Part 2: Introductory article

Inducting BEd Hons students into a research culture and the world of research: The case of a Research Methods course in the BEd Hons programme

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Abstract

It has become a policy imperative that the training of future researchers in Education should start at the Honours level. This training presents particular challenges as students entering the Bachelor of Education Honours (BEd Hons) programme have diverse professional backgrounds and personal motivations for pursuing the programme. Moreover, the majority of the students have fairly substantial experience in schools, one of the primary empirical sites for educational research. This diverse student profile yields several challenges in relation to the teaching of a Research Methods course. In this article, the authors reflect on their experiences of offering a BEd Hons course to induct students into research against the traditional, literature-renditioned components which comprise the practice of research in the Social Sciences. Working with the notions of critical aspects and encounters, the authors found that students experience a tension between their desire to solve their identified research problems in a common-sense way and a teaching interaction that moves them to an abstract/theoretical level. In light of this, the authors identify that students experience difficulty with shifting their strong beliefs about knowing the answers (in terms of their research), to notions of doubt. Each of these beliefs marks different academic cultures that respectively refer to, on the one hand, a teaching practice-supervisor and, on the other, a participant observer-inquirer. The depth and richness of their experiences in the former tends to constrain the transition from predetermined answers to a curiosity driven mode.

Keywords: Bed Honours programme, inducting students, research culture, participation

in higher education, research methods, novice researchers, generic-type approaches, teaching practice-supervisor, participant observer-inquirer

INTRODUCTION

Within the global knowledge framework much emphasis is placed on the need for strengthening the number and range of Doctorate or PhD holders which is perceived to stimulate the research capacities of economies (Edwards 2010; Neumann and Tan 2011). Accordingly, the policy imperative in South Africa also stresses the need for further growth in the number of postgraduate students in order to ultimately increase the number of PhDs as a per capita proportion of the population (NRF 2008). Given the historical legacy, there are significant transformation challenges. It is against this backdrop that an Honours-level qualification takes on significance insofar as it is the point at which students are introduced to an academic research sensibility. In other words, it is increasingly seen as the opportunity to induct students into an academic research culture of the respective disciplines and/or fields of study. Cognisant of the diverse approaches to disciplinary-specific research, our aim in this article is to bring to the surface the processes involved in the teaching of a Research Methods course to students enrolled in the Bachelor of Education Honours (BEd Hons) programme at one university in South Africa. Our particular interest in presenting our ideas, is that teaching the practice of 'research' in a structured way to a large group of students tends to run counter to traditional ways of learning about how to do research. A few examples from the Natural Sciences will suffice.

Historically, the training of researchers in the Natural Sciences has mostly followed the 'apprentice model' where the expert and novice work closely together, with mastery being demonstrated and expected. This can be characterised as a tacit and osmotic process during which the student has to wait patiently to progress in a stepwise manner. The expert and novice work hand in hand and the novice 'picks' up the culture of research by being engaged in a singular project with the mentor. The engineering model is appropriate here, as at the Honours level students start by engaging with the mentor/expert and the materials at hand and then the new methods that develop emerge from the project.

By way of contrast, the teaching and learning arrangements in the BEd Hons programme are very different insofar as the approach to teaching research is 'structured' to accommodate a large group of students. In the Research Methods course, the expert course giver provides generic-type research training across the different educational fields: Education Psychology, Language Education, Mathematics and Science Education and Education Studies. Students are introduced to a variety of methodological approaches and perspectives. Here the focus is on a variety of projects generated primarily by the students who take the initiative in terms of 'thinking through' (conceptualising or formulating) their specific research topics. In a sense, the course is a first stage in the humble beginnings of growing novice researchers and we therefore wish to share these experiences.

By way of a caveat, we assume that teaching research in the field of Education is much like taking a photograph insofar as different people using a similar lens will yield different fields of view. In this article, we analyse some of the pedagogic encounters in an introductory 15-credit module to induct Honour's students into the craft of research in Education. The primary intention is to excavate the nuances, critiques and anxieties that have emerged in our teaching encounters. To restate then, the purpose of the article is but to explore by drawing on the respective disciplinary vantage points of those who have been involved in the teaching of the course. In this respect, the article offers one angle into the teaching of Social Science research, with specific reference to how it has unfolded at the BEd Hons level. To begin, we provide some historical background to the introduction of an Honours-level qualification in the BEd programme.

OVERVIEW OF THE EVOLUTION OF THE BED HONS PROGRAMME

The BEd Hons programme was a postgraduate qualification primarily designed for practising teachers, delivered on a part-time basis in order to accommodate those in full-time employment. The entry qualification to this postgraduate degree was a degree and a teaching qualification. Currently, a four-year diploma from a legacy-based training college or a university is also accepted as an entry qualification. The overall aim of the programme is of a dual nature, namely, upgrading disciplinary-based knowledge related to current pedagogical issues in areas related to school subjects and issues surrounding schooling; and introducing students to the academic study of Education. The content of the programme under consideration comprises 8 modules with a credit value of 15 credits per module. Of importance for the current article is that the research component constitutes two 15-credit value modules, with one, the introductory, being compulsory. An achievement mark of at least 60 per cent in this introductory module is a prerequisite for continuing with the second module.

As outlined above, a function of the qualification is to enhance the expertise of students with respect to the academic study of Education that includes strengthening the students' knowledge of developments in the field of Education. In this respect, it is about introducing students to knowledge and skills that could deepen their thinking in pedagogic practices both at the micro- (classroom) and macro- (policy) levels. The purpose of the qualification tends to nest between what could be termed, on the one hand, a professional, and on the other, an academic route, with the orientation seemingly more in terms of the latter, given institutional and national policy developments. We briefly signal this tension.

At the institutional level, when the undergraduate BEd degree was introduced the indication was such that it would provide a platform for postgraduate studies in the field of Education. With the delivery of the undergraduate BEd, the assumption was that students holding this degree would progress into a first postgraduate qualification in Education. In effect, in addition to practising teachers, students were also recruited from the BEd programme onto the Honours course. In combination with faculty and

institutional factors, the national policy quality assurance discourse also played a role, by placing increasing pressure on the research component. The pressure at the macro-level, for example, from the Council for Higher Education (CHE), was about the quality and standard of a postgraduate qualification in Education.[1] In light of this, there was increasingly more oversight around the quality and standard of the Honours programme. Indications suggest that the discussions and thinking around the notion of a standard at postgraduate level also had to do with the depth of the knowledge in relation to the delivery (including the teaching) of the Research Methods component. In this regard, the Higher Education Qualification Framework (HEQF) realignment also serves, and from 2013 onwards, all Social Science Honours qualifications will have to include a compulsory 30 credit research module comprised of basic research and a research project. It is in light of the increased oversight around the research component that we present our encounters on the teaching of Research Methods to BEd Hons students. To contextualise, a brief description of the course design and its delivery is presented below.

CONTENT AND DELIVERY OF THE INTRODUCTORY RESEARCH METHODS MODULE

The Research Methods course works with the traditional phases of the research process, starting with developing a research identity, and signals around the antennae for the context in order to formulate a research problem. The discovery process is cushioned by multiple approaches to 'getting to know', moving into reading what others tell us about the problem in order to guide the filtering down of the questions. Towards the end, students are, in an introductory way, given insights into techniques for data collection and ethical protocols. The course ends by shepherding students through writing a short research proposal.

The teaching approach ranges from problem-solving, action-research, social constructivism, through to argumentation, dialogue and (recently) an attempt at structured debate. The course combines lecturing with tutorial group support adapting these to the students at hand. Three principles guide the curriculum delivery, namely: (a) the logical design of the subject matter, with the course outline serving as a key compass; (b) drawing on the existing knowledge base of the students; and (c) developing assessment grids to directly identify opportunities for further growth in the particular areas. The course has prescribed readings and students are provided with extensive lecture notes that contain summaries and discussions of the key theoretical aspects of the readings. There are three assessment pieces, namely, a literature review, an instrument design, and a 6–8 page proposal. The course has a total of 30 hours of contact session time spread over seven Saturdays, and in addition there are individual or group consultations and e-mail contact.[2] During the course there is an attempt to popularise aspects of the scientific language.

The course is team-taught by two lecturers – one with experience and expertise in qualitative research methods and the other with knowledge of quantitative research

methods. Both lecturers are present at all the sessions and are prepared to share and express their views and opinions about knowledge production in the Social and the Natural Sciences. This engagement has stretched beyond the Honours-level course, through discussions with the postgraduate office. This has enabled us to keep abreast of the quality and standards pertaining to postgraduate qualifications. These discussions have also provided a feedback loop into the actual course.

In the following section, we discuss some aspects of the critical engagement of and encounters during the course. The issues that are highlighted evolved through competitive argumentation between the course presenters and one non-presenter who participated in some of the presenters' deliberations and discussions. The non-presenter acted as a critical friend in order to assess and rule whether the positions arrived at were justifiable. In addition to the insightful input provided by the non-presenter, a preliminary version of the article was presented at a faculty seminar with the moderator, from another university, of the course as a respondent. The insights gained from seminar participants and the respondent were considered and, where appropriate, included in the final version of the article presented here.

CRITICAL ASPECTS OF AND ENCOUNTERS DURING THE COURSE

The discussion of some critical aspects of and encounters during the course is done by a rendition of the different components of the research process as presented in the course. These aspects and encounters are interspersed and highlighted in the discussion.

AN INTRODUCTORY APPROACH TO THE 'GETTING TO KNOW' PROCESS

At the start of the course, students are invited to identify their personal meanings of research, more specifically around the distinction between being a teacher and a researcher and, the reasons for conducting research. Following this, via lecture format, the course moves into orienting students to the definitions, meanings and practices of research, using a very basic philosophical lens for them to mediate and navigate their way through the 'getting to know' process. In lecture format (tempered by limited discussion and debate), students are oriented to the values, ideas, principles and beliefs that underpin (or cushion) our thinking, drawing on concrete examples of schooling 'problems' in the 21st century, articulated either at the macro- or micro-level, and are used in purely illustrative ways such as 'Understanding/Explaining the discipline and punishment of learners in a Grade 7 classroom at an under-resourced school in the Western Cape'.

The intention from the above example, working with two key texts,[3] is to move from the empirical through to the abstract, by lifting out on to a meta-level, for example, the concepts of 'discipline' in terms of their broader and substantive meanings and their relationship to classroom behavioural practices. At this point, students are introduced to some of the deeper theoretical and conceptual aspects directly related to their immediate language, ideas and terminology that they bring

to the surface in the process of pondering about the nature of the scientific problem. We have observed that this tends to unsettle their popular notions of what constitutes a 'scientific' problem.

Problem identification: From a personal problem to a public scientific problem

The area of finding the problem and developing the key question is always a complex one requiring innovation on our part to make the content of the course accessible. This part of the course begins with students identifying their internal 'troubled voice'. We begin with the statement that 'There is an internal intellectual problem that troubles one', presented as follows: 'When you are in the classroom, you will find that the entirety of the knowledge acquired (both in terms of your own training as well as your general experiences) will hold, but not in its entirety', and at this point we assert that the boundaries of knowledge would need to be pushed a bit further. Through research, new knowledge is discovered and generated.

By drawing on the aforementioned statement, the students are shepherded through how their internal motivation (and in turn, their passion) reflected through immediate statements of the issue at hand, is the first step in the problem identification process. We are influenced by the work of C. Wright Mills who asserts that this is the point at which the student begins to make the shift from a personal trouble to a public concern. The mechanism for doing this is through probing for the context within which the problem nests as it is through the background and rationale that the student can build up an argument, or, make a case, for investigating a scientific problem. In teaching this section, complexities emerge, insofar as we have observed that students are both responsive to, but also reserved at the thought of being able to speak publicly of a structural issue (in the classroom) that troubles them personally, and then take this through a social process where it becomes a scientific problem. In addition, the interest here is also about students coming to terms with the fact that their 'person' matters, that social research starts off as a personal journey, in suspense of moral judgments. The guiding question here is: What is the 'run-up' (rationale) to the problem?

Background to and rationale for the problem

In seeking to convey to students an understanding and skill of how to develop a motivation for the problem, certain challenges have arisen. This complexity may have to do with the non-linear nature of the research process. Here is a brief exposition. When seeking to discover the focus area, that is the scientific problem, there is an iterative process between the background or rationale on the one hand, and what the literature tells us about the actual problem, on the other. One of the difficulties is to enable students to make the cognitive shift between the two processes. Our hunch is that students become somewhat confused about the to-and-fro process, which begs the question as to the non-linear type phases that mark the research process. Both processes though require students to know the related literature. What we have

encountered is that students are constrained by their prior background knowledge of research with insufficient command of the literature to 'know' or to 'justify' the problem they wish to pursue. This phenomenon in the main arises from practising teachers' background educational training as well as the limited focus on research at the undergraduate level in the case of the newer cohort of students.

The question at hand is teaching students about the nature of the engagement with the social milieu in which the problem is nesting. In light of this, the encounter is wide ranging. On the one hand, certain students immediately marshal the policy context or the material conditions in which learning occurs. On the other hand, there are students who tend to be unable to shift their ideas beyond the narrow learner-teacher engagement. In the case of the latter, this is somewhat expected as their undergraduate training has been focused more on professional preparation to deal with the delivery of the curriculum inside the classroom. The question posed and the attendant challenge is about the relationship between a personal problem and the broader policy/societal context. What is the background to the research? Which contexts inform the research focus? Here, via tutorial groups, students are provided with matrices to enable them to map the regions in which the context operates, working from the macro to the more micro and localised centres or vice versa. The purpose here is to trigger thinking on how their work – be it at the very localised level – is shaped by what could be defined as the surrounding discursive (background) regions.

As the students move iteratively through the personal motivation and background context, their ideas and thoughts about the 'problem' increase, leading them to classify the ideas related to the problem. However, it is in the actual wording of the research questions that the challenge arises as this is where students isolate the ideas and relate them directly to the problem at hand. The discovery process is, therefore, fraught with the difficulty posed by the economy of (English) language expression.

The discovery (or unfolding) of the problem/question, is approached in the following way. Working closely with designed matrices students identify a research area, proceeded by a consideration of the topic (as part of the overall research area), from which they then return to formulating the actual research question in a broad way and then move into a narrowing down, or filtering process. The exercise is most useful and can address the probing of 'scope' which is often not explicitly taught to novice researchers and can impact on overly large theses later on. There are several other ways in which the discovery process unfolds around the formulation of the research questions, including assisting students to inquire into how the questions will seek to answer the elements of the research problem, and in addition the justification for doing the research. But this conveys a fairly linear process, which in practice does not hold, as it is in the formulation of the research question that the student discovers the need to get into the literature on the actual problem in order to systematise the focus area. Momentarily, the student suspends the questions and then moves into what certain scholars have written about the problem, in other words, the literature review.

Engagement with the literature

We approach the literature review section from the angle of it being an engagement and a conversation with scholarly authors. In the course, students are instructed to read up on a minimum of three published journal articles on the topic. An interesting dimension at this point is that most of the students are not entirely familiar with what constitutes a 'published' text. In this regard, there seems to be an overemphasis on much grey literature, popular articles, and at times, works of fiction (such as novels). In addition, there tend to be several challenges around what constitutes a review of the literature.

Briefly, the first challenge is the actual sourcing of the literature, in other words, finding the literature at which point the unevenness in information literacy emerges; the second is distinguishing between the types of literature (grey, popular, scholarly, journals, media, books, policy literature); the third is reading up on the background that may not yield the debates on thinking about the problem; and this brings us to the fourth area, which is working in an engaging way with the authoritative articles. The actual writing up of the literature review has its own set of challenges: do you provide a summary of the points; how are these related to the scientific problem; do you evaluate the content of the texts; do you write these up thematically or merely paraphrase them? These are complex processes, compounded by the literature that yields a vortex of ideas with direct and indirect relevance to the question at hand. The challenge is therefore to bring the novice researcher to the realisation early on that the literature review should provide a context for the study, and locate the research within the broader field as found in the existing literature.

Methods and techniques

From our experiences on the course, there are indications that following an engagement with the literature, students demonstrate a reasonable ability to formulate their research questions. In other words, there is some clarity as to 'what' will be probed. Following on from here, the course outlines, in an introductory way, the traditional quantitative and qualitative methods and techniques used to glean data, interspersing these with concrete examples. Without delving into the detail, suffice it to state that there are confounding moments. This is especially evident in the qualitative lecture series, as students seek to translate the information from their actual experiences into researchable data as part of the knowledge production process. In other words, there are constraints around 'seeing', or 'getting to know' that a classroom encounter with their learners could constitute a research activity. In this respect, working with the metaphor of a 'spade' as representing the 'instrument/technique' that could be used to 'dig for' (i.e. 'glean') the information, has proven to be useful. When following through with this metaphor and transposing it onto the case study design, using the interview as a key technique, there tends to be a positive learning response on the part of certain students. In addition to case study, survey research design is also positively received. The latter may partly be a result

of their exposure to (household) surveys presented in the popular media. Thus, case study and survey research designs are very popular. Insofar as students tend to be drawn towards certain qualitative designs, the quantitative lecture series generates contradictory responses. For example, there is some interest around the experimental design techniques insofar as there is a keenness to measure phenomenon. However, it is at this point that numeracy constraints emerge, more specifically among those students pursuing a social science route.

Designing a brief research proposal

The course culminates in the design of a 6–8 page proposal, referred to as the 'letter of intent'. The lectures focus on the expectations and functions of the proposed research, assisting students in synthesising the content of the previous two assignments into a coherent plan. One of the encounters in this aspect of the course tends to border on a tension as to whether the proposal is an essay-type assignment written up over a few days, or a 'product of a sustained process of planning and designing the research' (Punch 2000, 11). In light of the latter, some of the students have difficulty understanding that the proposal as a 'sustained product' is a result of all the processes that have preceded this stage of the course.

Some of these tensions are reflected in the writing process with students uncertain as to how it should be structured. For example, initially, some of the students interpret the writing up of the proposal as one of attaching the previous two assessment pieces (i.e. assignments) with a brief comment on the topic. These are done in the framework of traditional headings and sections culled from other standard proposals. However, several students have shown evidence of 'sustained' thought and research by building these into a narrative discursive discussion with the use of the 'headings'.

REFLECTIONS

First-order research concerns

Since the students have not been exposed to research training, yet do have several years of practical experience, we have been keen to integrate their prior knowledge. In this regard, students enter the course with an empirical base, with a set of concerns that are somewhere between, 'I want to learn about corporal punishment', to, 'learners misbehave therefore their marks are low', or, 'learners are malnourished therefore they cannot learn'. These concerns demonstrate students' intellectual puzzles, not quite defined as such, but nonetheless, in want of finding out. The key point here is that students enter the course with a rich and diverse set of experiences about which they feel rather passionate. We are interested in the engagement. For example, when probed a bit further around 'defining the research topic', especially in terms of a motivation for such a topic, the stock response is to solve the problem as it exists in its first common-sense or, first order way. In other words they 'see' the problem and wish to then find a way to 'solve' it.

On reflection, there is the distinction between first and second-order responses, that is, between experience-based/empirical/common sense one the one hand, and that of abstract/theoretical-based knowledge on the other. One of the stumbling blocks encountered is facilitating students to think beyond what they 'see', as first order sensory experiences as in an example of the 'learner being bullied in the school grounds'. This image conjures a sensory experience, but of course the challenge, when conducting the research, or, framed another way, probing for new knowledge, is to suspend (at times) the affective aspects.

A further encounter experienced is that at times the 'answer tends to be before the question'. Nested somewhere in students' first-order responses is that they will 'have some answers already'. In addition, it seems that they enter the research space with fairly firm beliefs around 'what one should do', or 'we know the answer/solution'. Given our experience as researchers, we want to make the case that this weakness could be translated into an opportunity, if and only if, students can be inducted into a sensibility of 'doubt'.

Strong beliefs versus notions of doubt

The course dialogues around the conventional wisdom that research is about *what* we do when we have a question to resolve. It is to respond to a set of issues for which we do not yet have the answer or, potentially, even a solution. It may be worthwhile to state that although these two concepts are different, there is a tendency among students to view these as being synonymous. To return to the 'notions of doubt'. Stated succinctly, the course begins by trying to 'sow a seed of doubt'. This is a complex moment, insofar as we are engaging with a group of teachers who have been trained in a culture of 'knowing the answers', in a fairly authoritative and expository way. It seems that the students enter the course with a fairly fixed notion of what they want to learn (i.e. research methods), and then come up against an approach that requires scepticism, or something of the order that tampers with their preconceived belief-systems.

Scepticism and not just blindly accepting authority and dogma are hallmarks or 'habits of mind' of science, and so too are making public your research findings and allowing for public critique. These are mostly new ways of knowing and novice researchers do need to be inducted into this 'new paradigm'. At this moment, there develops a kind of a 'dilemma of belief' so to speak. The point we are trying to drive home is that the free thinking approach that is a potential mark of a social researcher, goes against the grain of what is perceived to be a singular belief system on the part of the student.

Honours-level qualifications and their structural accountability at higher education institutions (HEIs) in South Africa, can also contribute to the problem of students' academic adjustment difficulties and understanding of research processes. The Minister of Higher Education and Training has recently made a case for training Honours students as novice researchers, thereby creating an opportunity to cultivate the next generation of academics at an early stage. This does not exempt

the undergraduate curriculum from the initial disciplinary training and conceptual development as well as introducing students to the basics of research. The Natural Sciences model is instructive here; undergraduate students are expected to understand and apply research conventions in writing up practical reports and their final year of study usually offers an opportunity for a research project as a continuous assessment product. In Science Foundation courses, students are introduced to 'habits of mind of science' very early on in the undergraduate curriculum, for example what scientists do, how they do science, and so on (Holtman and Marshall, 2008). So there is less of a shift or academic adjustment at the postgraduate level. In fact, the process of this socialisation and enculturation of graduate students as explained by Campbell (2003) is special for the Natural Sciences, since it is based on a very long tradition. It results in the new scientist or 'becoming scientists' completely forgetting that things could be 'otherwise'; as the 'becoming scientists' eventually 'establish their own research identities, and these actually reflect strongly the systems of meaning established by existing members' (Campbell 2003, 3). A picture of science as contained and self-reliant is painted.

Students 'know' what research does but are not familiar with it having a scientific norm of convention: In the name of reason

One of the learning moments is to shift students' common sense view to another purview. Students are therefore introduced to the notion that 'common sense' informs how they do things; however, in research they have to go beyond common sense and subject the problem or the question to 'scientific investigation'. It is this scientific inquiry that we refer to as research to which students are introduced. The encounter in the classroom is one of students showing some reservation about what a scientific system means and looks like. Here, their reservations may have to do with the Natural Sciences model which depicts a stereotypical image of the scientist in a white coat, out of reach and engaging in activities beyond the horizon of the ordinary person. Our approach here is to use the term 'system'/'systematic' in order to convey the logic embedded in the process. Thus, for example, when discussing the interviewing of informants, students must realise that even though they would like to interview three people (which they would merely just like to do), there has to be a rationale for selecting these three people, and this has to be spelled out. In other words, there is a strong aspect of *rationality* that has to be communicated, that is, reasoning systems.

Judgments, critique and induction into a peer review system

Given that peer review is a vital component of the academic research system, conveying this to the students has been somewhat challenging. As alluded to earlier, students enter the course with the belief that critiquing one's work is a personal judgmental process, arguably linked to the 'red-pen syndrome'. Attempts are made to assist students to shift from a judgmental to a more engaging culture of critique: When we present our written work to an external reader working in a similar

academic field (i.e. a peer) for comments and judgments (i.e. review), this enables us to improve the quality and standard of our written work. The value and significance of the peer review and how it functions in the postgraduate system, is somewhat alien to students.

Teaching practice supervisor or a researcher?

A further key tension in the course, linked to our earlier point on research identity, is the distinction between the role of a teaching practice supervisor and that of a researcher. The aim of the course is to unhook students from their thinking and mindset about the need to solve a problem directly (as in a teaching practice session). It seems that one of the dilemmas is about the tension between being a teacher practice supervisor and a researcher-in-the-making. The two have different orientations, as the former has a normative orientation, whereas the latter is multifaceted. Of course, the latter does not preclude arriving in a normative way, given that the end of a research report tends to have some recommendations (norms), but this is through the marshalling of evidence (i.e. the actual research, rather than through first order opinions). Again, the explicit teaching of this distinction in terms of developing a sound research identity becomes critical.

The proposal writing process is complex

The students on the course find that the proposal writing process is complex and this has led us to rethink the extent to which there are continuities from the students' prior training. In brief, we have found that the linear shape of the writing process tends to be entrenched at undergraduate level. The construction of the assignment, subsequent to the perusal of the readings and the lecture notes, proceeds with the writing of the assignment, submitting it and getting feedback from the lecturer, with the process culminating in a mark allocation (Neville, Power, Barnes and Haynes 2012). Our hunch is that this process follows students into postgraduate studies where the writing process involved in producing a research report based on their small-scale empirical studies is not as linear and has a different purpose and end in mind.

CONCLUDING COMMENTS

As we have shown, teaching an introductory and basic level Research Methods course is complicated, so we conclude with several comments and further questions. The first has to be about the shape of the research learning and teaching process.

While the literature suggests a fairly linear, almost isomorphic, relationship between the various steps in the cycle, the shape of the actual research practices could possibly be defined as being polymorphic (if we are capturing the iterative process correctly). The image that comes to mind is, arguably, that students enter the course with a metaphorical sub-text of a 'ladder'. There is a general perception that by completing the course they would be progressing in a linear way up this

'ladder'. Framed another way, there is a sense in which they are looking ahead and that there is constant movement and progression, until they 'get there'. It is here that we have found the conventional stages of the research process both enabling as well as inhibiting. The process is enabling insofar as there are clear milestones to be achieved; yet inhibiting insofar as the practices reveal that the journey onward is not always clear. There are times when the student may fall off the ladder, or there is a sense in which the destination is both uncertain and unknown, other than there being light markings on the map. On the other hand, there are dense markings that may necessitate regressing, or digressing. The boundary lines, the containment of the subject matter, that is, social research methods, are not clearly tangible: if you are in doubt, then it is unclear where you are heading; in contrast, if you have the answer and know your destination, then you want to get there via the shortest route possible. This may explain the current cut and paste practices or, the need for a shopping list of how the process works. Experience has shown us that this process is not so easily taught and we ponder the wisdom of pushing 'self-help' type research books onto students who need to unlearn the step-wise approach taught in undergraduate writing development support sessions/classes.

The question arises, therefore, as to what the ideal structure of a basic course for Honours-level students is. What then is the purpose and function of the Research Methods course in the Honours programme? If, as research shows, postgraduate students grapple with the required levels of skill, knowledge and attitude, what should our expectations be given the prior knowledge base from which Education students enter the course? Our thinking is also influenced by the negative experiences of certain students who have progressed into the Research Methods module. In light of this, there are indications to suggest that students are not adequately prepared to do the second module. Effectively (and, in addition taking our cue from the practices of other HEIs) there has been a shift from a generic type of research training to one that is more disciplinary/field specific, which would then provide a firmer methodological background especially when students progress to the Masters level. In this way students gain exposure as novices to discipline-specific methods and techniques. This will give them more epistemological traction as they navigate the discipline-specific research journey. Hence, the notion of students being 'knowledge producers' is predicated on the knowledge base ('the dogma') of the discipline.

NOTES

1. For example, resources were channelled into a publication by the HEQC under the leadership of the late Prem Naidoo This was the national pressure exercised on all Faculties of Education at the time.
2. The teaching arrangements are fairly labour intensive. For example, in addition to increased contact time, the course is structured around a tutorial system.
3. The key texts for these lectures are Neuman (1997) and, more recently, Kalmbach, Phillips and Carr (2006), which approach the meaning of research differently. While

both texts draw on social theory, the former engages with the historical and classical views around knowledge, while the latter applies it to different knowledge epochs, with a teacher training orientation.

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