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Sustainable Education as a Way of Bringing People Together – Multiple Stories From Europe

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Theoretical and Methodological Principles of Research Methods Teaching

Abstract: Capacity building in pedagogical research methods is positioned by researchers as crucial to global competitiveness. The pedagogies involved, however, remain under-researched and the pedagogical culture under-developed. This paper builds upon recent thematic reviews of the literature to report new research that shifts the focus from individual experiences of research methods teaching to empirical evidence from a study crossing research methods, disciplines and nations. A dialogic, expert panel method was used, engaging international experts to examine teaching and learning practices in advanced social research methods. Experts, perspectives demonstrated strong thematic commonalities across quantitative, qualitative and mixed methods domains in terms of pedagogy, by connecting learners to research, giving direct and immersive experiences of research practice and promoting reflexivity. This paper argues that through analysis of expert responses to the distinct pedagogic challenges of the methods classroom, the principles and illustrative examples generated can form the knowledge and understanding required to enhance pedagogic culture and practice.

Key words: research methods, teaching, learning, pedagogic culture, expert panel method.

The teaching of research methods places very specific demands on teachers and learners. The capacity to undertake and engage with research 'requires a combination of theoretical understanding, procedural knowledge and mastery of a range of practical skills' [Kilburn, Nind, Wiles 2014, p. 191]. These pose significant challenges to both methods teachers and learners. For learners, Howard and Brady argue that methods modules are among the most intellectually demanding courses

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in university education [Howard, Brady 2015, pp. 511–525]. Methods teachers and instructors face additional challenges as methodological expertise is often fragmented across academic disciplines. Nationally and internationally there are no agreed curricula; methods content is dynamic. Working in this fast-changing environment requires constant vigilance and skills development on the part of learners and teachers. Within this challenging context, efforts to accelerate the development of methodological expertise have not always been informed by pedagogic research, principles and theories.

Reviews of the literature suggest a disjointed and under-developed discourse around the pedagogy of methodological learning. A systematic review by C. Wagner identified a lack of 'pedagogic culture' in research methods teaching, concluding that there is little guidance available to teachers [Wagner 2011, pp. 75–88]. M. Earley's (review also notes a paucity of pedagogical research and pedagogic culture across disciplinary boundaries. He observes that teachers of methods cannot inform their practice by calling upon a substantial body of literature characterised by systematic debate, investigation and evaluation of teaching and learning. Instead, there is a reliance on peers, trial-and-error and methodological know-how, rather than pedagogic knowledge informed by theory or research [Earley 2014]. Given that the ability to undertake and evaluate research are foundational within the social sciences [Ryan 2014].

A thematic review of scientific works suggests that pedagogic dialogue is beginning to emerge, particularly in the form of pedagogies for active, experiential and reflective forms of learning in research methods [Stoliarenko 2014].

Recent debate around the teaching of quantitative methods exposes the lack of connection between the teaching and educational research and theory. For instance, MacInnes observes the neglect of quantitative methods and problems with understanding how they might be taught in the social sciences [MacInnes 2012]. Within the mixed methods classroom, the need for pedagogic culture has spurred deliberate moves to develop the field. Here the challenges include a 'first generation of faculty' in which teachers themselves are learning the 'how-to's of conducting mixed methods research, as they simultaneously teach these methods to their students [Creswell et al. 2003, p. 620]. Mixed methods courses are new argues that instructors continue to be largely self-taught and are themselves lacking in adequate training in both quantitative and qualitative methods. Taken together, she argues, these training gaps can undermine students' understanding of using mixed methods and teachers' confidence in addressing student needs [Frels et al. 2012, pp. 23–44].

Despite the growing corpus of research in methods pedagogy, this literature is marginal when compared with discussions of social science methodology. Moreover, as Nind argues, the work that is published tends to comprise narratives of specific pedagogic examples, based on the experience of a single teaching team with

one or two cohorts of students [Nind et al. 2015]. The trend they observed, of reflection, both as a key pedagogic theme and the dominant research method, continues in other recent research. The insights gained from such research are valuable, contributing to pedagogical culture by providing detailed examples of the ways in which teachers can engage with, and motivate, learners through changes to pedagogic practice. However, there remains a need for research that expands the frame of reference to cross-cutting research that encourages the dialogic practices through which teaching praxis can be more empirically and systematically examined and debated. This is the gap that must be filled.

In this work we develop the emerging pedagogy for research methods identified by D. Kilburn by connecting new research to the pedagogic approaches they discuss. These are approaches that are grounded in reflection on the research process, learning by doing research and the processes necessary to make methods visible [Kilburn et al. 2014]. To do this, we present and discuss a new evidence base grounded in qualitative analysis of expert praxis in the teaching of social science research methods, which constitutes a step towards the formation of pedagogic culture.

To build on the emerging pedagogic culture surrounding methods learning, we have sought a dialogic method design that develops understanding of pedagogic practice, moving from a level of individual reflection to a level of communal engagement. Moreover, we have sought an approach that could encourage and expand the dialogue that characterises and promotes the development of pedagogic culture through and between participants and the wider research methods community. In this way we have set out to engage with teachers and learners of research methods, rather than to evaluate them. Thus, we devised a study to widen and deepen the conversation, as opposed to closing it down by rushing to a solution or to a consensus. Working with the guiding principle of dialogue, we initiated an 'expert panel method' adapted from the work of R. Galliers and J. Huang "The Teaching of Qualitative Research Methods in Information Systems: an Explorative Study Utilizing Learning Theory [Galliers, Huang 2012, pp. 119–134]. Expert panel method involves a series of qualitative interviews with individual experts who are then each invited to respond to an analysis of the group's data. As our work was concerned with dialogue and sharing conceptual insights, our panel method differs from previous work. Our participants were invited to respond to initial findings as a group in a shared forum, foregrounding opportunities for dialogue with and between methods specialists.

A key challenge in the development of excellence in the teaching of research methods has been that the development of advanced methods training has frequently been the task of methodological experts who do not have a pedagogic background. In this sense, they demonstrate strong content knowledge (a knowledge of method), but, as M. Nind observes, they do not necessarily have the peda-

gogic knowledge (including that specific to the subject matter, pedagogic content knowledge, associated with excellent learning experiences [Nind, Kilburn, Wiles 2015, pp. 561–570]. For the purposes of sharing pedagogic experience and insight, it was therefore necessary to recruit participants with both teaching and methodological expertise who could share their pedagogical content knowledge. Within higher education, expertise is notable for its social aspect, developed with and judged by peers [Wray, Wallace 2011]. Such recognition of expertise by peers must also exist side-by-side with the procedural knowledge, theoretical expertise and practical skills accumulated through ongoing experience. As expertise develops slowly and can be characterised by a large integrated knowledge base we recruited academics and scholars from the universities, we work at, with significant experience over time of advanced methods teaching at a postgraduate level, the publication of influential methods textbooks and papers with a pedagogic function, and published reflections on pedagogy for methods teaching. Thereby we created a panel of people we characterise as methods experts and 'pedagogic leaders'. We recognise that expertise in teaching practice is not necessarily visible within these criteria. For example, the pedagogy of textbooks is often implicit, rather than explicit in its formulation and expression. Moreover, we acknowledge that the notion of leadership is contentious, and that our participants would not necessarily define themselves as experts or leaders. Nonetheless, we hold that their academic teaching practices 'set the cultural of much contemporary methods teaching and learning.

Expert panel method has previously been used to examine aspects of methods teaching in Information Systems. R. D. Galliers and J. C. Huang sought alternative narratives to dominant positivist paradigms and a quantitative methods culture. They note 'expert groups provide a forum in which leading experts in a given field are invited to share their experiences and thoughts' [Galliers, Huang 2012, pp. 119–134]. We arranged and conducted two expert panels: Panel 1 (2014–2015) involved and Panel 2 (2016–2017). We undertook individual semi-structured interviews with 20 expert methods teachers working at different higher educational establishments of Ukraine. Panel 1 included scholars specializing in technical sciences and Panel 2 – in social sciences. The status and specialization of many of the experts meant that retaining their anonymity before a social science readership would be unfeasible.

Interviews were conducted by phone/Skype or in person, audio-recorded and transcribed in full. The interview schedule was shared with participants for consideration in advance. Questions covered pedagogical knowledge (e.g. probing the distinctiveness of methods teaching; the influences, learning theories and approaches that experts associated with their practice), the culture of methods and pedagogy (including socio-cultural factors, such as the influence of discipline, method and geopolitics among others) and innovation in methods and in teaching and learning (e.g. how experts respond to the challenges of new types of data in the

teaching of data analysis). Experts were consulted on themes from the analysis of Panel1 data, which were then used in face-to-face focus groups comprising 10 teachers deeply immersed in teaching particular methods (quantitative, qualitative, narrative) to test out the resonance of identified pedagogic challenges, approaches and issues. Some expert panel themes were simply endorsed, such as the challenge of the diversity of learners in a group and the need to find out what they know and pitch the teaching accordingly. Other themes were challenged, however, such as the notion of short courses not providing sufficient space for reflection on practice ('I think you can do it on a short course actually'). Other themes (presented in the focus groups through illustrative quotes) led to extensive consideration, sometimes problematising an issue ('I don't know how to read that comment actually, because…'), and to discussion of how different experiences mapped with those of the panel. The method thereby generated data through interactive dialogue across groups with pertinent expertise.

The second expert panel oonce again was invited to respond to and discuss emergent themes to inform subsequent in-depth analysis. This approach promoted the dialogue and debate that characterises pedagogic culture, but also deepened our understanding of the emergent data and offered experts reciprocal insight into the pedagogic expertise of their peers.

Analysis of the data set was thematic, with data coded independently by two researchers. Coding in the first instance was based on immersion in the data (listening to complete interview recordings as well as working with transcripts). Following an initial analysis, emergent themes were shared with panel participants. Participant validation helped us to establish the credibility of our themes and online panel discussions generated further data, suggesting useful lines for more in-depth analysis. In the second deeper wave of analysis, we inductively and iteratively pursued lines of inquiry critical to the study and our participants. This influenced the choice of broad-level themes (e.g. pedagogic challenge, pedagogic approach, innovation in pedagogy); themes within these emerged in a more grounded fashion (e.g. unprepared learners, project-based, risk-taking) and were labelled using expert's own terminology. We were interested not just in recurrent themes, but in the importance they held for individuals, and responses to them in dialogue.

In this study, we have begun examining the pedagogy of methods learning at a community level, rather than the individual level that currently characterises the literature. Individual findings have been exposed to an iterative sharing process through the expert forum and focus groups thereby exploring which themes resonate beyond individual contexts. Through our analysis and expert dialogue, strong commonalities emerged regarding the roots of pedagogic practice. Experts talked about, and reflected jointly upon, how their pedagogical approaches have evolved. Substantive discipline was a key theme. The formative influence of prior methods

training was also lucidly discussed among the panel. According to the discussions we can come to a conclusion that the combination of disciplinary methods teaching, individual histories influenced the evolution of the experts' pedagogical practices, by their own accounts more so than any pedagogical theories. When more theoretical influences were mentioned, these were in the context of the above. Exceptionally, and understandably so, this was different only for those with a background in education, who made greater reference to pedagogic concepts such as pedagogic spaces and peer learning.

From the foundations of pedagogy, we now turn to how experts described their pedagogical approaches in practice with a view to the learning that can be gleaned for the methods teaching community. Three meta-themes were identified within the data collected. These related *firstly* to the importance of making research visible – connecting learners to a world of methods through active engagement with methods; *secondly* to perspectives and approaches concerned with learning through the experience of conducting research; and *finally* to approaches that encourage reflection on research practice. These themes are interrelated – importantly, we note that a given learning activity may express multiple complementary pedagogic aims.

Analyzing the first theme D. Kilburn referred to a group of teaching approaches linked by the goal of making the research process visible by actively engaging students in the aspects of the methods at hand [Kilburn, Nindand Wiles 2014, p. 197]. We did not analyse our interview transcripts with this categorisation in mind. However, our coding allowed us to map the experts' pedagogical content knowledge in this area. We interpreted this range of pedagogic activity in terms of the pedagogic starting points or hooks that our interviewees described as ways of connecting the learners to the research space and might involve connecting methods learners to research ideas, data or methods, but it is fundamental work, central to bringing learners in to the activity of researchers so that they might see or know research in engaging ways.

According to the literature and to our expert panel, to hook in – or connect – learners and research methods might require active learning, which gets students actively involving solving problems and using methods [Keyser 2000, p. 35]. Teachers working in a student-centred way to foster engagement might use tasks and exercises, but also examples, metaphors or vignettes to make the research method knowable to learners [Kilburn et al. 2014, pp. 191–207]. Hence, pedagogic hooks in the process of making research visible are about active engagement rather than just activity. They are often the things that are non-threatening, non-technical, even enjoyable. This might mean hands-on working with analytic software or engaging with interesting quantitative data sets or ethical questions. Experienced methods teachers 'start from where people are', how they use observing and listen-

ing as 'methods of everyday life'. Such teachers use the learners' interests and own culture to build bridges into the research space, for example, learners' disciplinary culture or literature familiar to them. Connecting learners to research in this respect can be a matter of 'appreciation' of what might count as data or evidence. We also identified, among a broad spectrum of teaching approaches described, those that could be categorised as active or problem-based learning. Such conceptualisation, therefore, has been applied not only in the descriptive, reflective and evaluative accounts of pockets of methods teaching to be found in the literature, but in the accounts of very experienced teachers of methods (quantitative, qualitative and mixed) across cultures and disciplines. Active learning was often about hands-on working with data and software, but also about doing and reflecting. It was about opportunities to practice the process, to make mistakes and learn from them, learning to take responsibility and to really know the methods within the disciplinary context. Problem-based learning could be about using a real-world research problem as a starting point, using worked examples and then working through problems in statistics, using software in a problem-oriented way or exposing the diversity of approaches to solving a research or statistical problem.

Speaking about the second theme "Learning by Doing: Giving Learners First-Hand Experience of Research Practice" D. Kilburn refers to activities that give students first-hand experience of undertaking research in real-world contexts or using authentic empirical data [Kilburn 2014, p. 199]. This was also a significant theme within the expert interviews, with experts frequently referring to learning by doing, experiential learning, and authentic problem-based learning as named and explicit pedagogic approaches. For all experts, learning with and through data was fundamental to their teaching practice, across qualitative, quantitative and mixed specialisms. Within panel discussion, learning-by-doing or experiential learning was cited as key to teaching practice. This mirrors the scientific literature, where M. Hammersley and others argue that certain aspects of research practice cannot be taught in abstraction [Hammersley 2012]. Supporting literature also highlights the tasks and work necessary to gain insight into methods, for example, A. Aguado focuses on the 'challenges of operationalisation' that might be encountered in real-world research projects [Aguado 2009, p. 256]. The stress on teaching experientially resonated beyond qualitative into quantitative and mixed methods areas. However, the insight of some intervieweesis especially useful as it draws the level of focus from the procedural knowledge – and often skills-based learning of 'learning by doing' and 'hands-on' working that is also visible in the 'active-learning' and problem-based scenarios that we have previously discussed – into the more immersive and authentic landscape of experiential, real-world research and the knowledge(s) this can evoke.

Across the interviews and focus groups, a common theme emerged on use of data to facilitate learning, as a pedagogic hook and more. The necessity of gathering/generating data, handling analysis and reporting data within empirical research methods training meant data was a key issue for experts. They recounted a variety of pedagogic approaches that focus on experiential, authentic, real-world and immersive engagement with methods and 'real' data. Examples include research projects with published outcomes; those that engage communities and research organisations and research using real data in the form of (for example) country-level data sets detailing economic, health or environmental data. Within these, data were used to several pedagogic ends.

Approaches characterised as learning by doing frequently gravitated around data to learn through. The use of student-generated data was frequently identified as ideal in grounding learning, but also problematised in the discussions. Problems with using the students' own data were elaborated on by the focus group of qualitative methods teachers who had experienced trying to manage working with poor or incomplete data, data that failed to interest others in the group and so on. Using the teacher's own data could bring parallel authenticity but reduce problems because you can choose the data and you can choose what kinds of challenges and messages there are in that.

The third theme deals with the notion of reflection meaning the understanding of different ways in which research problems can be engaged with. Much is written about reflective and reflexive practice in the teaching and learning of research methods, whereby the element of judgement or reasoned decision-making necessitates embedding reflection in the process of being competent [Kilburn et al. 2014, pp. 191–207]. Experts elaborated on this theme from their experiences, identifying the ways in which they facilitated learning in which learners reflect upon their own understanding of research. We found experts use reflection on methods as a key way to promote a deeper knowledge of method expertise in learners. However, the modes of reflection, and the pedagogy deployed vary, dependent on a number of variables (linked to pedagogic challenge). Reflexive language and pedagogic approaches were frequently embedded in expert teaching practices. These were described as attention to critical standpoints, critical engagement in peer groups, promoting the evaluation and adoption of multiple perspectives, engaging understandings of paradigms and critique, reflexivity. Notably, these terms can be considered as overlapping themes, rather than discrete definitions, that allow learners to situate themselves in different ways. Moreover, the tasks deployed to engage learners in reflexive practice also illustrate how multiple pedagogic aims can be articulated in a single learning task. As a whole, reflexivity in these cases was characterised as an ability to locate and situate oneself, and ones' methods decisions within a wider methods landscape. D. Kilburn finds these approaches to be largely qualitative [Kilburn et al. 2014, pp. 191–207]. We

found that approaches that promoted reflection were deployed strongly in qualitative and mixed methods, but also in a significant strand of quantitative teaching. An additional essential aspect of reflexivity in advanced methods exposes the realities of research in a given context. This knowledge was essential to the articulation of methods in emergent methods cultures where new forms of research can be fraught with difficulty. Within reflexive (and particularly cross-cultural) practices, the necessity of orientating teaching to the learner's particular context(s) in terms of their expertise, discipline, background, nationality, standpoints and so forth was a recurrent theme. In practice, experts reported additional benefits from student-centred practices. Experienced (expert) learners can constitute a resource for teachers. In a focus group, one methods teacher described the benefits of teaching a group with scholars who 'have an expertise in one particular kind of field of qualitative research but are relative novices, say, in narrative or another [method]' and 'the kind of doctoral students who have extraordinary expertise'. Orientating to learners in this way frequently spurred pedagogic development, suggesting that the reflexivity of teacher-as-learner continues to be a strong tenant of expert practice.

Our findings engage with recent systematic and thematic reviews to offer an analytic lens on multiple teaching practices rather than a reflection from within practice, as has previously characterised the literature. Our focus has been to elucidate not only what experts do, but also the roots of pedagogical approaches and the import and value placed upon them within the methods classroom. Deepening the conversation about methods pedagogy enriches our understanding, thereby promoting pedagogic culture in advanced methods teaching. Nonetheless, among our participants, there remained a strong sense that the gap in pedagogic culture is still felt. Experts identified a need for forums to debate, give visibility to teaching practices and draw in more significant pedagogic discussions from the disciplines (and education more specifically). Thus, while we have sought to promote pedagogic debate, this research highlights the substantial work still needed to adequately represent and connect developments in the field.

Experts' perspectives demonstrated strong thematic commonalities across methods domains; at the same time, these perspectives were frequently highly original and independent in their articulation. Pedagogy, in each case, is found to centre on connecting learners to research, giving direct and immersive experiences of research practice and promoting reflexivity. While these themes have been scoped by D. Kilburn in the literature, here we get a sense of the importance placed upon these themes in practice [Kilburn et al. 2014, pp. 191–207]. Expert practitioners place great significance on particular pedagogic approaches, notably, active learning, learning by doing, working with and through data and the facilitation of multiple methodological perspectives and reflexive standpoints. The teaching acts associated with these approaches are enacted, reflected and theorised in highly

unique ways. In this paper, we have offered a thematic and conceptual frame for expert insights. This has not been straightforward, as the pedagogic actions of both teachers and learners may be understood to serve multiple purposes. Moreover, we find that within expert talk, language, when probed, can blur the conceptual terrain, as terms are used to gesture to different facets of similar practices. In this respect, there remains significant scope for exploring the richness of expert and practitioner standpoints across disciplines, locations and methods. We also find that expertise within social science methods teaching largely continues to be based on individual work over a lifetime of practice. However, by engaging across disciplinary, national and methodological borders, we have sought to establish a more granular understanding of the basis of this expertise, and a clearer insight into the overarching challenges of methods teaching.

In social science research methods, pedagogic culture is, as we and others have argued, still nascent. This research has helped to elicit what experienced teachers know about the pedagogy of methodological learning, to synthesise and communicate this, and thereby to stimulate pedagogic culture. In the interest of pedagogic culture, we have fostered dialogue to expand the lens of focus from individual accounts of 'what works' that are primarily located within individual disciplines. We have crossed disciplines, national boundaries, and qualitative, quantitative and mixed methods to engage significant actors and informants within research methods in productive discussion of methods pedagogy. Through analysis of expert responses to the distinct pedagogic challenges of the methods classroom, the principles and illustrative examples generated can form the knowledge and understanding required to enhance practice and wider pedagogic culture.

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