特 別 寄 稿

Catalyzing humanistic inquiries into contemporary social agendas: An introduction to the new Educational Innovation and Communication Studies Master's Program

Noriyuki Inoue

(Faculty of Human Sciences Waseda University)

Abstract

The field of human sciences has full of potential, but as a relatively new field, it is not free from possible pitfalls. One possible pitfall is becoming a faceless field without distinctive identity where anything goes, that is, any research area that deals with humans or human components in some way or another can claim itself as a part of human sciences. Another one could be becoming a fragmented collection of academic silos where the sense of apathy towards each other becomes the norm. To actualize the full potential of human sciences, it is important for us to critically reconfirm and strengthen the identity of human sciences with its purposefulness to contribute to building a more humane society by embracing diverse research activities. A new English-based Master's degree program titled Educational Innovation and Communication Studies (EDICS) is starting at the Faculty of Human Sciences, Waseda University this fall. This new program intends to connect the field of human sciences to contemporary agendas of globalized society and empower students to engage in humanistic inquiries into key agendas of educational innovation and communication by using action research as its overarching methodological framework. This article discusses key features of EDICS and its epistemological foundation as it examines possible future directions of human sciences in the 21st century.

Key Words：Epistemology, humanistic inquiry, education, globalized society, action research

The field of human sciences is often described as an interdisciplinary field. To better study the complexities of the human mind and human behavior, the field is destined to draw from a wide variety of traditional disciplines such as psychology, sociology, anthropology, philosophy and other natural and social sciences. This is a blessing for human sciences, but it could be a curse.

The benefit of being able to draw from many different academic disciplines creates large degrees of freedom in pursuing our research agendas and allows us to go

早稲田大学人間科学学術院（*Faculty of Human Sciences, Waseda University*）：n.inoue@waseda.jp

beyond the limitations of our specializations. It can help us cross epistemological borders that cannot be easily overcome in traditionally defined academic disciplines. In fact, it is quite eye-opening and stimulating to interact with colleagues who specialize in other academic disciplines and learn new theoretical and methodological frameworks from them.

However, this could be a curse if the norm of the field becomes "anything goes". Almost all academic fields have relevance to humans in some way or another, and if any academic field can be a part of human sciences, then the field of human sciences will be regarded as a faceless field X where anything can go into X. If we do not critically examine what it means to be human scientists, the integrity and identify of human sciences will readily collapse.

Another challenge that must be considered is the possibility of paradigm wars between different academic camps. With many different disciplines working alongside each other on the same boat, the assertion of rigid paradigms can be detrimental to all researchers, even resulting in unwillingness to share, discuss, and collaborate in research—or in a slightly better scenario, mutual apathy or cold war where fragmented silos of academicians refuse to talk to each other. The field of human sciences is a relatively young field, and it is vulnerable to those challenges.

How can we avoid these scenarios? In what direction should we proceed? One possible path could be to reconfirm and strengthen the identity of human sciences with its purposefulness to contribute to building a more humane society through its diverse research activities. This requires the field of human sciences to be constantly in touch with contemporary agendas of society as we critically question the purposefulness and integrity of human sciences as an academic community. This could create growing pain, but no academic field can achieve its integrity by daring to go through such a quest.

Take, for instance, psychology. In the early 20th century, the widely popular image of psychology was that of a pseudo-science. At that time, in order to qualify as a science, it needed to stand the test of objectivity, generalizability and replicability—criteria posed by the positivist paradigm (Hughes, 2016; Mertens, 1998). For example, from its outset, the theoretical framework of Sigmund Freud had been questioned regarding its objectivity (e.g., "Is it just him saying that it is the Oedipus complex based on his personal experience alone?"), generalizability (e.g., "Can we generalize what he found beyond affluent patients in Vienna at that time?") and replicability (e.g., "Can the same finding be replicated at a different time and different place?"). Furthermore, his theoretical framework was critiqued by his students and followers who felt it necessary to modify his theories into more sophisticated ones that were better in touch with reality (Monte, 1995). And of course, these new frameworks were later critiqued and modified to become even newer frameworks so that people with psychological needs—or those who do not seem to have psychological needs—could be better served. The history of psychology and any other academic discipline is full of such examples where a normative framework is modified and refined by subsequent scholars with its purposefulness to refine the field's identity and better serve those who are in need.

In the 1980s, learning science emerged out of psychological science—mainly from cognitive psychology—and has flourished as a highly active academic discipline (Bransford, Brown, Cocking, 2000; Ormrod, 2003). From its outset, the discipline was shaped to satisfy the positivistic criteria of objectivity, generalizability and replicability unlike at the embryonic stage of psychological science. The field has identified itself as a much more rigorous and defensible kind of science. But nowadays, the very criteria of objectivity, generalizability and replicability have been heavily criticized by contemporary learning scientists and educational theorists on the basis of too much emphasis on individualized, competence-based and information-processing learning, and the field has

been seen to have largely failed to capture the social and cultural foundations of learning (Hyslop-Margison & Dale, 2005; Mertens, 1998). To address this issue, new methodological frameworks have emerged and evolved to encompass phenomenological, ethnographic, critical and humanistic perspectives that can better capture the complexity and diversity of human learning in real life contexts. We will not go into details of these discussions here, but the key point here is that such purposefulness to shape a new academic field is quite essential even though it may entail growing pain. This applies to many other academic disciplines, and the field of human sciences is no exception.

At the Faculty of Human Sciences, a new English-only Master's program, Educational Innovation and Communication Studies (EDICS) is starting this fall. This program intends to strengthen the field of human sciences with its purposefulness to instill critical research inquiries into the process of educational innovation and communicaion in real life contexts. The program will equip students with a broad knowledge base and practical skills to conduct cutting-edge research related to educational innovation and communications that are in touch with the needs of contemporary society. Students will learn necessary skills and resources to actualize transformational and humanistic educational practices in an increasingly globalized and digitalized society.

Currently, innovation serves as the key agenda in almost any society in the world. Innovation requires out-of-the-box thinking and open dialogues in situations where diverse ideas are freely communicated to overcome the limitations of existing assumptions. EDICS helps students achieve a deep understanding of various cases of educational innovation around the world and undertake thesis projects on topics such as what it takes to actualize and sustain educational innovation and how to bring about socially just educational practices.

It is important to note that EDICS is the first English-based degree program in the Faculty of Human Sciences. This is an essential feature of the program since across

the world, there are more than 1 billion people who speak English (Lewis, 2005), while there are only 100 million people who speak Japanese—only 1/10 of the English-speaking population, and they are mostly living in Japan and constantly decreasing. And by 2050, half of the world's population is expected to speak English (Hyland, 2009). Nowadays, it seems that English has established and consolidated its status as the standard academic language of the world. Consequently, English-based university programs have mushroomed across the world, and Japan is no exception. By using English as the official language of communication, EDICS intends to usher students into a rapidly increasing body of resources, knowledge and dialogues in the world.

This is important since innovation is often quick. Digital technology and a connected world make innovations and communications much faster, open and diverse. If we wait for new ideas and trends to be translated into our mother tongue, it would be too late to participate in emergent dialogues and debates that are taking place in the world. And resources translated into your first language are most likely to go through the "filter bubble" reflecting the biases of publishers, translators and intellectual authorities. Therefore, we all need to go beyond our comfort zone and keep our eyes open to new initiatives in the world. In this sense, EDICS is a new type of program in the Faculty of Human Sciences. It can connect the field of human sciences to the increasingly globalized and digitalized world of today and empower students to engage in such initiatives with a global mindset.

Studying educational innovation and communications has become even more important nowadays because it is the ideas incubated in the minds of innovators and communications in the networks of reformers, rather than the magnitude and efficiency of industrial productions, that define the strength of society nowadays. It is both important and exciting to investigate the conditions by which innovative ideas are nurtured and actualized to promote humanistic and socially-just educational

practices. This requires us to engage in muti-faceted inquiries into how innovative ideas are embodied, prototyped, implemented and sustained in real life contexts.

The EDICS program adopts action research as its overarching methodological framework. There are many different variants of action research, but the common goal of action research is to actualize practice improvement through iterative cycles of actions and reflections (Stringer, 2007; Whitehead, 2012). It typically involves researchers and practitioners collaborating to conduct systematic needs assessment of the targeted practice, context-specific theorization of the needs, action planning and implementation, effect assessment, critical reflections on the process and then repeating the process (Inoue, 2015). For the needs assessment and effect assessment stages, it involves quantitative and qualitative data collection and triangulated data analyses based on which researchers and practitioners reflect on their initial assumptions and personal theories regarding the targeted practice. Action research is a complex research methodology, but given the complexity of real-life practices, it may be the best available approach for investigating educational innovation and communication practices.

I would like to point out that nowadays, it is rare to see traditional positivist research serving as the central stage of methodological debates in educational research around the world. The key methodological discussions in educational research seem to have shifted to context-specific research methodologies such as action research, lesson study and design research. These context-specific research methodologies are considered to be more suitable for investigating today's research agenda in education such as how to actualize equal opportunity of diverse learners, online and offline learning synthesis, multicultural collaborative learning, social structures for teacher development, ways to promote students' non-cognitive ability development and critical examinations of

values associated with educational assessment in real life contexts. The complexity of these issues requires the use of diverse theoretical and methodological frameworks beyond positivism.

This does not mean that we should deny or exclude traditional positivist research and theoretical knowledge derived from context-general research. Positivist research can help us gain new perspectives that can expand the scopes of both researchers and practitioners to formulate new hypotheses in the context. In other words, academic theories can be used as a guide, rather than absolute truth, in the process of context-specific research.

Here, one of the key agendas in educational resaerch today is how to overcome the gap between theory and practice (Deemer, 2009). Using positivist research methodologies to generate context-free knowledge and hoping that such knowledge will be successfully applied to some context by somebody would be too optimistic. Whether knowledge is obtained from rigorous research design, large sample data sets or sophisticated statistical analyses, the real test of educational research is whether it can actually contribute to the transformation of the targeted practice. In American English, there is an expression "Where the rubber hits the road" (i.e., the point at which the tires of cars actually contact the road surface). The question is whether we are critically aware of how things look when the rubber (i.e., theories generated from our research) hits the road (i.e., real life practice improvement and outcomes). This is an important question to ask in our attempts to bring about more humanistic practices through our research activities. This issue demands us to recognize that in real life contexts, there are numerous variables—social, organizational or cultural, you name it—at play, and there is a great chance that observed phenomenon deviates from the hypothesized models or theoretical assumptions. It is as if you cannot improve actual real-life practices without going beyond initially assumed set of variables incorporated in the research design. Even though you statistically process deviations in the aggregated data set

and analyze the data to generate a statistically significant model, the practice you see in front of you may not necessarily follow the model you obtained from your statistical analysis. In other words, statistical models that were created based on aggregated data can be fruitless for predicting and transforming any given targeted practice that is n=1. This means that the methodological criteria shared by positivists such as objectivity, generalizability and replicability can lose its value when it comes to transforming a real-life professional practice. The following is a famous dictum by Kurt Lewin (Marrow, 1977).

You never understand a system until you start to try to change it.

This dictum highlights the point that unforeseen factors often surface when you try to bring about a change to any existing system. By trying to improve the system, you will encounter issues unforeseen in your initial assumptions and expectations, which will enable you to understand the complexity of the system from inside. This prospect makes studying educational innovation and communication systems both challenging and rewarding at the same time.

However, if science is really the process to advance our understanding of reality and bring about positive changes to society, the above issue can lead us to a gold mine of research agendas. There are already good attempts to excavate this gold mine. One of the promising trends, for instance, is the emergence of improvement science. As a new type of science, improvement science addresses how we could improve real life practices and systems with new ideas, as we handle the complexity involved in real life practices and systems (Crow, 2021; Lewis, 2015). Improvement science encompasses a variety of context-specific research methodologies such as action research, PDCA cycles, design research and lesson study among others so that its research activities can encompass where "the rubber hits the road". In the United States,

new doctoral programs with improvement science as the major theoretical framework are mushrooming across universities with the support from the Carnegie Foundation. This new generation of science has still room to grow, but it made a very good start.

For EDICS students, what seems to be promising in their research activities would be to conduct collaborative inquiries into educational practices with practitioners so that data-driven, reflective and recursive improvement of practice can be initiated as their research inquiries become grounded in the practitioners' tacit knowledge (Polanyi, 2009). This approach will allow us to investigate how innovation could be actualized and sustained in actual practice contexts from inside-out (Tobert, 2004). Researchers and practitioners possess different types of knowledge and expertise, and they could purposefully co-generate theories-in-context of the targeted practice by making use of different types of expertise. Research activities of this kind will most certainly yield considerable benefits in the field of human sciences.

EDICS was built with such a vison with the sense of purposefulness to promote innovative humanistic practices. This year, the initial cohort of English-speaking EDICS students will start their master's studies in the fall semester. It is expected that the EDICS program will pave a new path for human sciences as it grows and blossom colorful flowers over the years. Welcome aboard, EDICS students.

References

Bransford, J. D., Brown, A. L., &.Cocking, R. R. (2000). *How people learn: Brain, mind, experience, and school.* Washington, DC: National Academy Press.

Crow, R. (2021). *Improvement science: Methods for researchers and program evaluators.* Gorham, ME: Myers Education Press

Deemer, S. A. (2009). Using action research methodology to unite theory and practice. *Teaching Educational*

Psychology, *3*(3), 1-2.

Hyland, K. (2009). *Academic Discourse: English In A Global Context*. New York: Continuum.

Hyslop-Margison, E. J., & Dale, J. A. (2005). The fallacy of objectivity in educational research: Scientism as neo-liberal ideology. *Journal of Curriculum Theorizing*, *21*, 33–42.

Hughes, B. (2016). *Rethinking psychology: Good science, bad science, pseudoscience.* London: Red Globe Press.

Inoue, N. (2015). *Beyond actions: Psychology of action research for mindful educational improvement*. New York: Peter Lang Publishing.

Lewis, C. (2015). What is improvement science? Do we need it in education? *Educational Researcher*, *44*(1), 54–61.

Lewis, P. (Ed.) (2009). Ethnologue: Languages of the World (16th ed.) Dallas, TX:SIL Interntaional.

Hyslop-Margison, E. J., & Dale, J. A. (2005). The fallacy of objectivity in educational research: Scientism as neo-liberal ideology. *JCT: Journal of Curriculum Theorizing*, *21*, 33–42.

Marrow, A. J. (1977). *The practical theorist: The life and work of Kurt Lewin*. Teachers College Press.

Mertens, D. M. (1998). *Research Methods in Education and Psychology*. Chap. 1. Thousand Oaks, California: Sage Publications.

Monte, C. F. (1995). *Beneath the mask: An introduction to theories of personality* (5th ed.). New York: Harcourt Brace.

Ormrod, J. R. (2003). *Educational psychology: Developing learners* (5th ed.). Upper Saddle River, NJ: Merrill.

Polanyi, M. (2009). *The tacit dimension*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Stringer, E. T. (2007). *Action research (3rd edition)*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Tobert, W. R. (2004). *Action inquiry: The secret of timely and transforming leadership*. San Francisco, CA: Berrett-Koehler.

Whitehead, J. (2012). Educational research for social change with living educational theories. *Educational Research for Social Change*, *1*, 5–21.