge as it moves from each of these contexts is not simply based on the logic of knowledge itself. Rather these transformations are the sites of struggle in which different voices seek to impose particular versions of legitimate knowledge, curriculum and student understanding.

This way of viewing knowledge raises particular questions about the research-teaching nexus, because it emphasises the differences between the knowledge that is produced in academic research and the understandings that student develop through engaging with the curriculum. It also emphasises

the struggles that occur in trying to link knowledge-as-research with knowledge-as-student-understanding.

Methodology

The Pedagogic Quality and Inequality in University First Degrees Project was a three-year ESRC-funded investigation of sociology and related social science degree courses in four universities, which were given the pseudonyms Prestige, Selective, Community, and Diversity Universities in order to reflect their different reputations. The departments at Prestige and Selective have been regularly rated in the top third of UK higher education league tables for their research and teaching in Sociology, whilst those at Community and Diversity have been regularly rated in the bottom third.

Three years' intensive fieldwork produced rich data sets, including: in-depth interviews with 98 students eliciting biographical stories and their perceptions and experiences of higher education; 31 longitudinal case studies following students throughout the three years of their degree programmes; a survey of over 750 students; interviews with 16 staff; analysis of video recordings of teaching in each institution in each year of the degree (12 sessions); analysis of students' assessed work (examples from each year); a focus group discussion with tutors from all four institutions about students' assessed work; as well as documentary analysis and the collection of statistical data relating to the four departments.

This paper is based on an analysis of 86 interviews with the 31 case study students who we interviewed in over the course of their undergraduate degrees and the analysis of 14 of these students' dissertations. These interviews focused on students' identities, their experiences of studying at university and their wider experiences outside of university. In each interview they were asked about how they saw sociology as a discipline. We analysed our interview data using a phenomenographic approach (Marton and Booth 1997; Åkerlind 2005). The focus in our analysis of the interviews was on qualitative variation in the ways in which the students' described their understanding of sociology as a discipline. In analyzing the dissertations, we were focused on exploring the extent to which students critically questioned the central categories they used in their dissertations and how much they demonstrated reflexivity in their research.

Outcomes

Our analysis is still ongoing but initial outcomes suggest that in only three out of 14 cases was students' representation of knowledge in their dissertation clearly different from their accounts of sociology in their second year interview. This suggests that students' engagement in research **in itself** does not transform their relations to sociological knowledge. Rather there is a need for research-informed curriculum to be carefully designed in order to bring knowledge-as-research into a transformational relationship with knowledge-as-student-understanding. This is likely to be an intellectually demanding, creative and iterative process.

References

- Åkerlind, G. (2005) Variation and commonality in phenomenographic research methods. *Higher Education Research and Development*, 24, 321-334.
- Ashwin, P. (2014) Knowledge, curriculum and student understanding. *Higher Education* 67 (2).
- Ashwin, P., Abbas, A. & McLean, M. (in press) How do students' accounts of sociology change over the course of their undergraduate degrees? *Higher Education*. DOI 10.1007/s10734-013-9659-z.
- Bernstein, B. (2000). *Pedagogy, symbolic control and identity: Theory, research and critique*. Revised ed.. Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield.
- Brew, A. (2006) *Research and Teaching: Beyond the Divide*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Jenkins, A., and Healey, M. (2005) *Institutional strategies to link teaching and research*. York,

UK: Higher Education Academy.

Marton, F. and Booth, S. (1997). *Learning and Awareness*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associ