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Developing a Qualitative Research Culture in University Psychology Departments

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We are academics in the Department of Psychology, Middlesex University. Nollaig's research is primarily qualitative and Richard's primarily quantitative. We form part of a team responsible for developing and delivering Research Methods modules to students at undergraduate and postgraduate level. In this paper, we draw on our experiences and those of colleagues to discuss some challenges (and possible solutions) to changing the research culture in a psychology department.

The importance of qualitative research in psychology in the UK is now firmly established (Willig & Stainton-Rogers, 2008). The largest Section of the British Psychological Society (BPS) is the Qualitative Methods in Psychology Section (QMIP). QMiP's rapid rise in membership and its relative newness (founded in 2005) demonstrates the level of interest in qualitative research from both students and professional psychologists. The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA), who set the minimum standards and benchmark requirements for the psychology curriculum in Higher Education, expect qualitative research to be included in psychology teaching at all levels. Qualitative research teaching to undergraduates is supported by a Working Group, Teaching Qualitative Research Methods at Undergraduate Level, (TQRMUL) developed by the Higher Education Academy Psychology Network. TQRMUL "exists to support Psychology Departments embed the teaching of qualitative research methods into undergraduate programmes" (Forrester & Koutsopoulou, 2008:174). As qualitative methods

teaching does become embedded in psychology departments, qualitative approaches are becoming regarded less as a 'soft' option by and for students struggling with quantitative methods (Hansen & Rapley, 2008) and more of an essential part of the psychology curriculum.

The QAA are broad in their description of what qualitative methods teaching should entail. The QAA requirement to include qualitative methods teaching states that, "It should be noted that qualitative methods are understood broadly here, and might include protocol analysis, interviews, grounded theory and discourse analysis" (QAA, 2007:5). The broadness of this detail allows for departments to be creative and flexible in the design of their qualitative methods programmes but may also serve to situate qualitative methods as an adjunct to the teaching of quantitative methods, rather than a primary research approach.

A survey carried out by TQRMUL (see Forrester & Koutsopoulou, 2008 for full details) found that, in the 18 UK psychology departments surveyed, qualitative methods teaching was typically delivered by a team of three staff members. Characteristic provision in this sample was of approximately six hours of teaching time at Level 1 to average class sizes of 190 students and approximately fifteen hours at Level 2 to an average number of 125 students. The teaching of qualitative research is usually set within the Research Methods module and covers differences between quantitative and qualitative methods, qualitative research skills such as interviewing, and some qualitative methods, such as grounded theory, discourse analysis, IPA and conversation analysis.

Forrester & Koutsopoulou (2008) point out that the first requirement to incorporate qualitative methods teaching into psychology training came at a time when the discipline was seeing unprecedented numbers of undergraduates undertaking UK psychology degrees. The requirement created an expectation that psychology academics teach a broader range of research methods to larger class sizes. This presented the challenge of developing teaching in a completely new area for some psychology departments. This challenge has been exacerbated by the lack of formal guidelines as to which qualitative methods are most appropriate to teach.

These challenges might be better addressed if the professional and personal demands on and concerns of those responsible for delivering the teaching are recognised. The TQRMUL survey found that professional psychologists were confused about how the required level of expertise can be delivered to psychology students by insufficient numbers of academic staff. Psychology staff argue that they are being required to deliver teaching in areas they are not familiar with and at the expense of quantitative methods teaching. In this paper we discuss some of the challenges and solutions that have emerged in our Department as it strives to re-establish a culture that includes qualitative methods teaching and research. Some of the academics in the Department have been part of this ‘qualitative research trajectory’ at Middlesex and we have used their experience and suggestions to start to develop changes. In this paper we discuss the practical ways in which a quantitatively-orientated focus on teaching and research can be broadened to include a qualitative orientation, as well as the implications of such changes for staff and students.

A Short History of Qualitative Research in the Department of Psychology at Middlesex University

The Psychology Department at Middlesex has always been open to the inclusion of qualitative methods teaching. Arguably it was ahead of its time when a Qualitative Research Methods module as a final year undergraduate option was launched during the early 1990s. At this time the prevailing culture in psychology undergraduate teaching was to focus on quantitative research methods and the module dropped off the curriculum in the academic year 2000-01 following the departure of the person who established it. Qualitative methods continued to be taught to undergraduates on the 2nd year research methods module due in part to the value placed on qualitative researchers who continued to be supported in developing their work within a wider predominant culture of quantitatively-oriented studies. The profile of qualitative research teaching increased in the academic year 2002/03 and there has been a gradual expansion of the number of qualitatively focussed lectures and workshops since then.

Thematic Analysis was introduced on the First Year Research Methods module in 2002/2003 but assessment was limited to a group oral presentation; today this research method is assessed by an individual report and makes up 12.5% of the overall grade and qualitative methods now take up almost 20% of teaching time. On the equivalent 2nd year module teaching of qualitative methods has increased by 50% this year and now accounts for almost 20% of teaching time.

Students have increasing opportunities to employ qualitative methods in the selection of their Final Year Research Project because of the ongoing recruitment of

qualitatively-orientated staff to the Department. Three of the latest six staff to join the department are qualitatively-orientated researchers. They have joined a staff team with a prevailing quantitative orientation but with a significant number of its members showing a willingness to engage with teaching alternative methods. Of the approximately twenty staff supervising these projects, more than half have listed themselves as willing to supervise 'various' research approaches, including qualitative and mixed method. Taking the last academic year as an example, of these over 80% can be considered primarily quantitatively-orientated researchers on the basis of their own research output. In the current year the proportion of staff offering to supervise 'various' methodologies had increased to approximately 65%, while those offering supervision for qualitative methods only had risen from about 4% in 2005/2006 to over 10%. However, students' selection of qualitative approaches in the Final Year Project has actually dropped in the same period: from a high of 15% of projects in 2005-06, the proportion has fallen in subsequent years - 8% in 2006/07 and just 5% in the last two years. Interestingly, this raises the possibility that as students become more versed in the qualitative research approach they regard it as more (rather than less) challenging than a quantitative approach in which they have received more teaching hours. Informally solicited student comments concerning their perceptions of qualitative methods before and after learning them lend tentative support to this hypothesis.

Qualitative research carried out by staff within the Department continues to grow. Recently published research includes an ongoing study into the benefits and creative tensions arising from pluralism in qualitative research (Frost 2009a; Frost, 2009b)¹,

¹ Originally funded by School of Psychology, Birkbeck, University of London,

the miscommunication model and acquaintance rape (Hansen & Rapley, 2010) and qualitative studies in the field of Assisted Reproduction (Purewal & van den Akker, ; 2007; in press), Consistent with the department's trajectory there are several recently-initiated qualitative projects in progress, including a study of the pluralistic analysis of naturalistic text (Frost and Barry), a project to examine the rebuilding of elite sports performance (Duffy), investigation into smoking cessation (Alexis-Garsee), and a study of racism and diversity in clinical training (Ciclitira). Mixed methods projects currently in progress involve investigations into ageing and well-being (Payne) and students' assessment feedback (Frost and Sandamas).

The changing research culture is further supported by newly formed cross-departmental collaborations with the Schools of Nursing, Information Acquisition and Engineering and Information Science. These collaborations bring qualitative research opportunities to areas of document analysis and technology not previously considered within the Department and offer innovative opportunities for developing joint grant applications. Visiting speakers with a qualitative focus make up most of the Psychology Seminar Series, PhD Student seminars include qualitative research input and Research Assistants taking up year-long placements in the Department are trained to work with a qualitative orientation.

It is primarily the willingness of all the staff to explore the value and place of qualitative research that has led the development of both new teaching practice and mixed-method research. At Middlesex this may be a reflection of the previous inclusion of qualitative research in the Department's research profile and a history of having prominent qualitative researchers working at the department. There may be an

established recognition of the value of qualitative research by those who witnessed it during its early establishment in the Department. It is also possible that the selection of those invited to deliver the teaching by the programme organisers reflects those staff most willing to engage with new topics and teaching styles. Some colleagues report that they experience positively the opportunities for research and teaching collaboration brought by new qualitatively-orientated staff to the Department.

It is by listening to the reports of colleagues becoming involved in the changes that some of the challenges have become clear.

Challenges

Challenges arise from seeking changes to an existing culture and from requesting staff to adopt new teaching and supervision orientations. It is obvious but worth recalling that the majority of psychology lecturing staff received their undergraduate training almost exclusively in the traditional quantitative research methods. The introduction of qualitative methods to undergraduate curricula means that many are being asked to develop new skills that they do not intend to use in their own research yet are expected to communicate effectively to students. Some qualitative researchers are uncomfortable to teach quantitative methods to students and quantitative researchers to teach qualitative methods.

Some quantitatively-oriented staff frame their objections to teaching qualitative research as methodological critique, attacking the perceived 'unscientific' nature of the methods. Others dismiss the rise in the popularity of qualitative approaches as a passing 'fad' and therefore do not want to invest the time required to gain competence

in their use. Others see the time investment as low priority when they are unlikely to use the methods in their research. Several report anxiety about a real or perceived lack of competence in teaching qualitative techniques. The issues of confidence and competence have arisen even amongst those quantitative staff who *are* willing (even keen) to engage with teaching alternative methods and it is clear that a greater number of formal training opportunities need to be provided for this group.

From our discussions with staff so far we think it is worth noting that there are perceived differences in the instructor role when teaching quantitative and qualitative methods. Teaching quantitative methods requires the provision and clarification of facts regarding the logic and practical use of statistical tests. Teaching qualitative methods requires the instructor to facilitate the development of the students' own interpretative skills and self-reflexive qualities. The differences in these approaches become particularly relevant when addressing students' questions in class sessions. Students often want to hear the 'right answer' and staff may want to provide one. Some quantitative staff have expressed concern over the shift towards handing over responsibility to the student of qualitative methods to find meaning in the text. Some staff question whether is 'teaching' at all. It seems that students can also experience difficulty with this change in instructor role, often having become used to the approach appropriate to quantitative methods teaching. One way to address this is to present qualitative methods earlier in the module so that student expectations are not so firmly embedded.

It is also worth considering the difficulty in fully understanding qualitative methods without practising them. It is only by engaging with texts that researcher interpretative and reflexive skills can be developed. This can be a considerable challenge for staff whose research activities do not include such practice.

The psychology curriculum emphasises the importance of research to the discipline. There are several long-standing requirements for the teaching and conduct of quantitatively orientated research. For the majority of academics in the Department this is an established and necessary programme and has been honed over several years. It is very hard for programme organisers to see what can be sacrificed in order to substitute teaching of an alternative approach to research that some know little about and that some question the relevance of. With support for qualitative research teaching from regulatory organisations having been inconsistent until recently the importance of doing so can be obscured or overlooked

Staff and students alike raise the issue of the time-consuming nature of qualitative research. Project supervisors who are new to mixed-method and qualitative research are unsure about timetabling research tasks with their students. The time needed to carry out qualitative data analysis is much longer than that for computer-based statistical analysis. The option of time-saving professional data transcription causes concerns about confidentiality and student ownership of the work. The writing-up is in a different style and appears to benefit from a greater word count limit than that imposed on quantitative studies.

For their part, students describe the less structured approaches of qualitative data analysis techniques as more challenging than the computer based analysis of statistics they have received proportionately more training in. The instructional style also seems for some to more easily fit with their expectations of the teacher-student relationship, perhaps derived from their own, often recent, experiences at school.

Finally, the diverse multicultural population of Middlesex University has presented some particular thought-provoking challenges to those teaching qualitative research. Michaels (1985) suggests that when conducting interviews where interviewer and interviewee do not share similar identities/backgrounds a “lack of shared cultural norms for telling a story, making a point, giving an explanation and so forth can create barriers to understanding” (Michaels, 1985:51 cited in Riessman 1987). Beyond the usual impact of such diversity on teaching processes it seems that the content of what is taught in qualitative research makes this consideration particularly important. For example, much of the work on interviewing techniques, such as building rapport, conveying respect and establishing boundaries, is essentially based on Western models of social interactions. This may prove misleading outside of this domain; while making eye contact conveys respect in the West, *avoiding* eye contact is respectful in other cultures. Beyond the many subtle issues of body language, there may be cultural constraints around other aspects of interviewing: When delivering teaching on semi-structured interviewing, for example, the notion of ‘open questions’ was found to be at odds with the expectations and etiquette of the culture of some students. Female students from some cultures are hesitant to approach male lecturers with questions about what is being taught. If these and other cultural differences are not recognised and addressed by staff, misunderstandings about what is required of

them in the training sessions can arise. Providing references from international sources can help both lecturers and students consider cultural emphases and sensitivities.

Solutions

Practical solutions to some of the concerns have been implemented. We have organised a series of support sessions and meetings with individuals to prepare staff for teaching research methods that they are unfamiliar with. We point staff toward online and other resources such as the forthcoming book that provides a practical guide to qualitative research (Forrester, in press), to provide further support. We are currently planning a training session for new Psychology Lecturers at the New Psychology Lecturers' Forum organised by the Higher Education Academy (<http://www.psychology.heacademy.ac.uk/s.php?p=202&db=185>) and are preparing a broader research study to identify strategies, issues and challenges in psychology departments across the UK. The output from each of these will help to build a fuller picture of current provision and debates around this topic and to identify ways of addressing them for all psychology staff.

The wording of the QAA documents allow for flexibility in the design of qualitative research teaching programmes and this can be an asset across different programmes. Curriculum leaders can decide to what degree they focus on teaching students about qualitative research *approaches*, to include for example issues of ontology, epistemology and reflexivity, and to what degree on the *techniques* of qualitative data elicitation, collection and analysis. The question of deciding which methods to teach is addressed in part by using the expertise available within the department. Prior to

the recent recruitment drive a few members of staff were trained in thematic analysis and this was the main method taught. It was argued that this method provides students with a firm grounding in the qualitative research approach. Those students with an interest were in a position to develop this and apply it to other methods. Qualitatively orientated researchers often have expertise in one particular method and staff recruitment has brought an expansion of the repertoire of qualitative methods available to students.

The inclusion of new teaching sessions has been supported through targeted staff recruitment. By bringing in researchers who use qualitative methods in their research, knowledge that can be brought to the teaching has broadened. Specific responsibility for developing qualitative research teaching has been assigned to staff and a medium term strategy for developing new, relevant modules has been put in place. To support the current and planned developments qualitative researchers liaise with staff to identify the areas in which they would like further support in order to deliver informed teaching. Identified areas have included devising semi-structured interview schedules and developing theoretically-informed frameworks for interpretation. These concerns have been addressed by developing tutorials and seminars for staff, by preparing them individually for seminars and being available for queries following seminar delivery. Additional student support is offered through a weekly lunchtime Discourse Analysis Group, facilitated by an experienced qualitative researcher. The group offers students the opportunity to discuss issues of transcription and data analysis.

Including qualitative research in modules other than Research Methods engenders support for the application of the methods. Lectures and workshops that utilise and critically analyse qualitative research across the curriculum help to reinforce learning about qualitative research. At Middlesex we incorporate qualitative research design, critical analysis of qualitative research and liberal use of qualitative research examples in Lifespan Development Psychology and Mental Health, Well-Being and Consciousness modules. All our Counselling Skills and Theories modules draw extensively on qualitative research to provide case studies and examples and to facilitate small group discussion work.

Rather than seeking to surrender existing teaching sessions on statistical analysis to qualitative research teaching, other ways of incorporating qualitative research teaching have been developed. Qualitative methods sessions have been added to the First year Research Methods module by decreasing the number of sessions on non-parametric tests in particular, but also by reducing the time allocated to the teaching of other topics. A number of weekly seminars have been turned over to qualitative teaching and workshops. Staff are provided with seminar templates, worksheets and 'cribsheets', devised by qualitative colleagues. Seminars typically focus on the role and technique of qualitative data collection. The teaching is supplemented with the TQRMUL 'Dataset Teaching Resources' and the TQRMUL 'Practicals and Reading Materials' (<http://www.psychology.heacademy.ac.uk/s.php?p=108>). These provide interviews for data demonstration, data transcription and data analysis and overheads, in-class exercises and assessment guides. The resources offer ways of saving time in workshops and of supporting lecturers less familiar with teaching qualitative research.

Middlesex is lucky to include researchers who use mixed-method approaches. Their strengths in qualitative approaches have been harnessed by asking them to supervise qualitative Final Year Projects. This offers a way of spreading the qualitative load amongst relatively fewer qualitative staff than quantitative staff.

To begin to address the challenge of supporting students whose cultures do not include the use of open question-style we hold quizzes to identify different question and interview styles with students. These are used as a basis for discussing difficulties in both devising and asking different types of questions. Students are given opportunities to discuss their concerns individually with tutors and to hold pilot interviews with fellow students for feedback.

Conclusion

The departmental experience at Middlesex continues to be a broadly positive one. While this may not universally be the case our experience suggests that even with a subset of staff willing to adopt qualitative methods, substantial progress can be made in encouraging collaboration in both teaching and research. Rather than obscuring the tensions between the methods, we are hopeful that these collaborative efforts will open a space in which pedagogical and methodological innovation can occur.

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