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Educational research in an era of alternative facts

We live in a would-be post-truth era in which runaway relativism has witnessed the US White House Advisor Kellyanne Conway giving us the amusing but astonishing and widely ridiculed concept of “alternative facts”. The blogosphere burst into life with writers parodying her statement. Students don’t write wrong answers in an examination, they just write alternative facts; I wasn’t absent from school, I was wearing my cloak of invisibility; so-and-so is not the school principal, I am; these are not school children, they are spaceships in disguise; today is not Monday, it’s the weekend.

The damage was not assuaged by her subsequent attempts to redefine “alternative facts” as “additional facts and alternative information”. Mercifully, since Conway’s mumbo jumbo there have been street demonstrations across the world in support of science and the careful, objective, disinterested, unbiased, serious pursuit of valid, reliable, evidence-based research on important matters for society. Conway’s “alternative facts” are kicked into touch, and that is the best place for them. As Chuck Todd remarked when he was interviewing her: “Wait a minute. ... Alternative facts are not facts. They’re falsehoods”.


A scientific approach evaluates alternative explanations of complex phenomena; indeed, falsifiability based on empirical evidence is a foundational principle. A claim is held up to the light of public scrutiny, and it has to pass muster; it must reach a demanding evidential standard and clear a high bar. Claims, and the research on which they are based, are scrupulously and rigorously interrogated, and the boundaries of the research are drawn carefully. This is why it is a *sine qua non* for research articles to include statements of limitations of the research and of the need for further enquiry in the field, acknowledging the tentative and conjectural nature of conclusions drawn, identifying the possible spatiotemporal and cultural situatedness of their findings, testing claims and identifying how such testing should be conducted, and keeping an openness to further evidence. The caution with which researchers state their claims is a fitting recognition of the messy, complex, multivariate, often non-linear world that they are researching.


The articles in the present issue attest to the caution with which researchers approach their task. Jinjing Li, Riyana Miranti, and Yogi Vidyattama, researching “significant variations in educational outcomes across both the spatial and socioeconomic spectra in Australia”, note that their results “*suggest*”, and that it “*might be the case* that some of the educational resources today may be more exam focused rather than promoting some of the long-term educational outcomes” (italics added). The authors comment that “[t]he limitations of this research also need to be acknowledged” and that “it would be interesting to explore further” the issue in question. This is light years away from Conway’s version of “additional facts and alternative information”.

Astrid Menninga, Marijn van Dijk, Annemie Wetzels, Henderien Steenbeek, and Paul van Geert, in a fascinating study of language use and production in kindergarten science lessons, provide an extensive discussion of the findings, their detailed complexity, and what they might mean, given “the idiosyncratic and non-linear nature that is characteristic of learning processes”. They exercise caution in indicating that their findings “*may indicate*”, that “[t]his result *may partly be explained*”, that there may be “[a]nother possible explanation”, and that

there exists “[a]nother factor which we *speculate* to partly explain these results” (italics added). Indeed, they acknowledge that beyond “the promising findings of this study, there is one major limitation to point out” and that “future research should focus on investigating” the matter further. This reflects the circumspection that must be adopted in conducting and evaluating research, and it is a formidable rejoinder to claims of Conway-like post-truth “alternative facts”.

Sanne van Herpen, Marieke Meeuwisse, Adriaan Hofman, Sabine Severiens, and Lidia Arends report their investigation into early predictors of first-year academic success at university. They “discuss the results per research question (RQ), recommend directions for future research and practice, report our study limitations, and conclude”. In doing so, they couch their discussion in tentative terms such as: “[a]n explanation of our result *could be* ...”; it “*may well be* that the level of academic self-efficacy measured in the present study did not vary enough to find differences among students”; “academic success in the first year at university does not *seem to be affected* by students’ initial motives to go to university”; and a “*first explanation* for not finding a relationship between pre-university reasons and first-year retention *may be* the very fact that students are transitioning and going through important personal changes” (italics added). Like the other authors in the present issue, they comment on the need for further research: “it would be interesting to investigate in more detail ...”. Indeed, their article catches well the open-endedness of the research enterprise by ending with the question “can changes in this behaviour during the transition to HE explain why students succeed or fail the first year at university?” This is a universe in which Conway’s versions of “alternative facts” or “additional facts and alternative information” have no place, and rightly so.

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