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Title The pedagogy of social science research methods: a textbook case

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The pedagogy of social science research methods: a textbook case.

Paper Outline

To date, there is a significant consensus across the literature that research methods teaching lacks the pedagogic culture necessary to ensure excellent teaching and learning (Earley, 2014; Wagner et al., 2011, Kilburn et al., 2014). This is manifest in a lack of dialogue that can be observed in cross-citation, a developed research literature, networks, forums, debate and robust discourse on the values and practices of research method teaching and learning. At present, teachers of methods cannot draw upon an established pedagogic literature when developing their teaching (Earley, 2014). What there is can be characterised as largely based upon individual reflections, rather than cross-case empirical research and analysis (Nind, Kilburn & Luff, 2015). Whilst these have value in developing emergent pedagogic culture, significant gaps remain in understanding how methods expertise are developed in higher education. This is troubling given that the ability to undertake and evaluate research are foundational within the social sciences (Ryan et al., 2014).

To engage this concern, the ESRC is funding a [authors'] project at [authors' institution]. Our scoping study builds upon this research (presented by [authors], to SRHE 2015), which used mixed methods to explore the distinctive pedagogical challenges faced by methods teachers and learners (see [authors] 2014a, 2014b; [authors], 2016). However, our current work, funded by SRHE, addresses an important new dimension, moving from methods teaching and learning practices to consider the important role of pedagogic resources, specifically, social science research methods textbooks in the development of methods competencies.

Textbooks deserve particular attention in this context. Research methods textbooks are amongst the most highly cited in the social sciences (Green, 2016). This is a resilient and influential area of academic publishing. Both within and outside the classroom methods textbooks are near totemic resources for methods learners. However, the pedagogies of these books remain largely unexamined.

In this study, we offer an analysis of the pedagogies embedded in a substantial selection of leading textbooks designed for postgraduate students and researchers, to help identify the pedagogical approaches and strategies employed and to stimulate the pedagogic dialogue that is needed.

The research comprises a literature review of 30 social science research methods textbooks. Our sample sought to recognise a spread of qualitative, quantitative methods and mixed-methods monographs by single authors, or small authorial teams that could supply a coherent pedagogic voice across a volume. We shortlisted from a cross-section of 324 books, drawn from all social science disciplines and identified on the basis of: i) authorship by acknowledged pedagogic leaders in the field (Lucas & Claxton, 2013; [authors], 2016), ii) citation as a signifier of impact (see Green, 2016; Martin-Martin et al., 2014), iii) revision through multiple editions, as an indication of the authors' sustained pedagogic development of the text, and its genealogy within methods learning, iv) listings in current course collections and reading lists for leading social science methods summer schools, v) sustained sales / 'best-seller' status. Shortlisting required judgements about the relative value of these criteria. For example, taken alone, citation is a blunt metric. It shows how a source is applied in published research, but citation does not indicate the extent to which a textbook is read,

or applied in student work. This approach has limits. New authors, future classics, specialist methods books and are unlikely to be adequately recognised by this qualitative formula. However, for our purposes, these landmark texts offer a verdant grounds for data collection and analysis. Textbooks were reviewed according to an iteratively developed analytic template.

Our findings afford new insights into cutting edge textbook pedagogies that address the mix of procedural knowledge, theoretical understanding and technical know-how that is arguably unique to building methodological expertise. In this presentation we will elucidate the pedagogies that are both implicit and explicit within our textbook sample. We will discuss distinct pedagogical approaches articulated by different textbooks - from reference, to course-based, and hybrid forms – demonstrating diverse pedagogical approaches to managing challenges such as difficulty, methodological pluralism and interdisciplinarity.

In terms of form, we notice the array in-text pedagogical devices deployed to connect learners to research and spur active learning. Functionally, we find the pedagogies of textbook as a vehicle, are used to effect the pedagogical content knowledge (Shulman, 1984) that are characteristic of methodological teaching. For example, authors deploy authorial voice in the first, second or third person (or alternate between these) to draw attention to the ways in which research is situated and necessitates a standpoint; key issues for reflexive methodological learning ([authors]). The importance of engaging multiple perspectives to model different approaches to methods, and expose the ‘messy reality’ of methods practices is also pertinent (for example, Strauss & Corbin’s (2015) use of ‘insider insights’ from guest authors in the field, or Fields’ (2013) use of personas to voice questions and insights).

Many authors are explicit about their pedagogical approaches, discussing how their book might be read or applied by different audiences, gesturing to how teaching and authorial roles blur and how they have engaged students’ learning experience to develop their materials across editions. We will however, discuss implicit pedagogies also. There is a significant discourse within the field that holds that many methods cannot be taught in theory, expressing the tension between the abstract and the applied signature pedagogies of research methods. In short, the pedagogies of learning-by-doing, and associated experiential pedagogies are deemed essential. Our findings suggest that authors work creatively to address this divide.

SRHE 2017 is themed around challenges facing higher education and the catalysts for change that may be held in tension with the longstanding values of academe. As research councils seek to answer the demands of the knowledge economy, pedagogy can be occluded by discourses of training and capacity building. In response, we seeks to spur pedagogic dialogue, arguing for sustained attention to the pedagogies of research methods, through research that seeks to develop and enrich pedagogical culture of this emerging field.

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