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Editorial:

Lessons Learned from Students' Research Experiences

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1. Challenges Teaching and Learning Research Methods

Teaching graduate students how to do research can be a challenge for many instructors because "research education" is not an established field of research like other areas of teaching such as mathematics education, nursing education, science education, and statistics education. There are no scholarly journals devoted solely to teaching research methods; these sources are instead scattered across disciplines and journals (e.g., *Nurse Researcher*, Volume 13, Number 2, 2005; *Sociology*, Volume 15, Issue 4, 1981; and *Scandinavian Journal of Educational Research*, Volume 49, Issue 1, 2005). Furthermore, even though research methods courses are a staple in most graduate training programs, instructors were rarely taught how to teach research methods as part of their own graduate programs. Left to their own devices, instructors of research courses must rely on a network of peers, scattered research literature, and much trial-and-error as they develop and improve upon their own research methods courses.

Part of the challenge research methods instructors face is the fact that the "learning of research methodology . . . is complicated" (Lehti & Lehtinen, 2005, p. 320). Research methods is itself a complex domain (Lehti & Lehtinen, 2005; McIsaac, Blocher, Mahes, & Vrasidas, 1999; Potter, Caffrey, & Plante, 2003; Sachs, 2002; Winn, 1995) that involves a combination of procedures and definitions, many of which Lehti and Lehtinen argue the "academic community itself has no uniform conception of" (p. 218). Schutt, Blalock, and Wagenaar (1984, as cited in Potter, Caffrey, & Plante, 2003) remind us that research is a "sustained task that involves a number of different kinds of activities that

must be interrelated carefully and for which decisions made at one stage of the process influence choices at later ones" (p. 38). Further, individual researchers face many unique situations when actually conducting research (Murtonen & Lehtinen, 2005; Taylor, Millei, Partridge, & Rodriguez, 2003; Winn, 1995), and it is impossible to introduce students to every potential research setting and how that setting will impact the study design, conduct, or outcomes (Taylor, Millei, Partridge, & Rodriguez, 2003). So not only do instructors need to find ways to bring the complexity inherent in doing research to students at different levels of experience and motivation (Onwuegbuzie, Slate, & Schwartz, 2001), they must also introduce the additional complexity of *context*. Instructors cannot describe for students every possible research setting and how it "should be" handled--students must be able to transfer the skills they learn to these unique and often unpredictable situations.

2. Purpose of This Special Issue

Challenges such as these routinely occupy my thoughts as I introduce graduate students in education to the research process, and it was these challenges that led to the creation of the special issue presented here. Why not ask students the simple question: What has it been like conducting research? What have you learned? To this end, I solicited proposals from students presenting first-person accounts of their research journey. My intent is to make it possible for graduate students to learn from, and perhaps be comforted by, the experiences of other students who have completed or are completing their own doctoral dissertations. Therefore, I hope these narratives serve as models for other graduate students beginning their own research journeys.

The purpose for this special issue, then, is primarily pedagogical: presenting the experiences of current and former graduate students' research experiences so that those about to embark on their research journeys can learn from those who have undertaken a similar journey. Getting from initial design to final polish requires some work and many decisions--the path from research question to conclusion is never a straight one, as these narratives demonstrate.

In part, this issue is also a qualitative research study in itself--the primary guiding question being one many current students ask: What is it actually like to conduct research? I received 103 proposals from authors in 17 countries representing a dozen disciplines. The decision about which narratives to include here was a difficult one, as most submissions were appropriate for the themed issue in some way. Students told stories of many unique experiences, challenging decisions, and valuable learning moments that come up along their journey, and I wish I could have selected all of them for publication.

3. Themes from the 103 Submissions

As I read the full set of proposals, clear themes emerged defined by similar sorts of "lessons learned" the authors wished to convey. Identifying these themes helped in the process of selecting the proposals to be developed into full-length articles for the special

issue. Each of the 103 proposals had its own unique characteristics, of course, but after reading and reflecting on the full set, four *themes* stood out enough to warrant organizing the special issue to include illustrative examples from each of these groups. In the rest of this issue you will read 11 reflective pieces that explore each of these themes in rich detail. Although I have indicated below where I would situate each author's work within these themes, the authors themselves may not agree with my rather simplistic summary of their very complex stories. This highlights two important aspects of these themes: (a) they overlap in many ways, further testament to the complexity of the research process, and (b) they are not only themes that describe the proposals submitted, they also describe the authors themselves as cultural and social individuals engaging in a process that cannot be separated from these cultural, social, and individual identities. That said, I represent each them by at least one of the manuscripts as a way to frame the important lessons learned by each author.

The first theme to emerge was a *cultural* theme that manifested itself in two ways. Some proposal authors were students studying and researching in a country away from home and spoke of the challenges they faced learning about and conducting research in a new environment. Other proposal authors spoke of the challenges they faced conducting research in two fields--each with its own professional culture. These students faced the challenge of reconciling differences, or merging traditions, or learning to identify themselves as researchers in both fields at the same time. **Erik Brogt's** article in this issue is actually a blend of both these ideas--a student from the Netherlands studying in the United States and working to blend the fields of astronomy and education. **Stephen John Quaye's** article also speaks to merging home culture and academic community values in his research. **Janna Jackson's** work with gay and lesbian educators was also impacted by cultural beliefs, in this case the homophobia these educators (and Jackson as researcher) experienced. Instead of crossing international boundaries, **Jacob D. Vakkayil's** article discusses crossing disciplinary boundaries and how researchers might embrace this process in their work.

The second theme to emerge was a *social* theme. Proposal authors spoke of research as a solitary and isolating process. Some spoke of the power of peer support networks while others spoke of supportive mentors and advisors. The opposite also occurred, where mentors or advisors did not meet students' expectations and thus contributed to the challenges students faced during their research. **Carlos Andres Trujillo's** article in this issue speaks of the social isolation he navigated when moving from an international business career into his doctoral studies. The article by **Malia Villegas, Theresa Kathleen Sullivan, Shai Fuxman, and Marit Charlene Dewhurst** highlights the value of a strong peer network, while **Cathy Guthrie** addresses mentors as part of her "memoirs of a journeyman researcher."

A third theme was *process-oriented*, wherein many proposal authors described challenges they faced (a) generating useful and meaningful research questions, (b) securing appropriate participants, (c) collecting and analyzing meaningful data, and (d) considering issues of validity and quality as they wrote the final report. For some proposal writers, these were issues they were facing at the time they submitted their

narratives, unresolved but clearly thought through. Other proposal writers spoke of how they navigated these issues to a successful end. In this special issue, **Thomas Misco** narrates his idea of "grounded understandings" as an extension of traditional notions of reader generalizability, **Nithikul Nimkulrat** addresses the value of documentation as data in practice-led research, and **Phil Jones** narrates the challenging process of developing a thesis proposal that blends methodology and practice into a unified whole. Many of the other authors also speak of the unexpected twists that made their research journeys both challenging and rewarding.

A final major theme to emerge was related to students' *identities* as researchers or how their identities impacted their research. This particular theme captures students' struggles to understand how they should integrate some component of their identity into their research, a theme that intersects with the *cultural* and *social* themes mentioned above. For some, this meant coming to a deeper understanding of who they were as individuals before understanding how this impacted their work as professionals. Thus the research journey they faced became a personal journey as well. **Faith Wambura Ngunjiri** describes the personal context from which her work developed as well as how her identity as "supplicant learner" was defined in part by the context in which her work took place. **Cathy Guthrie** also speaks of her "journeyman" identity and how it framed her research process. **Stephen John Quaye** also speaks of his identity as a Ghanaian/American student, and how he struggled to seamlessly weave these cultures into his research. **Janna Jackson** explores the considerations involved in conducting research with a population to which she belongs, and one that is often considered controversial, the community of gay and lesbian educators.

4. Implications for Teaching and Learning Research

So what can we learn from these students and their experiences? Beyond the specific lessons each narrative describes, I have learned three more general lessons important to my work as an instructor of research methods courses. First, research skills learned in graduate school only take a student so far--there are social, cultural, and personal aspects of the research journey that render it far more than the simple application of procedures to a research problem (what I have earlier referred to as a "recipe approach," Earley, 2002). Each unique context in which we conduct research presents its own challenges, whether they are learning a new language or learning more about oneself or learning new theories and paradigms beyond those learned in class. These unique contexts cannot be captured fully in any classroom; they can only be experienced. How then do we prepare students for these experiences? What more can instructors of research methods do in the limited classroom time we have? How much *content* do students need and how much *experiential learning* do they need, and how can we balance these in support of our students' development as researchers?

Second, *support* is crucial. Whether consciously or unconsciously, we cannot simply leave students hanging after the coursework is over and the thesis or dissertation process begins. This "apprenticeship" phase of graduate study (Neumann & Pallas, 2006) cannot be treated as a separate *step* in the process, but rather as a *transition* from student to

apprentice--still a learner, but of a different sort. Often students feel they are "on their own" at the thesis or dissertation writing phase, with no course syllabus or externally-set timelines to follow. The narratives in this special issue point to the power of support from both faculty and peers. Instructors of research methods courses can create learning environments through which students develop these support networks early on. Instructors can also incorporate reflective activities that encourage students to learn about the communities of practice (Pallas, 2001) they are becoming a part of--through joining professional associations, attending conferences, networking with peers at other institutions, and appreciating but also asking questions about the traditions and culture of that community.

For me the most important lesson learned is the need for me as an instructor to encourage students to focus on topics about which they are passionate. I often speak of passion in my research methods courses, and I have had students tell me my own passion for research is contagious. A recent doctoral graduate announced at his final dissertation defense that as his instructor, I had "messed with his mind." Just when he thought he had his dissertation topic set (while in my class he was in his second year of study), I stopped class and asked students what they were passionate about. What drove them professionally and/or personally? And how could they incorporate this passion into their research? At that point, a light clicked on for him--he struggled to reconcile this question of passion with his dissertation plans at that point. Ultimately, he saw no other course but to change his topic completely in favor of his passion for working with youth in "at risk" environments. The powerful and moving dissertation he wrote would not and could not have happened without listening to the call of his heart. We have not done our job as teachers if students leave our methods courses convinced "research is hard" or "I just want to get this done." They should most certainly consider it challenging, but by encouraging them to find and apply their passions we should also be able to convince them that research is a worthwhile pursuit.

Each of these lessons, along with the more detailed lessons each author provides, expands our understanding of the "complex domain" of research methods described by others (e.g., Lehti & Lehtinen, 2005; McIsaac, Blocher, Mahes, & Vrasidas, 1999; Potter, Caffrey, & Plante, 2003; Sachs, 2002; Winn, 1995). Beyond the traditionally perceived "procedural" complexity involved in conducting research, these students' stories remind us there are complexities beyond process that also impact students' development as researchers. Students may have a strong desire to *connect* with their research in cultural, social, and personal ways that lead to unique challenges we as instructors and advisors cannot ignore. In addition to understanding the experience and motivation students bring to research (Onwuegbuzie, Slate, & Schwartz, 2001), we must also understand who our students are *personally* and where they hope to go *professionally* (Pallas, 2001).

As mentioned earlier, this paper and the special issue it introduces are not meant to provide answers to the many questions posed within. My hope as guest editor is these narratives inspire dialog about the research process and how students are welcomed into their chosen research communities. I also hope future instructors and students are comforted by the fact that they are not alone in the process, that the challenges they face

are not due to their deficiencies as students, and that they do not have to leave their individual "selves" behind as they move into the community of research practice.

Acknowledgements

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