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Student as researcher: rethinking how to make research methods interesting for students

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Abstract

This project aimed to enable students to appreciate the technical and epistemological nuances of different phenomenological approaches. We involved a small group of self-selecting honours level undergraduate students in the plural analysis of focus group data. Students reported that this supportive teaching technique, facilitating peer working, resulted in deeper learning. This case study describes the piloting of a collaborative teaching method, engaging students as researchers. The project lasted six months, with monthly meetings from tutors to guide procedure and to support academic discussion. The group had a shared interest and joint cause but as each student also had an individual task of conducting a certain analysis, we did not observe any group member failing to offer full effort and participation. Reflections of how this type of teaching could be conducted with larger cohorts are considered and critiqued.

Keywords: peer learning; students as researchers; collaboration; group work; qualitative research methods.

Introduction

Teaching undergraduate qualitative research methods such as interviewing, participant observation and documentary analyses can be challenging (Earley, 2014; Meyer et al., 2005) and how different methodological approaches can be informed by the research aims/questions can lead to students feeling overwhelmed. Using lectures and seminars to

teach research methods is not always conducive to learning or the motivation of students but embedding research methods in applied topics can be fruitful in enhancing their engagement and learning experiences. We are also faced with studies that advocate research-led teaching, so we have the evidence base that tells us that research methods teaching is both relevant and needed for today's students (Jiang and Roberts, 2011; Zamorksi, 2002).

At undergraduate level across human and health science subjects (for example Psychology and Nursing), students may be introduced to the practical application of a thematic analysis and, through didactic seminars, be taught the key yet basic differences between grounded theory, ethnography, narrative approaches and phenomenology. This method of teaching however, keeps the students at a distance from both the tutor and the empirical material. A number of studies have detailed how many institutions create a close interconnection between research and the programme curricula they deliver. However, usually undergraduate students are placed 'at arm's length' (Brew, 2006, p.52) from wider university research. Indeed studies have detailed how students feel excluded from direct involvement in research as stakeholders (Lindsay et al., 2002; Turner et al., 2008) and too often the curriculum is 'framing learning as the passive acquisition of knowledge' (Baxter Magolda, 2008, p.75).

Prior to this project, a cohort of health psychology students was involved in research looking at the healthy eating perceptions and experiences of students (Rodriguez et al., 2014). This work enabled them to appreciate models of behaviour change and to consider relevant outcome measures, as included in the design and conduct of the study. Aside from the more quantitative elements of the research design, students were also invited to participate in focus groups and practise the role of facilitator. At the close of this study and teaching on the associated module, a group of students approached us to engage in further learning that could support their final year of studies. Their interest, stimulated by participation in the healthy eating project, had encouraged them to read about qualitative research methods. Specifically, and aligned to our own methodological preferences as tutors, these students wanted to learn more about the phenomenological paradigm. Their questions included: why are there different approaches? Do the different approaches produce different findings? Why would we adopt one approach over another? Whilst we could have referred them to additional reading lists or run an additional seminar, we reflected that what had worked so well in the preceding module was treating the students

as researchers. They learned and their interest was enthused from both doing and the responsibility of doing. The decision then was made to support these students over a summer term, to engage in the plural analysis (an analysis involving a number of different types/methods of analysis) of focus group discussions around healthy eating. The purpose of this small and collaborative peer study group was to:

1. Enable the students to appreciate the technical and epistemological nuances of different phenomenological approaches;
2. Pilot a collaborative peer support and student as researcher teaching method that could potentially be explored for future mainstream and larger research methods modules;
3. Evaluate student learning experiences.

Methods

Three focus groups had been conducted and digitally recorded for the purpose of a previous student-based study around healthy eating. This project was approved by the academic school ethical panel and included ethical clearance for students to be involved in the data collection and analyses of both the quantitative and qualitative elements of this project. The data collection was conducted across three participating campuses. Five honours level students agreed to participate in a peer study support group to analyse the transcription of one of the focus group discussions that they had not been involved in as either participant or facilitator. At our first meeting we explored their interest in the topic under study and the methodology of phenomenology, as well as the phenomenological literature and their existing levels of understanding. Each student was then assigned a different phenomenological approach, provided with a directed reading list and encouraged to start reading and, if confident, start analysing. The different approaches were Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis - IPA (Smith et al., 2009), the human science approach of van Manen (2001), the critical narrative approach of Langdridge (2008), the descriptive phenomenological approach of Colaitzzi (1978, cited Sanders, 2003), and the analytic procedure of Braune and Clarke (2006) which considers interpretive phenomenology more broadly.

We arranged six further meetings across a six month period, mindful that this activity was extracurricular to the other study commitments of these students. We had an open agenda but always updated on progress, what was going well, what was interesting, and students were encouraged to voice difficulties, queries and questions. We noted observations, for example, obstacles and key learning evidences, following each meeting. These notes and added electronic member testimonies were later used to reflect on the success of the project. Students were also aware that they could seek peer support from each other in between meetings and could contact us as tutors for extra support and guidance. At the end of the six month period we reflected on the quality of the analyses and the learning activity.

A number of other authors have promoted moving away from traditional teaching methods in order to be more student-centred (Rust et al., 2005), which encourages students to explore and construct their own meanings, contextualising prior knowledge and being more active in their learning (Herman, 1995). The current teaching style aimed to put the responsibility of learning on the student, hopefully making them more invested in their studies and leading to a greater depth of knowledge.

Outcomes

Involving students in 'real world' data collection and analysis can help them to understand methodological purpose and indeed motivate their interest for research (Smyth et al., 2016). It is thought that few students enter into a human or health science course because their motivation has been research methods and so it is our challenge as lecturers to engage students as researchers themselves (Earley, 2014). The promotion of the Socratic or student-centred approach to teaching is often cited as a good quality indicator (Herman, 1995).

Student requests to learn outside of the module space is not commonplace but we responded with interest to explore how we may better engage students in learning, especially in the qualitative research methods context. Each student clearly articulated a rationale for their given approach, a methodological procedure, and set of themes. The degree to which there was movement away from the given data (interpretation) seemed to be dictated by the chosen methodological approach and confidence the student had in

being able to engage in a level of reflexivity. Irrespective of methodological approach, the students agreed on shared thematic areas and their analyses were found to be contributory or add to debate around the more cultural issues of healthy eating in a student population. A layered and critical plural analysis (a combined and multiple phenomenological analysis) was achieved, something that prior to this learning activity, we would have not considered possible in our larger teaching sessions.

At the close of this exercise, the students could broadly articulate how phenomenological philosophy has developed over time with existentialist, hermeneutic and, more recently, narrative implications (Langdridge, 2007). They discussed that in order to apply a phenomenological approach in practice, it is important to have a grasp of its underpinning philosophy. They noted that, as active researchers, we have available to us methods informed by theories of understanding and interpretation. However, a phenomenological method never provides us with a direct recipe and it is through reading and understanding the philosophical foundations of an approach that we can then 'start to join up the dots to make a picture', or in other words take steps to achieve a relevant analysis. In class, the students claimed that this is hard to assimilate but through practice it can be appreciated. There is a need for creativity and reflexivity in conjunction with any chosen approach (Stige et al., 2009). Arguably this should also extend to the ways in which we consider our teaching of these very complex methodological traditions/processes. Students desire to be active learners; we therefore need to provide the best ways to support this.

The students commented that this way of working had made them 'feel like university students', independently learning yet still appreciating the advice and expertise of their tutors. In other areas of the curriculum they discussed how they 'needed to only revise facts, models or theories' and 'the lack of application of this knowledge struggled to engage them' and arguably 'did not move them much forward beyond pre university styles of teaching and learning'. This group of students benefited also in terms of how this allied learning could support them in their dissertation studies and their ambition for postgraduate study.

Concluding reflections

Reports on student experience often highlight the lack of a full understanding and exposure to the research process and there is also a lack of agreement among students regarding the expectations and requirements implicit in undertaking research (Meyer et al., 2005). Despite their crucial importance for students' professional development and academic training, these skills are often not established.

The findings of this small project are therefore illuminating. The learning activity was deemed to be worthwhile, both in terms of the analyses produced and the reported enriching learning experience. Through peer support and the informal but structured monthly meetings, students felt able to appreciate the science and philosophy of qualitative research methods. Their wider reading had led them to understand epistemology and ontology. They had learned to appreciate the work and opinion of others in the group and, as such, had not just learned from reading and doing, but had also learned from each other. Their dual yet different pursuits with the same data had prevented any level of over-reliance on other group members to conduct the majority of the work and it had inspired them to consequently consider the formation of a reading group or journal club for the remainder of their studies. They reported enjoying the process of active and peer learning.

This activity was serendipitous and proved to be a useful learning technique that we will apply to other (and larger) modules in the future. Its major limitation is the fact that it was a small self-selected group of students who volunteered for extra-curricular study. Its success could be more strategically evaluated by including a greater number of students in this type of working and by conducting a more structured evaluation and analysis of student experience.

To teach students electronically/remotely is an option that this type of learning activity could easily be combined with. Students could share data and discuss their analytic reading, approaches and progress via closed social media group applications that could be monitored by tutors. Replacing formal lectures with group tutor time to monitor learning and understanding may be a more fruitful teaching and learning experience for all. Individual group Skype meetings could be orchestrated for this purpose. Assessment could then be in the form of a group analysis feedback presentation to the full cohort. If

different groups were engaging in looking at different qualitative methods, it would then also be an opportunity for further peer learning.

What appears to be important for this kind of task to work is students each having their own analysis to conduct and for them to be working with data they have some investment in – here they were involved in the design of the related study, where the data was relevant to their subject or practice interests. Different students have different levels of motivation. Working on the same data set encouraged group support and needing to conduct one's own analysis encouraged independent working. To then need to reflect on one's own findings and the groups' working for formal assessment, would perhaps prove to be a further source of learning encouragement. However, this is something that would need to be trialled and evaluated.

Phenomenologically speaking, it is our willingness to step back and let things speak to us, it is a matter of us allowing a passive receptivity to let the things of the world present themselves in their own terms that will encourage our teaching development (van Manen and Shuying, 2002).

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