Editorial

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Teaching research methods at the post-graduate level presents a characteristic set of challenges that are not always or even often found in teaching at the undergraduate level. There are, for instance, questions as to whether the teaching of generic approaches and methods in terms of the traditional binary of quantitative and qualitative methods is either effective or provides for a good student experience. There are also issues around the necessity of providing either discipline-specific teaching, or specialized inter-disciplinary methods training that is tailored to particular combinations of disciplines present in any study. Furthermore, there exists a healthy debate, particularly in the arts, humanities and social sciences, on what, indeed, constitutes research as such.

Against this background, it is both topical and difficult to talk about innovative ways of teaching research methods at the doctoral level and this volume represents not only some of the diversity of approaches, but also a glimpse of some of the situated challenges that makes the task important and demanding of imagination, energy and skill

The contributions

In the opening lines of 'Under Milkwood' Dylan Thomas wrote 'to begin at the beginning …' which for those of us engaged in research and the teaching and learning of research methodology, this usually turns on some kind of 'question'. For experienced researchers, the search for the 'question' never seems to get any easier as we move from project to project, but for neonates, the translation of a vague or even a well-defined idea into a set of 'doable' questions is a tortuous process. It is a process littered with conceptual traps which, for many students (in conjunction with their supervisors), involves an awkward and uncomfortable challenge to their presuppositions about the social world. Questions (as we know) are never neutral but come wrapped in all sorts of conceptual blankets; smooth as well as coarsely woven. However, a critical moment in the teaching (and we hope learning) of research methodology is the identification of the 'question'. As we are fond of telling our own students, once the question of the 'questions' has been resolved, the rest of the research design tends to follow in a slightly less painful manner. In his paper, Patrick White takes the issue of the 'question' and offers a critique of how this pivotal moment in the research process is dealt with – often superficially – in methodology texts. Although somewhat obvious, he argues that research should be driven by the needs of the questions and not the method. Returning to a method like a comfortable pair of

shoes may well be reassuring, but it does not necessarily lead to good research, though research without a rigorous application of method does not produce good research either.

Following this line of reasoning in the second paper, Daniela Mercieca and Duncan Mercieca issue the warning that in all efforts to discuss the teaching of research methods we should be cognizant of the argument that method can determine object and that the framework that is used to view the world can result in shaping and determining what is seen. This perspective is relatively unproblematic for the natural sciences which hold, generally, to a realist, materialist ontology within which measurability is constitutive. This leaves quantitative methods an uncontested field of action. However, in educational and other social scientific research, the situation is quite different and most definitely more complex, and any attempt in research to avoid this complexity in its uncertainty and messiness is a mistake. Methodological uncertainty is, as the authors point out, not simply another process problem to be solved on the way to the perfect design; both are likely and can be expected to impact on the thinking and affective lives of the researchers themselves. Here we detect, as in many of the papers in this issue, a specific educational moment and opportunity: the pedagogical response to practical uncertainty in early researchers. Should teachers allow students to remain in this state for a length of time, as part of learning the nature of research, and, if so, for how long? Or do the demands of time-limited funding and completion rates dictate that students should be provided with a clear path through the process? Merceica and Merceica are clear on how they view these questions and offer the work of Deleuze and Guattari as a way of looking at research not as a representation of the world but as a means by which all who are involved in the process are changed-in-relationship by their engagement with things and events that do not fit the pre-shaped moulds of traditional methodological constructs. As they state it '[t]here is no easy way of going through this' but perhaps it represents one of the key educational possibilities in the supervisory relationship and in the mentoring of researchers.

The third paper by Anita Sinner extends this argument in her contribution entitled 'Archival research as living inquiry: an alternate approach for research in the histories of teacher education.' Here, she offers a view of her own self-reflexive relationship with an historical archive. Pedagogically, this can be read as the author leading us through her research and how she positions (as well as problematizes) herself vis-à-vis the archive. The critical point being addressed is the lack of easily definable boundaries between the research and the researcher. As is well accepted for most researchers, this distinction, to quote Marx, is one which 'melts into air'. In orthodox terms, the archive is presented as an ahistorical entity; simply and unproblematically, a repository of material to be accessed and 'mined'. She invites us, through her own work, to reconsider this view of the archive as a relatively fixed and stable entity. We are accustomed to, and indeed treat as axiomatic, the sites of our research (schools, colleges, classrooms and so on) as changeable and unstable spaces. In this context, the archive is problematized similar to any other research site and so too is our relationship with it. Additionally, the archive becomes an artefact (i.e. an ontological *and* epistemological construction) in its own right and one which has to be critically 'worked with' as with any other set of data which is generated in

the course of undertaking research. The pedagogical value in her work comes at the end of the paper. Here, she explains how she brings into the teaching and learning context her own experience of archival research. In summary, what she attempts to create in her own students is a sense of 'disruption' in their research doxa through the interrogation of their own personal archives. For us, as educators and researchers, Sinner's relationship with the archive can be seen as emblematic of the way in which our own (as well as our students), should strive to problematize the research process. In the context of her own work, she remarks that 'the overtures made to graduate students to become archival by revisiting their public and private documents and memories, and by engaging in reflexivity inevitably transforms understandings of research as an application to understanding research as an experience'.

In shifting the emphasis, but still in keeping with the idea of transformation and uncertainty, Kathryn Roulston, Judith Preissle and Melissa Freeman in their tracking of the doctoral research journey, document a familiar uneven road commonly travelled by students. They situate their research within the debate around the quality of educational research more generally, but with a specific focus on the 'sub-plot' of the place and role of research training for doctoral students. The attempt by policy-makers to standardize this training, in a bid to generate uniform outcomes in the form of well-trained technicians, is challenging for those working in what we loosely refer to as the 'qualitative tradition'. In their discussion they bring out clearly that the doctoral journey is as much about personal transformation as it is about the development of technical competency. Each stage of the research process appears to be punctuated by a transformation and, more importantly, one which is as much bound up with contingency and serendipity as it is technical prowess. Although Roulston et al. do not couch it in such terms, policy-makers also need to be reminded that not everything can be carolled into neat and tidy learning outcomes. For instance, their participants describe the transformation of their broad areas of research into specific research questions; a steep learning curve for all novice researchers. A further significant point of transformation is brought out in their discussion concerning fieldwork. This they conceptualize as not merely an unproblematic exercise in generating data, but a profound learning experience. It is at this point in their doctoral journeys that their participants move from seeing research as a tidy(ish) linear process, to one which is (for want of a better phrase) holistically connected. There is a realization that past, present and future become crystallized in the act of being 'out there' in the field. As Roulston et al. note: 'in their [students] retrospective accountings, they seemed to have become reconciled with the 'messiness' inherent in conducting qualitative studies. As research methods instructors, we recognize this messiness as integral to the developmental and emergent nature of qualitative design'.

The final papers in this series engage with the integration of technology in the teaching of research methods, albeit in different contexts and with different technologies. The paper from Nicholson and Uematsu reminds us of two things: that technology is received and engaged in different ways depending on the cultural background and that virtual learning is not necessarily a complete substitute for face-to-face learning. Neither of these claims is new, though it could be argued that there has been less recognition of the cultural dimensions

of technology integration in literatures that often consider the virtual a culture-free zone, or even constructing its own substituting culture. However, one of the most enriching experiences of working with multi-cultural collaborative groups, highlighted in this paper, is the realization that culture cannot be put aside even while attempting to pursue a shared goal. On the contrary, there is the indication here that it is precisely through the challenges posed by different cultural constructions of social phenomena that the authentic education of this group occurred, thus supporting the often-cited claim that there can be 'no education without difference'.

A further contribution of this paper is the description of how the writers coped with the unexpected and unplanned disruption to the group. This acknowledgment and management of the contingencies of life that often interrupt and impinge on long-term plans such as research projects provides an impetus to a possible discussion on disruption in postgraduate teaching and learning due to life circumstances. Here again, this discussion is not clearly present in the literature and it is good to see it being expressed here in honest terms.

In the final paper in this volume innovative teaching of doctoral research methods meets the 'innovative and entrepreneurial' university. The Innovation Alliance between the two largest universities in Ireland adopted as its initial project the training of doctoral students in both universities in new and creative ways. One way that has attracted some attention, particularly from employers, is the use of the medium of video to enable PhD students to present their work in a creative and accessible manner in the public domain. In this paper, the student engagement with the medium is described based on feedback generated from reflective logs following a module in which the students learned how to script, record and edit a video clip that demonstrated the innovative character of their work. By means of this exercise, it is suggested that students can become aware of the innovation potential of the larger work of the thesis, though there is an indication that the timing of such a module in the life-span of a doctoral programme may be important if the most is to be made of the potential of the medium.

Perhaps the most valuable aspect of this teaching lies in the bringing together of students of many different disciplines to assist each other in the production of the video clip and the pooling of abilities and knowledge that can result. It is certainly not clear to what extent the specific skills that are developed in the module are likely to be employed by the candidates at a later stage of their careers. However, this uncertainty about the long-term effects or subsequent use or applicability of skills learned in research methods is not unique to this particular example of innovative teaching. All endeavours of this kind bear the possibility that they might not bring about enduring understanding and yet this ambiguity cannot be permitted to stifle creative and imaginative ways of approaching research and research methods.

In summary, the papers of this volume are witnesses to innovation, to imagination and, in many cases, to risk-taking. Almost all refer to the act of disruption, whether intended or not, in students attempting to become

researchers. For us, as educators, this is a re-assuring characteristic. Teaching is a disruptive act in a world that is marked by uncertainty and fuzziness and no longer trades on the idea that students can be trained in linear methodological procedure alone. It is precisely because our teaching has these attributes that it is a true educational activity and not simply a matter of training. The persistent demand by policy-makers for generic and standardized researcher 'skills-development' is at odds with and is challenged by the contributions in this edition.