

Editorial

Welcome to the eleventh issue of Building Research Capacity, a journal of the Teaching and Learning Research Programme (TLRP). It has been exactly a year since the last issue of this journal was published. Since that time the TLRP has entered into its second phase of research capacity building, under the Associate Director Stephen Baron, University of Strathclyde. The core strategy of TLRP's Phase 2 Capacity Building activities is to work with authentic social networks of educational researchers in order better to embed capacity building activity in sustainable ways.

However, it has been decided to 'relaunch' Building Research Capacity. The TLRP will publish two issues of this journal a year, and will continue to include short articles about methodological developments, activities and resources to enhance the research capacity of education research.

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Working with Users in Educational Research: some implications for research capacity building

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...the more open and comprehensive the scientific community, the more socially robust will be the knowledge it produces.

(Gibbons, in Nature, 1999)

We draw on a TLRP-funded seminar series which examined a variety of forms of user-engagement; their purposes; and their implications. The series attempted to understand the intertwined features of new education spaces where research and policy can meet; the negotiations with policy communities that occur there; and the implications for these negotiations and for research design in the production of pedagogic knowledge in partnership with practitioners.

Part of the background to the series was the statement by the then Secretary of State David Blunkett (2000) that

Too much social science research is inward looking, too piecemeal rather than helping to build knowledge in a cumulative way...issues for research are

too supplier driven rather than focusing on the key issues of concern to policy-makers, practitioners and the public at large.

This challenge to the university-based producers of knowledge reflected Stehr's (1994) observation that currently experts are 'at best' part of loose associations or groups providing knowledge to those who choose or can access it to enable them to transform the world.

Indeed, the 1990s saw ideas of the knowledge society becoming common currency and new spaces opening up. These were forms of agora or meeting places where knowledge products vied for influence on the way in which the world was transformed. Across academe considerable attention was paid to how these knowledge products were arrived at and warranted (Gibbons, Limoges, Nowotny, Schwartzman, Scott and Trow, 1994; Nonaki and Takeuchi, 1995). But relatively little attention was paid to negotiations in these new agorae; how they were being shaped; and given value by those

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who championed particular processes of knowledge production. TLRP was the first large-scale systematic attempt to get to grips with these aspects of knowledge production and use in educational research.

The Nature of Pedagogic Research in Education

We, of course, recognised that different genres of research would make different demands. In Figure 1 we show a broad categorisation of beliefs about the nature and use of research-based knowledge derived from looking across all the projects, within and beyond the TLRP, that we discussed.

This categorisation points to differences in how the knowledge products of research studies might claim to be 'socially robust' (Gibbons, 1999). User-engagement in the example of dualist research that we discussed was in the form of comments on research instruments; some data collection; and help with dissemination. The contribution of these potential users of the research products, increased the demands on project management. Nonetheless, this form of co-construction of research-based curricula, part of a long tradition in, for example, science education research, was highly valued because of its impact on the relevance of what was produced and its acceptability to the practice community.

The TLRP studies which included action research methods, the second broad category in Figure 1, presented pictures of complex iterative research designs which had a great deal in common with design experiments (Cobb, Confrey, diSessa, Lehrer and Schauble, 2003). Here

ideas were tested and developed in classrooms by teachers in cycles of iterations which involved the university-based research teams. This process revealed productive tensions to be managed. For example, trade-offs when negotiating the research process with practitioners were necessarily restricted. It was essential that the practitioners saw the time they spent on the research as worthwhile for their pupils; equally it was important that they really did engage with the ideas being tested. Also, as the practitioner researchers were so central to the studies, boundaries between professional researchers and practitioner researchers became blurred adding to tensions for the university-based researchers between being responsive to changes affecting practitioner communities while remaining faithful to the research designs.

Boundaries and different agenda were also evident in the third broad category of study. Here studies were aimed at developing and refining concepts which helped to explain and take forward understandings of practice. Researchers were not working with practitioners to test ideas, but to generate fresh ways of explaining what was going on in both existing and emerging practices within relatively long-term partnerships. They took a systemic focus which called for on-going dialogues and which meant that they were more likely to be welcomed by practitioners when the research project meshed with practitioners' attempts to rethink practices; the re-configuration of practices in integrated children's services was one such case.

Ways of Knowing and Boundary Crossing from Research and Practice

The categorisation revealed some

common themes about working with practitioners across genres, with implications for both research design and capacity. Here we focus particularly on project management and the mediation of research-based knowledge into practice communities. The cross boundary work that characterised project management in the studies we examined did require that university based researchers to be familiar with what Knorr Cetina (1998) refers to as the 'epistemic cultures' or ways of making sense of the communities with which we work.

The criteria for warranting research employed by the science teachers in the first category of Figure 1 reflected their disciplinary backgrounds. These criteria were different from those acceptable to the educational psychologists, trained in systems theory, who were involved in the study of learning to work in integrated children's services placed in the third category. While epistemic cultures may vary across the broad field of Education, they do need to be understood and brought into knowledge construction processes for mutual learning across research-practice divides. As Gibbons (1999) explains: 'experts must now...try to integrate what they 'know' now with what others want to 'do' in the future.' That is, researchers in some fields need to have strong links with these fields if they are to engage with its practices, anticipations and emergent challenges and to offer insights that might inform the way the field is able to look to the future.

The mutual learning that can arise when research knowledge is linked with the intentions of practice reminds us that pedagogic researchers need to be adept at weaving their understandings into the con-

Figure 1. Beliefs about the Use of Research Knowledge

Type of Research	Based on a Dualist Separation of Mind and World	Passionately Engaged with Practice	Based on Non-dualist Assumptions about Mind and World
Primary Approach to the Use of Research Knowledge	The application of robust research findings	Improving education while studying it to understand it better	Refining ideas in and with the field

cerns and constraints of practice. One suggestion offered in the seminar series for work on boundaries between research and practice, in order to enable this weaving, was to incorporate 'boundary zones' (Konkola, 2001) into research design. These zones or fora are sites for discussion, where people's own organisational priorities are recognised; where ideas can be shared; trust built; and collaboration stimulated (Edwards, Barnes, Plewis, Morris *et al*, 2006). Rather than places for one-way dissemination of research findings, they function as sites of mutual learning where knowledge flows in and out of projects. Differences in interpretations and ways of knowing become explicit in discussions of evidence in these sessions and can themselves become legitimate focuses of discussion.

User-engagement in research studies also adds a pedagogic function to research management as it involves mediating interpretations across boundaries so that changing interpretations of the problem being studied keep pace with each other. In the three categories of research we outlined in Figure 1, boundary management and knowledge mediation served slightly different purposes. In the more dualist approaches, ideas or materials were field-tested by practitioners and fine-tuned as a result of that testing. The research teams were clearly in control of the research agenda and the field-testing was carefully managed. If the problem changed, these changes were accommodated by adjustments made by the research team to what was next field-tested.

In the design experiments there was a similar focus on refining what is known, but there was also an emphasis on enabling practitioner researchers to *know how to know* as researchers to enhance their own professional development. Project management here was a complex interweaving of developing interpretations into the work of practitioners across a range of sites to maintain coherence and confidence that practitioners were indeed working

with the ideas being developed and tested across the project. It was the job of the research team to work these interpretations back into the project as a whole, while allowing enough space for practitioners to continue to work on and reinterpret the problem.

In the third category of study the focus was less on refining what is known and more on teasing out and labelling practices in systems so that both practices and systems might be developed. Interpretations of the problems of practice were likely to change; and practitioners' interpretations of their practices and their purposes were therefore central. Here project management was an on-going orchestration of understandings across sites and likely to be part of the research process itself.

In summary, the expertise that practitioner users could bring to the research processes needed to be elicited, collected, and incorporated into the development of projects. This was a co-ordination job that was invariably left to researchers.

One outcome of recognising the distributed nature of expertise in cross-boundary collaborations is an increased focus on the relationships that lead to expertise being recognised, accessed and used (Edwards, 2006; *in press*). Lundvall (1996; 2000) identified know-who as a much needed new capability alongside the know-what, know-why and know-how of professional competence because 'it involves the social capacity to establish relationships to specialised groups in order to draw on their expertise.' (Lundvall, 1996). The 'confidence pathways' traced by Knorr Cetina in her study of the making of knowledge in science communities (Knorr Cetina, 1998) support Lundvall's claim. These pathways are part of the social practices of systems and are often informal. We would suggest that if the know-who of distributed expertise is important for making the most of user-involvement, it needs to be labelled and acknowledged in

strategies for building research capacity.

Research and Policy: Knowing How to Know-Who

The seminar series also examined the interfaces between research and policy at local, regional and national levels. Knowing how to know who in order to take research findings and the ideas generated and refined in studies within reach of policy was a source of considerable frustration across projects. Guidance for getting ideas across was offered by experienced knowledge brokers. This included: identify key messages; recognise the limitations of the evidence; be persistent; use multiple formats when communicating i.e. one page, three pages and 25 pages; don't dumb-down, but don't blind with science. Also these knowledge brokers, such as the Government Social Research Unit and CUREE, are able to identify the preoccupying questions of the day and make links with research.

Fora for conversations between researchers and policy makers which catch the wave of policy concerns have been a feature of TLRP. Both mediation by brokers and TLRP fora resonate with advice from Sandra Nutley in a seminar that researchers should analyse and engage with policy networks, which include think tanks, professional groups, internal analysts, rather than think only in linear terms of direct links between researchers and those most immediately connected with policy making.

Part of the problem is how education is positioned as a policy field that has tended to be backward looking. An orientation to the future in interactions with users of research returns us to Gibbons' suggestion that university-based researchers need to be able to connect what they know with what practitioners intend to do (Gibbons, 1999). Focusing on ideas that take the field forward is a particular form of expertise that needs some unpacking so that we can recognise it more easily. Project management is

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therefore a difficult pedagogic role, requiring a sound grasp of how knowledge is produced in a range of epistemic communities and a capacity to mediate between them and is a research role that increasingly needs to be taken seriously.

Thanks to the members of the seminar core group and presenters who are listed on the website along with summaries of each event. <http://www.tlrp.org/themes/seminar/edwards/index.html>

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Conceptualizing, Categorizing, Contextualizing – It's the Name of the Game!

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Introduction

If learning is lifelong and lifewide, what makes something specifically a learning context and how do we conceptualize learning and context? These are the sorts of questions that have been pursued in the TLRP Thematic Seminar Series, *Contexts, communities, networks: Mobilizing learners' resources and relationships in different domains* (<http://crl.gcal.ac.uk/tlrp.php>). This article reviews some of the positions and issues arising from the Series, focusing on the questions of what constitutes a learning context and how the relationship between learning and context can best be conceptualized. These are not new questions. Chaiklin and Lave (1996) suggest that all practices are contextualized and involve learning, but how

those practices are conceptualized is more contentious. The Series drew upon situated learning theory, activity theory, actor-network theory, complexity theory and pragmatism to explore issues in relation to learning across the life course.

There are more questions than answers

Under the sign of lifelong learning, a great deal of attention is being given to those domains outwith educational institutions and other structured learning opportunities wherein people are held to learn. The workplace, the home and the community are all held to be domains of learning. In this sense, learning contexts are distributed across the social order and embedded in practices. That this is the case has become

perhaps most apparent in the development of distributed, blended and online learning through the use of information and communication technologies and the use of the Internet as a site and resource for learning, with its associated network metaphors.

Insofar as we expand our concept of learning to embrace apparently all domains of life, we might be said to start to lose the conceptual basis for talking specifically of a learning context. What is specific to a learning context which is not to be found in other contexts? What characterizes a specifically learning context? Who names these contexts as learning contexts? The latter is important insofar as the discourses of educators and researchers are not neces-

sarily shared by those who are engaging in practices within the domains identified as contexts of learning. Thus, for instance, doing family history may be considered a leisure activity by those who are engaging in it, when for many educators, this would be considered a form of learning or even research. The meaning and therefore significance of practices can therefore vary. Insofar as people do not identify themselves as learning in different domains, they may not draw upon the resources and relationships available to them for learning in other domains.

People also move in and between domains and may be said to carry with them aspects of their learning and identity. This may be from task to task within a single domain or between domains, signifying different *distances, mediators and relationships* between contexts. The question then emerges about how we understand a learning context, when the learning is not necessarily bounded by a specific set of institutional relationships and structures. Pedagogic approaches may seek to bound the learning and the learner, but there is also the sense in which there is a desire for learning to be mobile, to be for a purpose. This is exemplified, for instance, in the discourses of transferability and transferable skills and those of the recognition of prior experiential learning.

In this sense, a context may be considered a bounded container within which the learning takes place or a more fluid and relational set of networked practices. In the former, there is a sense in which there is closure to contain or structure the learning, which once acquired may, in principle, be poured from one domain container to another. Relational framings find expression in theories of learning that emphasize activity and mediators. Here, rather than a thing, context is an outcome of activity or is itself a set of practices – contextualizing rather than context. Practices and learning are not bounded by context but emerge relationally and are polycontextual; they have the potential to be mobi-

lised in a range of domains and sites based upon participation in multiple communities of practice.

To understand context as a container or in relational terms has effects on how we conceptualize the mobilising of learning across domains and associated pedagogic practices. To reject the notion of context in favour of that of activity or practice is one strategy. To change the understanding of context is another. During the course of the Series, it was towards the latter that we tended to turn.

The Long and Winding Road

By looking beyond the context of conventional sites for learning, the concept of context has extended into the dimension of relationships between people, objects and mediating tools. Conceptually there was a move towards the notion of context as an effect of practices or contextualization. In particular, the focus has been specifically on learning contexts as an effect of practices rather than the context pre-existing those learning practices. Here there is also an issue about the conceptualizing of activities and practices within different traditions and whether they are synonymous or different.

Exploring the ways in which practices from different aspects of a person's life can be mobilized as learning in particular contexts has brought to the fore relational understandings of learning and the key metaphor of the network. By examining cases of learning across the lifecourse and from differing domains, the Series has pointed to the changing relations in the effecting of a learning context, for example, the pedagogical relationship between parents, pupils and teachers in primary education, and between peers and lecturers in community-based education. This points to a horizontal set of relationships, which are also nested hierarchically within institutional, curriculum and policy practices. A learning context is therefore an emergent effect of the relations of people and artefacts. This in turn points to the centrality of

both the material/technological and semiotic mediations in the practices of teaching and learning, even when undertaken in a closed classroom and within a tightly bounded curriculum.

Thus, in order to mobilize resources across domains of people's lives, the Series points to the importance of recontextualization as practices through which to enable learning from one domain to be realized as learning within another, where what constitutes learning cannot be taken for granted. This is taken to not simply be a cognitive achievement but mediated by artefacts that can be salient in different situations. This suggests that learning and the potential of people are limited by the inter-related discourses and practices that bound too narrowly a context as a container.

However, there may be certain situations in which such bounding is appropriate for learning, for example, in some forms of disciplinary knowledge. What this indicates is that notions of expansive learning, while helpful, are not relevant to all situations and that it is a question of a more explicit articulation of the degrees and forms of expansiveness necessary to effect specific learning contexts and contexts of learning and contexts for learning. Here there are important questions of value introduced in terms of what constitutes 'good' or 'worthwhile' learning, as issues of expansion and restriction require some understanding of these in order that a judgement of contextualisation is possible.

The Series has also raised interesting methodological questions about what constitutes the unit of analysis in research when a more relational understanding of learning is adopted, and reflexively opened up the practices of categorization in research, practice and policy. These arenas can therefore be explored for the mobilizations of certain concepts/subjects/disciplines to represent and order what is occurring. This involves boundary-marking, as

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certain concepts are mobilized rather than others, or perhaps more accurately they are mobilized through the process of othering. Concepts are often taken to be pre-existing in a social reality to be explored rather than fashioned through discursive and material practices, that is, boundary-marking. In other words, while objects are 'an effect of stable arrays or networks of relations' (Law 2002: 91), they are often treated as naturalistic objects, pre-existing in the social world. If we accept this view, we follow Pels, *et al* (2002: 11) in their view that 'objects need symbolic framings, storylines and human spokespersons in order to acquire social lives;

social relationships and practices in turn need to be materially grounded in order to gain spatial and temporal endurance'. It is the material and symbolic practices of conceptualization, categorization and contextualizing – the marking of boundaries – that enables certain practices to be identified as specifically learning context.

Having written this, there is of course much more work for further consideration, as there are still more questions than answers.

Note

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sents an attempt to synthesize the discussions among the Planning Group and participants in the Seminar Series.

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The Concept of a 'Fair Test' is Relevant to all Researchers: introducing the Trials in Public Policy Project

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What follows is a summary of my own conclusions drawn from participation in the international debate on education research methods: a debate that is growing by the decade, as demand apparently grows for sound evidence on which to base educational policy and practice. I shall set out a number of summary propositions. Interested readers can trace the further basis for these propositions in my research writings – examples of which are provided. These propositions are used as an introduction to the work of the ESRC-funded Trials in Public Policy Project.

A key ethical concern for those conducting or using publicly-funded education research ought to be the quality of the research, and so the robustness of the findings, and the security of the conclusions drawn.

Until recently, very little of the writing on the ethics of education research has been concerned with quality. The concern has been largely for the participants in the research process, which is perfectly proper, but this emphasis may have

blinded researchers to their responsibility to those not participating in the research process. The taxpayers and charity-givers who fund the research, and the general public who use the resulting education service, have the right to expect that the research is conducted in such a way that it is possible for the researcher to test and answer the questions asked. Generating secure findings for use could involve a variety of factors including care and attention, sceptical consideration of plausible alternatives, independent replication, transparent prior criteria for success and failure, use of multiple complementary methods, and explicit testing of theoretical explanations through randomised controlled trials or similar experimental designs (Gorard 2002a).

It is helpful to consider the research enterprise as a cycle of complementary phases and activities, because this illustrates how all methods can have an appropriate place in the full cycle of research.

Experimental designs, like in-depth work or secondary analysis, have

an appropriate place in the cycle of research from initial idea to development of the results. The main reason to emphasise experiments at this point in time is not because they are more important than other phases in the cycle, but because they represent a stage of work that is largely absent in education research. If nearly all of education research were currently conducted as laboratory experiments then I would be one of the commentators pleading for more and better in-depth work or secondary analysis, for example. Other weak points in the cycle are currently the systematic synthesis of what we already know in an area of work, the design or engineering of what we already know into usable products for policy and practice, and the longer-term monitoring of the real-world utility of these products (Gorard with Taylor 2004, Gorard et al. 2004).

Working towards an experimental design can be an important part of any research enterprise, even where an experiment is not envisaged or even possible.

Sometimes a true experiment, such as a large randomised controlled trial, is not necessary, and sometimes it is not possible. An experiment is not necessary in a variety of research situations, including where the research question does not demand it, or where a proposed intervention presents no *prima facie* case for extended trialling. An experiment may also not be possible in a variety of research situations, including where the intervention has complete coverage, or has already been implemented for a long time, or where it would be impossible to allocate cases or clusters at random. However, a 'thought experiment' is always possible, in which the researchers consider no practical or ethical constraints except answering the research question as clearly as possible. In then having to compromise from this 'ideal' to conduct the actual research, the researcher may come to realise how much more they could be doing. There might then be more natural experimental designs, more practitioner experiments, and surely more studies with appropriate comparison groups rather than no explicit comparison at all (a situation which reviews show is the norm for UK academic research in education). There might also be more humility about the quality of the findings emanating from the compromise design (Gorard 2002b, 2003a).

Part of the problem of research quality lies in traditional research methods training and 'experts'.

In the UK, traditional methods training for new researchers in university departments of education generally starts by introducing students to differences between types of research, and emphasising the purportedly incommensurable values underlying the variety of approaches to discovery. Most obviously, researchers are introduced to a supposed paradigmatic division between 'qualitative' and 'quantitative' studies in a way that encourages methods identities based on a choice of only one of these 'paradigms'. This leads many to indulge in paradigmatic strife, or to

write off entire fields of endeavour – as being 'positivist', for example. Some commentators try to heal these schisms after they have been created, but there is a shortage of texts and training resources that take the far superior approach of assuming, following Heraclitus, that there is a universal underlying logic to all research. Such an approach leads to a focus from the outset of training on the craft of research, thus bringing design, data collection, analysis, and warranting results to the fore, leaving little or no place for paradigms (Gorard 2003b, 2004a).

Part of the problem of research quality may lie in a lack of appropriate integrated use of numbers.

Since experimental designs are seen by many, incorrectly, to be 'quantitative' in nature, a lack of researchers willing and able to work with numbers could also be part of the reason for the lack of experimental work. There may be a range of influences at play here, including poor maths teaching in schools, lower ability of social science students in comparison to other disciplines in terms of maths, selection of methods courses by students in terms of perceived ease, and the widespread misunderstanding that being a 'qualitative' researcher means never having to deal with numbers. However, I am coming increasingly to the view that a major share of the blame lies with 'quantitative' researchers. They seem to prefer devising more and more complex methods of analysis rather than devoting their energy to creating higher quality datasets that are easier to analyse. They often present their research in exclusive and unnecessarily technical ways. They generally assume, incorrectly, that numbering is the same as measuring, that reliability is the same as validity, that probabilistic statistics can be used with purposive samples, and that any use of numbers must be based on sampling theory. This is not the way forward (Gorard 2006a, 2006b).

Part of the problem of research

quality lies in an unwillingness to test cherished theories.

Another element of the methods crisis stems from a love of specific theories, and a consequent unwillingness to test them for failure. A typical piece of evaluation in UK education is either commissioned by, or conducted by, those responsible for the programme being evaluated. There may then be pressure from funders to 'finesse' the results. I have certainly been contacted by evaluators seeking some new kind of analysis that will gainsay the surface findings, and which will support instead their underlying belief that the programme must be being effective. This is no different, in principle, to the dredging of data that goes on *post hoc* in other forms of research as well. I have also experienced too many cases in which researchers appear to distort data in order to help preserve their prior beliefs. Some methods experts in the UK actually advise researchers to 'take sides' before conducting research, and not to publish unhelpful results. Of course, it remains true that the evidence-based approach to policy-making and practice is itself untested in education, and still far from satisfactory in fields such as health sciences. But this is a reason to test it, not reject it out of hand (Gorard 2004b, Gorard and Fitz 2006).

Much of the solution lies in greater scepticism, because the problem is not really one of methods at all.

Some of the criticism of education research in the US, UK and elsewhere during the 1990s was concerned with relevance. But education is a very applied field of research. I do not find, as I review evidence for different projects, much published research that has no relevance to some important or useful component of education. The criticism should more properly be directed to the poor quality of much research, where even though the findings may have relevance they still cannot be used safely. In response to these perceived deficiencies, formal capacity-building activities,

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ties have tended to focus on solutions in terms of methods, such as having more quantitative work, more systematic reviews, or more experiments. These, to my mind, are not the answer. The answer for me lies in genuine curiosity, coupled with outright scepticism. These characteristics lead a researcher to suit methods to purpose, try different approaches, replicate and triangulate, and to test their findings. It leads them to consider carefully the logic and hidden assumptions on the path from evidence to conclusions, automatically generating caveats and multiple plausible interpretations from the standard query – ‘if my conclusions are actually incorrect, then how else could I explain what I have found?’. Some improvement may come from researcher development, but, somewhat pessimistically for an educator, I have come to believe that the role of capacity-building is limited here (Gorard 2002c, 2005).

In the spirit of capacity-building, the project ‘Training in pragmatic social interventions: problems, promises, and protocols, is part of the Researcher Development Initiative set up by the ESRC, and led by myself and Carole Torgerson from the University of York. The Researcher Development Initiative (RDI) supports the training and development of researchers in the social sciences at all stages of their career. Established by the ESRC’s Training and Development Board, RDI contributes to the development of a robust national training infrastructure intended to drive forward research training in a systematic way. RDI aims to facilitate the production and deployment of a range of activities and resources, including student-led activities; training for research students and researchers throughout their career; regional training events; and the development and use of new tools and packages for training purposes. RDI is linked closely with other ESRC training activities and resources, such as the National Centre for Research Methods, and the Research Methods

Programme (further information available at <http://www.rdi.ac.uk/>).

The Trials Project itself is open to participation by all, and we hope that readers will register interest in events, and in receiving the free quarterly newsletter ‘Trials in Public Policy’, by contacting <http://trials-pp.co.uk/>. There is a helpline for those conducting or planning a trials-based evaluation, a gateway to resources and methods articles, a register of trials, publicity for our free training events that can be held in your own institution covering both teaching and learning about trials, and we have set up working groups looking at a variety of issues, including research methods training curricula, the reporting of trials, and the definition of terms. In order to provide and create these resources, we have assembled a team of experts in the conduct of public policy interventions, based across the UK and abroad. Across a range of fields in public policy, we wish to contribute to the growth of the number of researchers who hold learned and reasonable views on the value of rigorous interventions, who can be appropriately critical and appreciative of progress in this area.

Second Annual Conference – Randomised Controlled Trials in the Social Sciences: The Way Forward, 12th to 14th September 2007, University of York

There is a call for papers for this forthcoming conference, for which further details are available at the website <http://trials-pp.co.uk/> or by emailing educ505@york.ac.uk. In September 2006, the University of York hosted the first Annual Conference on Randomised Controlled Trials in the Social Sciences. The focus was on challenges and prospects for the conduct and use of trials to improve public policy. The conference was preceded by extended workshops, open to all, on the design and analysis of cluster randomised trials, and on the synthesis of evidence from a series of trials. The opening and closing keynote speakers were Thomas Cook (Northwestern University) and Philip

Davies (then at the Treasury and now the Campbell Collaboration). The peer-reviewed papers were both substantive and methodological in nature, and included work on voter motivation, crime prevention, benefits schemes, job-seeking, adult literacy, children’s services, health promotion, economic evaluation, and forensic settings. Full details, copies of presentations, and access to a full recording of the sessions are available via the website above.

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Developing Interactive Vignettes in a Study of Young People's Injury-Risking Behaviour

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Introduction

This brief report discusses the creation of an interactive form of vignette, which was employed as part of a three-year PhD project into young people's injury-risking behaviour in leisure settings. Finch (1987: 105) defines vignettes as, 'short stories about hypothetical characters in specified circumstances to whose situation the interviewee is invited to respond.' Whilst historically a technique employed by the cognitive and behavioural sciences, the use of vignettes in qualitative research is becoming increasingly popular.

As the use of vignettes in qualitative research has increased, they have tended to adopt a distinctively qualitative form. These have become known as developmental or 'continuous narrative' vignettes (Hughes, 1998). Unlike 'snapshot' scenarios (see Bloor, 1991 for example) developmental vignettes follow a scenario through a series of stages with participants usually being invited to comment at each development in the story's progression. Whilst these have proved an effective tool in qualitative research, scenarios have tended to be presented to participants in relatively uninspiring mediums – usually on paper and read out by the interviewer – and leave little or no room for the story to adapt in order to accommodate the participant's response. As a result, Hughes (1998) argues that interviewees can be left feeling that they have given the 'wrong' answer if the scenario develops contrary to their expectations, which can culminate in their becoming upset, confused, and disinterested in the research. With an

increasing emphasis on participatory research techniques (Qvortrup, 1994) vignettes which are presented to children in exciting and accessible formats, and where young people themselves are 'at the helm' of the story's progression, offer rich rewards for researchers, especially those from the new social studies of childhood perspective (James and Prout, 1997).

Constructing interactive vignettes

By hyper-linking Microsoft PowerPoint slides, gender specific vignettes were created involving hypothetical young people being faced with decisions over whether or not to engage in risky forms of leisure activities. In the initial stages of the vignettes participants were presented with a deliberately vague scenario and a choice of usually two diametrically opposed courses of action - the 'safe' and the 'risky' option. These options were hyper-linked to subsequent slides relevant to those options. If participants selected the 'risky' course of action they would be presented with further and potentially more dangerous risk decisions. If they elected the safer option, the character in the scenario would usually face pressure from peers to reverse this decision. The intention behind this was to explore the ways in which risk behaviour can escalate from mundane interactions to potentially dangerous situations, via a series of gradual and seemingly unconnected events.

After piloting, these vignettes were used in semi-structured interviews with 15 young people and their parents in South Wales. Participants were purposefully selected from a

survey of three hundred parents presenting their children (aged 11-15) to a local A&E ward with injuries sustained in non-domestic, non-road traffic settings in the spring of 2004. The purpose of the interviews was to explore parents' and young people's lived experiences of accidental injury. In order to ensure that the vignettes were as salient as possible to participants, the extent to which the child's accident resembled those events represented in the vignettes was a key criterion for sampling. The majority of participants were from 'managerial and professional backgrounds' (National Statistics, 2000) and with one exception all young people were described by their parents as 'White'. Parents and their children were, whenever possible, interviewed separately. Listed below, are some of the key advantages which making the vignettes interactive brought to the interviews.

Character construction

As mentioned above, one of the principal arguments for making vignettes interactive is that it is the participant who determines how the scenario unfolds. Not only does this reduce the possibility of making participants feel that they have given the wrong answers but actively includes them in the generation of the character's identity. This then allows the researcher to explore the role of the protagonist's past actions in the interviewee's construction of that identity. At the analysis stage the researcher was able to observe how participants attributed a character and personality to Jack - the principal protagonist of the boys' vignette - as a result of the options they

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chose for him. Consider the following example:

Interviewer: 'No, well there's no kind of right or wrong answer.

Mother: Yeah I know what you mean, yeah I know. But it's being bad Really what I'm doing to Jack is I'm making him out a naughty little boy (laughs). And I dunno if I should be doing that. I reckon he's gonna join in. He will join in because he's at the car park now and he's doing wrong anyway, by just being there.'

Mother of child aged 14

Here the mother is unsure, in the later stages of the vignette, as to whether the character she has created is in fact a plausible representation. The fact that she has taken responsibility for the development of the character's personality and behaviour - and questions herself as to whether she has done so correctly - is fascinating in itself as it provides new avenues for analysis and theory building. However, the mother also frames Jack's decision as to whether or not to join in a dangerous skating game in the context of the character she has constructed. By making him perform acts of parental defiance, such as electing not to wear protective clothing and to engage in risky tricks, Jack has been constructed by this mother as a naughty and mischievous character. Thus, the view that Jack would engage in a highly dangerous skating game is based on the identity that she has made for him.

Route comparability

When analysing the data, the routes of the different participants through the vignettes were mapped in the form of a flow chart. This enabled key areas of agreement and divergence between parents' and children's responses to be identified quickly and encouraged the researcher to return to the qualitative data in order to understand them. As routes through the scenario can be compared, interactive vignettes also offer strong potential as a longitudinal qualitative instrument capa-

ble of rigorously identifying changes in the same participants' responses to the materials over time. Methodological innovation in relation to qualitative longitudinal research is much needed (see Holland et al., 2004 for example) and interactive vignettes have the potential to contribute substantially in this area. However, given the short time period of the PhD, it was not possible to explore this capacity further.

Medium accessibility

As well as Microsoft PowerPoint being a familiar and accessible tool for researchers it also proved to be a programme which young people, especially teenage boys, were highly proficient in. A number of young people for example, reported that they were currently using the software in school-based IT projects and when asked whether they would have preferred the stories to have been presented on paper, all the young people interviewed said no. Indeed, some felt that presenting the stories on the computer made the scenarios appear more 'real' as the layout of the screen helped them to picture the situations unfold.

Young Person: '... it was good on the computer cos the pictures were good and it was good just clicking on them you can actually see pictures so you can actually picture it in your head.'

Boy aged 11

The validity of qualitative data is often heavily dependent on the interviewee's level of mental engagement and computer-based interactive vignettes proved a useful tool in ensuring young people's participation. Neither the parents nor the young people who took part in this research displayed any difficulty in using the laptop computer. However, this may well have been influenced by the fact that the majority of participants were located at the top end of the socio-economic spectrum.

A note of caution: factors to consider when creating and using interactive vignettes

In order to be effective, interactive vignettes must be both well planned and well piloted. If they are not, they have the potential to suffer from two main drawbacks, which are a lack of internal continuity (Barter and Renold, 2000) and the problem of option restriction. Internal continuity refers to the extent to which the interactive scenario develops in accordance with the options that the participant selects. Hyper-linking each option to their relevant slide can be a rather time consuming and logistically challenging process depending on both the number of options and the number of slides being used. In hyper-linking to the wrong slide the internal continuity of the vignette is compromised as the participant is presented with a situation that is not consistent with the option they have selected. This can be a rather embarrassing experience, especially if it bears absolutely no relation to the option the participant has chosen. This did in fact happen during the piloting phase of the research, the outcome of which was a confused participant and a rather red-faced researcher.

Careful planning, story boarding, and piloting are essential in obtaining a high degree of internal continuity. However, the format in which packages such as PowerPoint present slides is not one that is particularly conducive to such a task. As such, the planning and numbering of slides for the purposes of hyper-linking is best done on paper initially where they can be mapped out in a pyramid structure - packing paper and Post-It notes are useful tools for this. Once all the options and slides have been designed and numbered they can be transferred to the computer.

In relation to restriction, hyper-linking options to subsequent slides automatically creates a fixed number of responses from which the participant must choose. This does not mirror 'real' social situations where a multitude of options and possibilities are available to actors. For the PhD, it was found that scenarios that presented participants with two possible courses of action

were most easy to storyboard. Presenting participants with a wide range of options risks creating a logistical nightmare as each option has to be linked to its own relevant slide and thus the number of slides can grow exponentially as does the potential for damaging the internal continuity of the vignette.

With a choice of only two courses of action however, the issue of restricting answers becomes highly salient as situations can arise where the option the participant believes the character would choose is not available for them to select. Indeed, in a latter stage of the Jack scenario more than one young person felt that the character, rather than return home or skate in a supermarket car park illicitly, would instead phone his parents explaining the situation and ask for permission. Whilst this provided a useful insight into parental sanctioning of young people's risk behaviour, this option was not available for selection.

If the most likely course of action is consistently available to the participant then the impact of restriction should be minimal. Conversely, if the most favoured option is consistently unavailable then restriction is likely to be a problem, as the potential for participants to become disinterested or disengage with the activity is high. Careful piloting is the most effective means of identifying likely courses of action but this cannot remove the potential for restriction completely. As such, when restrictions do occur the researcher should both note them and assess their significance. This assessment should be factored into any final

evaluation of data quality.

Summary

Developmental vignettes are valuable tools for qualitative researchers interested in exploring sensitive topics in a situated yet non-direct, non-confrontational manner. For this PhD study, making developmental vignettes interactive proved an effective way of engaging young people in the research process and removing barriers to participation associated with more conventional approaches. Furthermore, the interactive component of the scenarios provided a number of methodological innovations, which - through their further application and refinement - have the potential to contribute to developing a uniquely qualitative approach to vignette methodology.

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For more information about *Qualitative Researcher* and to access (for free) previous issues of this journal please visit:

www.cardiff.ac.uk/socsi/qualiti/qualitative_researcher.html

ESRC Researcher Development Initiative (RDI) News

The ESRC Researcher Development Initiative (RDI) has just announced the second phase of projects being funded from 2006-07. These include:

- Training Researchers in Online Research Methods (TRI-ORM)
- Sociolinguistic Ethnography in a Changing Society
- ISSTI Interdisciplinary Masterclasses
- Writing Across Boundaries: Explorations in Research, Writing and Rhetoric in Qualitative Research
- Scottish Social Survey Network
- Building Capacity in Visual Methods
- Training Researchers in Ethics and Ethical Practice in Social Science Research
- BERA/ESRC 2007 Residential Summer School

For more information visit the RDI website:
www.rdi.ac.uk

Building Research Capacity

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TLRP News

Placement Fellows Scheme

Call for Applications. A major opportunity has arisen for an academic to be seconded into the Scottish Executive Education Department and Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Education during 2007 in order to bring the research of TLRP, AERS and other teams to bear on their work. This secondment will be the subject of an application to ESRC's Placement Fellows Scheme.

For full details of the Call please visit the TLRP website: www.tlrp.org

NCRM Events

Real Life Methods Workshops

These workshops are part of a series on the practice and experience of social science research. The aim is to stimulate debate and to share experiences of methodological issues in researching a range of social science issues. Sessions will explore how different ways of seeing and conceptualising research questions and topics lead to distinctive methodological possibilities and challenges

Each workshop starts with short and relatively informal presentations from people who have approached the same broad research concern in different ways, followed by discussion and debate.

Location of workshops: Harold Hankins Building, University of Manchester

Methods Workshops: Comparative Cases

Date: Thursday 1 March 2007, 3pm – 5pm

Speakers: Professor Louise Ackers (University of Leeds) and Professor Colette Fagan (University of Manchester)

Methods Workshops: Kinship and Relatedness

Date: Thursday 17 May 2007, 2-4pm

Speakers: Professor Jeanette Edwards, University of Manchester, Professor Jennifer Mason and Katherine Davies, University of Manchester

Assessing the Impact of School Resources on Pupil Attainment: Methodological Challenges

Date: 20 June 2007

Location: Royal Statistical Society, 12 Errol St, London
Organisers: University of Bristol, Graduate School of Education

Improving educational achievement in UK schools is a priority, and of particular concern is the low achievement of specific groups, such as those from lower socio-economic backgrounds. An obvious question is whether we should be improving the outcomes of these students by spending more on their education.

The literature on the effect of educational spending on pupil achievement has a number of methodological difficulties, in particular the endogeneity of school resource levels, and correlation between the attainments of pupils from the same school. In addition, there may be area effects on pupil outcomes. The meeting will begin with a discussion of these methodological issues. A multilevel simultaneous equation modelling approach to allow for the endogeneity of school resources will then be described, with an application to an analysis of the effect of school resources on pupil attainment at age 14, using data from the National Pupil Database. There will also be discussion of the feasibility of extending the multilevel model to include cross-classified school and area random effects.

Speakers

Anna Vignoles (Institute of Education)

Fiona Steele (University of Bristol)

Antony Fielding (University of Birmingham)

For more information about these and other NCRM events please visit the NCRM website: www.ncrm.ac.uk or call +44 (0)23 8059 4539, or email: info@ncrm.ac.uk