Master of Research (Online)

Research and the Theoretical Field

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Only theoretical objects may be discovered; an empirical object is merely encountered.

(Dowling, in press)

A participant on a Doctoral School workshop that I was running, recently, said that he was interested in looking into students’ understandings of learning. My response to this was to ask whether it was generally the case that students have understandings of learning. Of course, if you ask students, 'how do you understand “learning”?', then they will, more than likely, attempt to answer your question. In doing so, it is at least possible that they will begin to formulate, explicitly, something that they have not thought about in this way before; they will begin to theorise learning. This possibility, of course, suggests that it is probably not a good idea to ask the question, if you want to find out something about the lives and thoughts and practices that the students already live, think and engage in, in advance of your intervention.

Let’s take 'learning' as an example. In order to theorise learning, there are two kinds of resources on which we might draw. The first consists of the ways in which other people have theorised it. In everyday life, a dictionary might be an appropriate source in this respect. These are rather less useful for our purposes, here, because the research literature will often use common (and less common) terms in specialised ways that may not be represented in everyday dictionaries, particularly as we are usually interested in the research of the moment as well as that of longer standing. So we go to the research literature itself to explore the ways in which learning is theorised. I’ve always been impressed by Jean Piaget’s theorising of learning; there’s a helpful and quite brief introduction in Piaget, 1980. Piaget is concerned with ontogenesis—the development of the individual—and, elsewhere (Piaget, 1995), the development of the social. The basic processes of individual learning and social learning are the same; Piaget uses the term equilibration. Essentially, a non-learning state would be a state of equilibrium in which everything is as expected, knowledge is, to this extent, complete. Such stability is not found in practice, of course, because individuals and groups keep bumping into things that disturb the peace. For Piaget, the natural state of development involves the attempt to restore equilibrium and, in Piaget, 1980, he proposes a hierarchy of levels of equilibration in ontogenesis. We must imagine a (notionally) stable schema, or cognitive plan or map of interpretation. A new experience, one that cannot be interpreted without conflict, will result in a development of the schema so that the assimilation of the new experience entails an accommodation, or transformation of the schema that resolves the conflict. At the next level, where assimilation/accommodation is not achieved, the schema divides to produce specialised schemata that are internally consistent. Thus, a child might be introduced to the term ‘plus’ in respect of the addition of money and may develop strategies to deal with money calculations: 75 cents plus 26 cents is
three quarters plus a quarter, that's four quarters = a dollar plus one penny left
over, that's a dollar-one (see Lawler, 1985, from which this illustration is, with
a little license, borrowed). Later, in school perhaps, she is taught a formal
addition procedure, using columns, so 75 plus 26 is to be expressed in this
way:

\[
\begin{array}{c}
75 + \\
26 \\
101 \\
11
\end{array}
\]

The child now has two schema for ‘plus’ (Lawler uses the terms ‘microviews’
(1985) and ‘microworlds’ (1981)). However, it may be that she has not yet
developed full competence in addition in columns—the ‘carrying’ part is
always a bit tricky to remember. So, when she's asked by her father, ‘what's
75 plus 26?’, she might say, ‘I don't know.’ But if her father reformulates and
ask, ‘well, what's 75 cents plus 26 cents?’, she may well deploy her money-
plus schema and get the right answer. The father may not understand what's
going on here (though Bob Lawler clearly did), because, for him, the two
problems are the same. That's because, in his own equilibrating learning, he
has progressed to the third level of equilibration, that of \textit{globalisation} in which
two or more schemata are subsumed under a more general scheme. The
works that I have referred to, here—by Piaget and Lawler—are not equivalent
theories of learning, but Lawler's cognitive science is influenced by Piaget’s
psychology (or, genetic epistemology, as he called it) and the two approaches
can be rendered commensurable in my strategy of globalisation here.

The other kind of resources on which we might draw in theorising learning
might be referred to as \textit{empirical} instances. We might, for example, consider
how we might recognise learning or how we have recognised it; or we might
think about how we might measure it. I've been making feeble attempts to
learn Japanese for the past six years. Now my problems do not seem to relate
particularly to the considerable difference in the grammars of Japanese and
English. Rather, they seem to be concerned with recognition and recollection
of differences, between words and, in reading, between characters. Thus, if
someone is speaking to me and uses the word, \textit{kooenkai} (講演会), which
means ‘lecture’ and is pronounced \textit{co} (as in \textit{coal}) \textit{en} (as in \textit{end}) \textit{ki} (as in
\textit{kite}), in the middle of a sentence, then I am not unlikely to recognize the first
two syllables, \textit{kooen} as the Japanese word for park (公園) and then be left
wondering about the kai part—shell (貝), mediation (介, also shell),
association (会) and many more, including the ‘ON’ (derived from Chinese)
pronunciation of the character for sea (海), pronounced \textit{umi} (u as a short ‘oo’,
\textit{mi} (as in \textit{mit}). In reading, I used to confuse the character for write, 書, with
that for thing, 事, though the are easily distinguished in context as the former,
unlike the latter, would be unlikely to appear without qualifying \textit{hiragana} (the
purely phonetic characters that are used for verb endings etc). And I have
another very interesting experience with Japanese. I have always found it difficult to distinguish between left and right. I remember, for example, turning left when my driving examiner told me to turn right. He didn't seem to mind very much, he said that I'd executed the turn correctly and that was what mattered. But I never have any difficulty distinguishing between *migi* (右) and *hidari* (左) in Japanese. This is because I still have a recollection of first being introduced to these terms. I was walking, with a friend, past a park (kishine kooen—岸根公園), as it happens. A boy had kicked a football, which had rolled into the road, on my *migi* from the park on my *hidari*. I can also readily distinguish the characters for these words, because of the 'H' on its side that forms part of the character, *hidari*, though I sometimes used to confuse 右 with 石.

Now what all of this suggests to me that learning is about making strong but multiple connections and this seems to fit quite well with Piaget's idea of a schema and with Lawler's conception of mind as comprising multiple microviews. This doesn't in any sense 'prove' Piaget or Lawler to be correct, not least because I haven't really formulated their theories very precisely, nor have I conducted any empirical work that would be acceptable to the field of educational research in terms of rigour. In any case, we can't really talk about 'proof' in educational research in the same way as we can, legitimately, in mathematics or, in a completely different sense, in a trial in a court of law. Nor, in my view should we talk about a theory in terms of its adequacy in respect of empirical facts unless we do so in the realisation that there is a real sense in which theoretical predispositions—even if not fully and explicitly formed—shape what count as facts. What we might say, at this point, is that thinking about learning in the kind of way that Piaget or Lawler do does seem to be potentially productive in organising our empirical experiences about and our possible research into learning as a field of phenomena.

Thinking about learning in terms of the formation and development of schemata or microviews is also useful in considering the development of theory in research. We might, for example understand the dialogic movement between the two kinds of resources that I've mentioned—theory already formed and empirical instances. Already formed theory seems well described as schemata/microviews that are disturbed by new empirical instances and undergo equilibration in terms of assimilation/accommodation, specialisation, and globalisation. This explains why it is that in this module on theory we will of necessity have to do some thinking about the empirical. But we won't be doing any systematic empirical work in this module; the emphasis will be on conceptual work in the theoretical field.
Chapter introductions and activities

Each of the chapters in the module includes an introduction. These introductions are written in a fairly informal style and are intended to spark an interest and, I hope, to provide an orientation to the chapter content. In some cases they offer exposition on a particular topic or the work of a particular theorist, but this is not intended to be definitive and certainly not exhaustive. The real content of the module is in your own responses to the activities in the chapters. Theory is concerned with making things explicit and writing theory is at least as important as reading it. The text-based, asynchronous CMC medium is ideal for working on this theme and the careful production of your contributions to the message boards, in formulating both your own ideas and your constructively critical responses to other postings is vitally important to your learning, both as individuals and as groups. Diagrams and tables are often useful ways to sort out ideas; use them, even formatively, if they’ll help; use MS Word, a graphics program, or a pen and a scanner and send attachments or urls of web locations for more complex constructions.

In the first four chapters, I have designated nine special roles as follows:

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<th>Chapter</th>
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<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>S1</td>
<td>summariser</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>S2</td>
<td>summariser</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>S3</td>
<td>summariser</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>S4</td>
<td>coordinator</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>S5</td>
<td>editor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>S6</td>
<td>coordinator</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>S7</td>
<td>editor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>S8</td>
<td>coordinator</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>S9</td>
<td>coordinator</td>
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You will be in three different teams during the running of the module, A-teams, during Chapters 1 and 2, B-teams, during Chapters 3, 4, 8 and 9, and C-teams during Chapters 6 and 7; Chapter 5 is an individual activity. So, the A-teams can appoint their specialists (everyone will have to take on such a responsibility at least once) at the beginning of the module and the B-teams can nominate theirs as soon as they have been formed by the tutor. You will also need to appoint similar roles in some of the other chapters (6-9); I have not designated these, rather leaving it up to you to determine your own organisation. Each of the special roles will, I estimate, involve an additional
There will be a discussion board for each of the teams that will be open throughout the module for general issues. There will also be a General Module Board for all participants on the course. I propose that all boards be open for reading by all participants, but that only the relevant team members or, in some cases, the nominated moderator will be able to write to the other boards. Inter-team discussion about content on the team boards can take place in the General Module Board.

I have placed an estimate of 7.5 hours of work per week on this module, not counting the additional work of those taking on special roles, but including all of the reading, internet research, composing, editing, online discussion etc. In particular, I have allowed an hour per week for reading my introductions to the chapters and the activity instructions, so that the time estimates included in the activity instructions add up to 6.5 hours per week. I also have also reckoned that taking on special roles will average out at 30 minutes per individual per week, so that gives a total of 8 hours work per week to complete the module—72 hours in all, not counting formal assessment work. Now, clearly, people work at different rates and read at different speeds. So the time estimate is intended as a guideline only, but it gives some indication of the time that you should expect to be spending. If you find that you are spending substantially more time than this, then you are probably doing rather more than is expected (though, if you have the time, then this is not a bad thing, of course). If you find that you are spending substantially less than 8 hours, then you are probably underestimating the expectations. The module is organised mainly as group activities and will work effectively only if there is a high level of commitment from everyone not only in terms of hours put in, but in respect of regularity of logging on and posting. Some activities, in particular, have very tight deadlines and will not work if you operate on the basis of logging on just once per week. Ideally, you should distribute your workload over several days per week and you should log on as often as possible and at least once every other day. In my experience, a very uneven pattern of participation can generate tension within a group, far more so than is seen in face-to-face courses. This will also prove detrimental to everyone’s learning.

Keeping a journal

I strongly suggest that you maintain a journal for the module or for the whole MRes programme. The journal should include your own thoughts and observations that are relevant to the course, including critical reflections on your reading. Since this is an online course, it might be a good idea to maintain a blog that you open to colleagues, permitting them to append comments. Keeping something less formal in addition is probably also a good idea, for example, a handwritten journal as a kind of ‘sketch pad’ for your blog, coursework and dissertation. You will also need to maintain a bibliographic database. I suggest that you use Endnote for this purpose. Please make sure that you include page numbers in the reference, where appropriate, and please make a clear distinction between verbatim quotations that you copy
into the database and your own text; also distinguish between your summary of what the author is saying and your critical commentary upon it.

**Intended learning outcomes**

I have listed ‘intended learning outcomes’ for each chapter—sometimes one, sometimes more than one. These are not *behavioural objectives*. Rather, they are intended to give a high level indication of the area to be covered. If they and you are successful, then at the end of the module you should:

Be able to:

- design research strategy in relation to a specific general approach (c. 8);
- formulate a researchable question (c. 4);
- formulate a structured discussion of a problematic (literature review) (c. 3);
- formulate an application for ethical approval (c. 9);
- interpret empirically a specific theoretical framework (cc. 2, 4);
- operationalise a researchable question (c. 4).

Understand:

- key methodological language concerning the generalisability of research findings (c. 5);
- key methodological language concerning the operationalisation of a research question (c. 4);
- key metatheoretical terms and positions (c. 7);
- the IoE process relating to obtaining ethical approval (c. 9);
- the issues concerning the relation between metatheory and educational research and its application (c. 7);
- the issues concerning the relationship between research and practice/policy (c. 6);
- the key issues and debates relating to the ethics of research (c. 9);
- the relational nature of theory in respect of a specific author (c. 2);
- the relationship between the theoretical and empirical fields (c. 2, 4);
- the term ‘general approach’ and the differences between specific approaches (c. 8);
- the term ‘operationalisation’ (c. 4);
• the term ‘problematic’ (c. 3);
• the term ‘theory’ in the context of empirical work (cc. 1, 2, 4).

Understand and be able to:
• deploy the mode of interrogation introduced in Brown & Dowling (c. 5).

We are increasingly being required to write intended learning outcomes. I have never had much faith in them, so I’d appreciate your comments on how useful they are in your evaluation of this module. It would be particularly helpful if you included some actual learning outcomes.

Assessment

The assessment of this module is by coursework and examination. Coursework should address ONE of the following titles:

1. Outline the key features of a particular general approach, or contrast the features of two general approaches. Discuss the implications of the general approach(es) for empirical research strategy by reference to one or more research question that you should formulate.

2. Identify or formulate a problematic and produce a critical review of relevant research literature, focusing on specifically theoretical issues.

3. Identify or formulate a specific research question and discuss the ethical issues that are entailed in its potential operationalisation. State and justify the decisions that you would take in planning the research and submitting an ethical review, giving due consideration to opposing positions.

4. Discuss critically the theoretical framework of a particular author in terms of the ways in which it shapes and/or arises out of one or more empirical studies.

5. Discuss the theoretical issues that are involved in the operationalisation of a research question and the generalisation of research findings. You should illustrate your discussion by reference to a specific empirical study or studies.

6. What are the implications for empirical research of adopting a particular metatheory? Discuss with reference to one or more realist and one or more anti-realist positions.

7. What is theory? Discuss in relation to the work of one or more theorists.

8. What is research for? Discuss with reference to a specific study or studies.
9. What are the theoretical and the empirical fields? Discuss in relation to a specific research study or studies.

These titles are all dealt with in one way or another in the introductions to the chapters as well as in the chapter activities. I suggest that you think about the titles as you work through the introductions and activities and maintain a section of your journal or blog with ideas and references etc relating to at least one of the titles. Clearly, my introductions and most of the readings that you will encounter take a particular line in relation to these titles. I must emphasise that you are under no obligation to follow any of these lines (or to challenge them). What is important is that you establish a strong line of argument that engages with relevant research literature (and that includes theoretical work). Paying close attention to the structure of your essay at every level of analysis (sentence, paragraph, section, essay) is crucial in presenting this strong line of argument. At undergraduate level, students must demonstrate that they are familiar with key works. At postgraduate level you have to do this as well, of course, but you must also demonstrate that you can open up the literature to critical scrutiny in establishing your own position on a question. You should include discussion of some of the essential reading items and you should take care to demonstrate that you have met those of the intended learning outcomes that are relevant to your essay. But you should also include material (eg literature) that you have found in your own research for the essay.

Essays should include a full bibliography in a conventional style (eg that used in this module) and listed alphabetically by author. Citations should follow the Harvard convention (name and date of publication and page number(s) for quotations shown in the text, full reference in the bibliography). Similarly, more substantial material may be included as an appendix. Footnotes may be used where you wish to include a point that is not central to the argument and that would spoil its flow if included in the main text. You should regard footnotes and appendices as optional reading as far as the examiners are concerned: if they are essential to your argument, then they should be in the main text. Bibliography, footnotes and appendices will not be included in the word count.

Coursework may be produced individually or collaboratively. An individual piece of coursework should comprise an academic essay of not more than 2000 words. The word count for collaborative work should be between 1500 and 2000 words times the number of authors and each author should be named as principal author for a specified section or sections totalling a minimum of 1500 words. Hypertext essays are permissible and here, the word count applies to the original material, including short quotations as might be used in a conventional essay, but not links out of the original material. Hypertext essays are not necessarily constructed in the same linear form as most conventional essays. However, there must be a clear intellectual rationale to the selection and presentation of lexia/pages. What I do not want is a simple collection of interesting thoughts and critiques loosely organised around a heading; the whole must be more than the simple sum of its parts.
Your examination essay should meet the same criteria as your coursework essay, except that a bibliography is not expected and you will not be penalised for errors in the date of publication—or even for omitting the date of publication—in citations; you do, though, need to get authors’ names right (or at least recognisable). Also, of course, an examination essay will be rather shorter; in my experience, candidates tend to be able to write between 700-1200 words per hour when writing by hand. The examination questions will reflect the intended learning outcomes and the module content. The questions will not make reference to specific authors, so you will be able to select for yourself which authors and works to cite.

**Ethics in writing**

Research ethics is the theme of the final chapter of this module. However, here, I should just mention a couple of key points relating to ethics and academic writing. This is from the 1978 Interpretation Act of the British Parliament:

In any Act, unless the contrary intention appears,
(a) words importing the masculine gender include the feminine;
(b) words importing the feminine gender include the masculine

This is an improvement over the 1850 Act, which included the first, but not the second rule. However, the first principle is generally not acceptable in academic writing. The second principle is used by some authors, presumably with the intention of marking out that we live in a patriarchal world. Whilst I concur that patriarchy is a prevalent organising principle and whilst I continue to be dismayed by this and do what I can do oppose it, I do not feel that playing around with pronouns is anything more than tokenist and I personally reject this strategy. My rule is that all pronouns should ‘import’ both genders unless the intention is to refer to a specific gender. I tend to use ‘s/he’, ‘her/him’, ‘hers/his’ (the first because it’s concise, the second and third to follow the ordering of the first) and often choose the gender neutral (and legitimate) ‘they,’ ‘themself’, and ‘their’ instead. You will not be penalised for adopting the second rule, though you may (or may not) cause the examiners to sigh; you are likely to be penalised for using the first rule unless you are quoting someone else, in which case the convention is to mark your displeasure by appending ‘[sic]’ to the offence. In general, you should use language that demonstrates respect for individuals and groups to which you refer. Sometimes this may entail using terms that members of particular groups use for themselves. Thus, the term ‘coloured’—a ‘racial’ category in apartheid South Africa is now a politically acceptable term for South Africans of mixed race or Malay origins.

You are also required to show respect for the academic community, which includes yourself and your colleagues on this course. In particular, you must respect intellectual property rights and the need for the university to protect the currency of its qualifications. This is a rather pompous way to say that plagiarism of any form is strictly forbidden. You must not represent the words or ideas of others—even with slightly altered wording—as your own. Of
course, it has often been said with some validity that nothing truly original can ever be said and we can never be sure of where many of our ideas come from. However, it is incumbent on all academic authors to do their best to acknowledge sources and to use sourced quotations rather than near verbatim summaries. Plagiarism also includes knowingly allowing your own work to be claimed inappropriately as the work of another. Contemporary software and other digital resources make it very easy to detect plagiarism and the IoE and the University of London impose severe penalties on offenders of which failure of the relevant course is likely to be the minimum. I am stating this strongly, not because I expect people to cheat, but because, in some academic systems, repeating the words of others in one’s own writing is deemed to be a mark of respect; I’m afraid not so in the European and American traditions.

I hope that you will enjoy working on this module. As I have said, although I clearly have my own takes on the topics included here, I am not attempting to foist these on you; the very best thing about the university is that people are supposed to disagree with each other a good deal of the time. What I hope to achieve is the stimulation of an excitement in reading and thinking and writing about theory and in theoretical ways, not to the exclusion of the empirical, but as its essential companion. There will be scope for the formal evaluation of this module. However, as I am unlikely to act as a tutor on the programme, I would welcome any suggestions or discussion about the module design, activities or any of the introductions. Please feel free to email me, though please copy to the module tutor or moderator just in case my email programme takes a dislike to your address and consigns your mail to junk—I manage to rescue most, but not absolutely all important mail—it also helps if you give careful consideration to the subject field of your mail.

頑張って下さい

Paul Dowling
London, May 2006
Chapter 1  Towards Theory  Week 1

This chapter involves a preliminary exploration of the world of theory in educational research. For this chapter, the cohort will be arranged in teams of 5-6 and these A-teams will continue into the next chapter. There will be two main activities and two discussion boards per team, plus two general boards for posting the outcomes of team activity. The two activities are to run concurrently. You will need to appoint two summarisers, S1 and S2.

The chapter addresses the intended learning outcome:

- Understand the term 'theory' in the context of empirical work

Total amount of time: 7.5 hours; S1 and S2 will each need to spend an additional 1-2 hours.

Core texts for this chapter


Introduction: Towards Theory

IQ is a score, or similar quantitative index, used to denote a person’s standing relative to his [sic] age peers on a test of general ability, ordinarily expressed as a ratio between the person’s score on a given test and the score which the average individual of comparable age attained on the same test, the ratio being computed by the psychologist or determined from a table of age norms, such as the various Wechsler intelligence scales.

(www.biology-online.org/dictionary/intelligence_quotient)

In everyday communication we may make reference to individuals being more or less clever or more or less stupid or having greater or lesser intelligence. Such references will often be made in reference to particular contexts. We may use these terms more or less consistently (how would we know), but generally, on reflection, we will feel that we have used a term appropriately for our purpose. But, if asked to define what we mean by such a term, we may have considerable difficulty and may resort to anecdote or even hyperbole (or maybe not): ‘well, surely, anyone who spends years getting a PhD only to get low paying work in an ivory tower rather than going out and getting a proper job must be pretty stupid!’ Forming definitions of everyday words quite often presents us with difficulties. Perhaps this is because they are the kinds of words that we learn through use rather than explicit instruction. They are related to what Lev Vygotsky (1986) called ‘spontaneous concepts’. Vygotsky contrasted this kind of concept with the kind that we acquire via definitions—these are non-spontaneous or ‘scientific’ concepts. Now ‘IQ’ might, for most of
us, be identified with the former, spontaneous kind and we might expect to hear ‘low IQ’ being used more or less interchangeably with ‘stupid’ or ‘dumb’. I suspect that ‘intelligence quotient’, however, would not be used in this way and would widely be understood as more of a scientific kind of concept, even where it is not really understood at all. The distinction that Vygotsky made resonates with, though is not identical to, an important distinction that is fundamental in this module, that between the empirical and the theoretical. We shall move to a fuller exploration of the empirical and theoretical fields and the relation between them in the second and subsequent chapters. For the time being, our interest lies simply in differentiating between, on the one hand, the use of terms in ways that are informal and close to everyday use and, on the other, the attempt to regulate or formalise or, indeed, to problematise the use of a term.

The definitions of concepts vary a very great deal in terms of precision or formality. The definition of ‘intelligence quotient’ (the expression given at the url cited, even though the acronym, IQ, is used in the text) in the extract at the head of this introduction is interesting in that it doesn’t really give us or seem to rely upon a clear understanding of what might be meant by ‘intelligence’; IQ is, essentially, a score on a test relative to the average scores on the same test by people of ‘comparable age’. We are told that the test is a test of ‘general ability’, but that doesn’t really get us very far. Naturally, all definitions must rely on the definitions of other terms. Here, for example, is Newton’s second law of motion:

\[ \text{The rate of change of momentum of a body is equal to the resultant force acting on the body and is in the same direction.} \]

(Mathematically, this can be rendered as \( \mathbf{F} = \frac{d\mathbf{p}}{dt} \), where \( \mathbf{F} \) and \( \mathbf{p} \) are the vectors, \textit{force} and \textit{momentum}, respectively. Effectively, this law defines force in terms of momentum, though you’d need to know what the latter is and what is meant by ‘rate of change’ (and/or the symbols used in the mathematical version) if the definition is to be much use to you. Since I’ve just introduced differential calculus, here is a definition of ‘derivative’ in mathematics:

\[ \text{The derivative is the instantaneous rate of change of a function with respect to one of its variables.} \]

Here is another definition from mathematics:

\[ 2(P) = (\exists x)(\exists y)[P(x).P(y).x = y.(z)(P(z) \supset z = x \lor z = y)] \]

This (from Benacerraf & Putnam, 1983) is, oddly, a definition of 2; unlikely to be of very much use in, say, a game of poker. And this is a definition of the biological object, ‘hormone’:

\[ \text{Chemical secreted by one type of cell and acting on a second type of cell.} \]

http://www.biochem.northwestern.edu/holmgren/Glossary/Definitions/Def-H/hormone.html

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Each definition sets up a cluster of technical terms and specifies one or more relations between them. It is these relational clusters that begin to give theoretical meaning to the terms. In the natural sciences, we are used to seeing a comparatively tight regulation on the use of terms. In the definitions that I’ve cited here, there are very few ‘spare’ or everyday words—perhaps most in the definition of IQ, but none at all in the mathematical expression of Newton’s second law. The little relational clusters are themselves parts of vastly more extensive systems of terms that constitute, shall we say, a particular region of psychology, classical physics, mathematics, and endocrinology. These systems, in turn articulate with broader disciplinary systems and, to a certain extent, with each other, to constitute, well, the natural sciences, I suppose. What is quite clear is that these definitions and the systems of which they are a part are far more highly organised, institutionalised than everyday practices and language. Basil Bernstein (1999) made a resonant distinction between vertical and horizontal discourse—but more of this in the next chapter—and James Gee (1996) another in ‘primary’ and ‘secondary discourses’.

In the social sciences and in educational studies in particular the level of institutionalization seems rather subdued after what appears to be the hard language of the natural sciences and mathematics. In formulating this introduction, I scanned through the main text for the module—Brown & Dowling, 1998—trying to find an example of a definition within the field of educational research that we had framed in a manner comparable with the extracts above. I could find these in the chapter on quantitative analysis and statistics, but not really elsewhere. Here is our attempt to distinguish between ‘probes’ and ‘prompts’ in interviewing:

A **probe** is a question used in an interview to gain further information, clarification, or which seeks to access underlying causes or reasons for a particular response. A **prompt** involves suggesting possible responses. The use of both probes and prompts interrupts the spontaneity of the response. This does not mean that they should be avoided; the use of probes, in particular, is a crucial strategy in many kinds of interview. You should, however, give careful advance consideration to the kinds of probes and prompts that you are prepared to use.

(Brown & Dowling, 1998; p. 62; emphasis in original)

Typically, this is written in a less formal style. It is important to point out that ‘less formal’ does not necessarily entail ‘more accessible’. Here is the opening from another paper of mine:

Every self-conscious act or utterance imagines itself the kiss of creator and created, structure and event, *langue* and *parole*, competence and performance (but which is which?) And there is anxiety; is this the kiss of my lover, or of Judas; does it wake me, or am I forever dream(t/ing)/betray(ing/ed)? All too often I sense that it's the kiss of Midas the necrophiliac. None of this is new, but it overtures our interrogation of our tribalisms, our alliances and oppositions and, as such, it is one of several points of departure, which is to say, points of entry into our discourse, where it functions also as a semantic shibboleth. Once under way, we may look around for alternatives. Halliday and Mathiessen […], for example, introduce the relationship between climate and weather as a metaphor for that between linguistic system and linguistic text. This is fine, so long as we
recognise that system and text are already seeds of doubt for the faithless Orpheus.

(Dowling, 2005a; no page numbers)

A lot of metaphors, a couple of words in French (and one, more or less in Hebrew), references to Greek mythology and the Bible and a work in sociolinguistics, a playing around with slashes and brackets as well as some possibly more arcane references to technical language (some, but not all of it, mine) probably render this somewhat opaque. This style of writing is consistent with an attempt to avoid placing undue closure on concepts, to give some encouragement to the reader to recruit the work to their own projects, to recontextualise it. Such an approach would not be permissible within the natural sciences, but is common enough in the humanities and in social science and educational studies writing that does not aspire to scientific realism (see Ward, 1996, for an introduction to and critiques of scientific realism and its opponents).

However, whether we are talking about the closed formalism of the natural sciences or the more open intertextualities of the social sciences and educational studies, what does seem clear is that a move towards theory entails a move away from the mundane and towards more specialised forms of language use. This move is precisely the focus of the first chapter in this module. The use of such specialised forms of language use often comes in for a great deal of criticism and even occasional ridicule on the part of advocates of ‘plain speaking’ who seem to think that they (and, presumably, everyone else) already possess all of the requisite linguistic resources to be able to understand anything that anyone might want to express. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the most aggressive criticism is reserved for the social sciences, whilst the (arguably even more arcane) jargons of mathematics and physics tend to get by without too much trouble. But a little plain thinking reveals the poverty of the plain speakers’ position. Whatever we think about epistemology, or the nature of knowledge (more of this in chapter 7), it is quite clear that saying something that is generally new (as opposed to being new to only a few people) must involve a new linguistic organisation; that, essentially, is what originality is. Very few of us, of course, are able to say anything truly original by ourselves. Rather, we collaborate with others who have developed specialised ways of thinking about, operating upon, and speaking about things and these specialisms constitute the disciplines—physics, mathematics, biology, sociology, and so forth—and subdisciplines such as quantum mechanics, topology, endocrinology and ethnomethodology. Naturally, the acquisition of the specialised practices, including the languages, of these disciplines involves a good deal of effort; let’s face it, the plain speakers just want something for nothing (or perhaps they think rather naively that only members of their own club have anything to say that is worth attending to).

That’s some of the politics out of the way. The main, shall we say, academic point that I want to make is that it is the deployment and development of theory that allows us to move beyond the local case that is immediately at hand, to generalise, to carry inspiration with us from one place to another. Such transposition may proceed according to the generally explicit and principled forms of the natural sciences or the more figurative ramifications of
literary modes or, as is usually the case in educational studies (and probably often in science as well), some combination of the two. The work in this chapter is concerned, firstly, with how we make the move from the immediately recognisable to this theoretical region and, secondly, with an initial exploration of some of what it has to offer in the work of one or two key theorists.

The intended learning outcome for this chapter is to ‘understand the term ‘theory’ in the context of empirical work.’ I hope that it’s clear from my comments above that ‘theory’ refers to more or less formally organised spaces or systems. ‘Empirical work’ refers to some engagement with local instances of practice—particular classroom settings, a movie or other text or texts, an individual’s recollections of their own schooling experiences, an internet fanfiction site, and so forth. During the course of this MRes programme and in your subsequent studies, you will explore the ways in which the empirical setting is, at least in substantial part, shaped by theory and by research methods. Development within and between theory and research methods proceeds partly internally to these respective areas of discourse and partly in dialogue with each other and with the accumulation of empirical activity. So research, in whatever discipline, is transactional and is a specialised practice. It recontextualises the world, presenting new worlds rather than presenting the world to you as it ‘really’ is; but then, you already had that before you began engaging with research.

Activities

Activities 1 and 2 should run concurrently

Activity 1.1

1. Read the two core texts for this chapter. These items are both written by the module author and are both concerned with the analysis of the same school mathematics textbook scheme. However, they were written at times when the theoretical development of the analysis had been at different stages of development. The first task in this activity is to identify what you see as being the key differences between the two papers in terms of conceptual development as this relates to the school mathematics books. For example, the first paper compares the two series of books in terms of how many pages and pictures there are, the second uses terms such as ‘esoteric domain’.

Prepare a brief summary of your conclusions about the differences between these two papers and post it in Board B1, Towards and Organisational Language.

You should post your summary to B1 by midnight GMT on day 2 of the week.

You should spend about 3 hours on this part of the activity.
2. Discuss the summaries that have been posted to your board. Try to come to an agreement on what you consider to be the key issues of difference between the two papers; how has theory been developed.

*Each individual might expect to spend an hour of online activity on this.*

3. The summariser, **S1**, should post to **Board B2**, *Towards an Organisational Language Summary board* a brief statement (no more than 500 words) summarising the outcome of your discussion.

*The summary should be posted to B2 by S1 by midnight GMT on day 7 of the week.*

*S1 should spend 1-2 hours on this task.*

**Activity 1.2**

1. The moderator will allocate to each team one or more (depending upon the number of teams) authors from: Pierre Bourdieu, Michel Foucault, Jean Lave, Claude Lévi-Strauss, Jean Piaget, Lev Vygotsky. All of these authors are included in the bibliography of one or both of the core texts for this chapter.

Each member of the team should explore internet resources to identify and explain one or two key theoretical categories that are associated with the author(s) that have been allocated to their team.

Each member should post to **Board B3**, *Theorists*, for their team a brief (100-200 words) definition of the theoretical category or categories that they have identified as being associated with each author allocated to their team.

*Your definitions should be posted to B2 by midnight on day 4 of the week.*

*You should expect to spend about 1.5 hours on this part of the activity.*

2. Discuss and, where necessary, amend the definitions that have been posted to your board.

*Each individual might expect to spend 1 hour of online activity on this.*

3. **S2** should post to **Board B4**, *Theorists Summary*, a list of categories and definitions for each author that their team has discussed.

*The definitions should be posted to B4 by S2 by midnight GMT on day 7 of the week.*

*S2 should expect to spend 1-2 hours on this task.*
Chapter 2  The Theoretical and Empirical Fields  Weeks 2-3

This chapter will introduce the strategy of differentiating between a theoretical and an empirical field and will present the structure of the former as it is presented in Brown & Dowling (1998). Key terminology relating to the theoretical field will be deployed in relation to the work by Alexander Luria as it is described in Brown’s & Dowling’s book. The theme from chapter 1 will also be picked up again in a detailed exploration of theoretical categories in the work of Basil Bernstein. You will need to appoint a summariser, S3, a coordinator, S4, and an editor, S5 for this chapter.

There will be four activities in this chapter and they may all be started at the beginning of week 2, though Activity 2.2 should be complete by the end of that week and Activity 2.3 should be complete by the end of the second week; Activities 2.1 and 2.4 may continue throughout the rest of the module. Participants will remain in the teams to which they were assigned in Chapter 1.

This chapter includes a collaborative writing activity (as distinct from a summary of a discussion) for this module. This is a very difficult task, but a potentially very productive affordance of online courses.

A substantial number of additional references have been provided. However, it is assumed that most of the reading outside of the core texts will be limited to online resources that participants themselves identify. The additional references are provided for those participants having access to a good educational research library.

You should look at the activity in chapter 3 as the first post to B10 in that activity will have to be made before chapter 2 ends. You will be assigned to teams for activity 3 during the running of activity 2.

The chapter addresses the intended learning outcomes:

• Understand the term ‘theory’ in the context of empirical work.
• Understand the relational nature of theory in respect of a specific author.
• Be able to interpret empirically a specific theoretical framework.
• Understand the relationship between the theoretical and empirical fields.

Total amount of time: 15 hours; summarisers, S3, S4 and S5 will spend an additional 1-2 hours each.
Core texts for this chapter


Additional References


Introduction: The Theoretical and Empirical Fields

At the end of the introduction to Chapter 1 I described the research activity as a specialised practice involving development within and transaction between three areas of practice: theory, research methods, and the empirical setting. As I have suggested in the previous introduction, in some fields of research—notably, the natural sciences—theory is generally strongly and formally institutionalised, which is to say, there is a fair level of regularity of practice within any given area of science (see Merton (1973) and also Fleck (1981), Kuhn (1970) and, in a different voice, Latour & Woolgar (1979) for engaging descriptions of the institutionalisation of scientific research). In these areas, too, what stands as the empirical object or setting is often also comparably stable as are methods of enquiry, both of which are often, to an extent, shaped by and in durable and expensive apparatus. In the social sciences and humanities, such stability is far less common. Indeed, it is often claimed that a discipline, such as literary studies is no discipline at all in the sense that it is in an almost permanent state of crisis in respect of its theory (or lack of it), its methods of enquiry and even its empirical objects (see, for example, Rosenberg (1962) and Fish (1995), for an example of what we might refer to as a stabilising strategy). The divergence between the natural sciences and other areas of research in respect of the stability of theory, method and object of study may well be at least in part the rationale for the hierarchy between them in terms of status, the faith publicly placed in their products, and the degree of public skepticism in their respective languages—this last hierarchy inverting the other two, of course.

Educational studies is a newcomer to the academic field and really cannot be said to be a coherent discipline at all. Some educational researchers do, of course, have academic backgrounds in other fields. But, taken as a whole, it is probably best to think of educational studies as a very loose coalition of recontextualisers—often eclectic recontextualisers—from other fields. Indeed, it is not even clear that there is a consensus on the range of objects of study that may legitimately be included in educational research, far less on the methods and less still on what might be taken to be appropriate theory. My own position is that education is usefully thought of as being concerned with the production of new competences and performances, where the former are to be interpreted as institutionalised forms if the latter (see Dowling & Brown, 2006). However, this hardly narrows or specifies the field. There is a sense, then, in which the beginning educational researcher is entering a potentially anarchic activity. This being the case, our (Brown & Dowling, 1998) intention in Doing Research/Reading Research was to attempt to provide some structure, a ‘mode of interrogation’ for educational research. Our book, which is the main text for this module, details this mode of interrogation. Here, I shall introduce its core feature, which involves establishing a strategic division of the world that confronts us into two fields: the theoretical field, which is concerned with general claims and debates; and the empirical field that consists of local instances of practice and experience. So this chapter is about two of the three areas of practice referred to above. The third, methods of enquiry or research methods, is, of course, the general theme for the whole of the MRes programme.
I have referred to the move that establishes the theoretical and the empirical field as strategic because I want to underline that this is the act of the researcher in taking charge of their research project. Metaphorically, I might identify the library (and those parts of the internet that are its analogues) as the theoretical field and everything else as the empirical field. But the library can also contain works about itself or activities within it (the library may be constituted as the empirical field) and items not in the library—not in the library of the Institute of Education, anyway—may well be interpreted as making general claims etc (the theoretical field extending beyond the library). Although we may have a sense of what we mean by the theoretical and empirical fields, they are, within the practice of educational research, in our own making.

So, let’s say I begin with an interest in an observation that, within the UK, at least, the everyday language used in speech by individuals from different socioeconomic backgrounds seems to be different, though I’m not quite sure how. Now this quite adequately (for the time being) defines my empirical field: it is the totality of everyday conversations by people in the UK. My terms are rather vague, of course—just what counts as an ‘everyday conversation’—but sharpening this up is a job for theory at some point in the research. So now I’ll need to construct a theoretical field. Well, this is very broad as well. Firstly, it’s going to include all of the research literature on speech used in everyday conversations. Or is this really entirely appropriate? We might suppose that a good deal of this research will really not be concerned with differences in terms of socioeconomic backgrounds and some that is might focus attention on accent, whereas I had noticed something that I felt to be rather more fundamental, that cut across differences in accent. In order to clarify things, I need to go look in the library. One way to start might be to search the library catalogue or to look at the contents pages of issues of a general journal on sociolinguistics—is there anything that seems to relate to my interest? If approaching neither the catalogue nor the journals directly yield positive results, I might try an electronic search using one of the digital research databases or even Google. At this point, I’m not trying to be exhaustive, just to get a start, a way in. If I’m lucky, I’ll soon turn up a paper by Ruqaiya Hasan that was delivered at a ‘Language and Education’ conference in Ho Chi Minh City in 1991. The paper is titled ‘Questions as a mode of learning in everyday talk.’ Even though this paper was written some time ago, its content and bibliography will suggest the names of key journals that may not have been in my library. It will also lead, eventually, if not directly, to key figures, such as Basil Bernstein and William Labov, who seem to have shared my interest, and I might even get a lead back to Alexander Luria (1976), who had been interested in the cultural and social foundations of cognitive development in 1930s Soviet Union, but whose approach was, as a colleague of Lev Vygotsky, very much influenced by sociolinguistics and who, in turn, certainly influenced Bernstein. Such a serendipitous search (and see Merton & Barber (2004) for a scholarly travelogue—belatedly published—of this term’s tourism) may even turn up a small item by yours truly (Dowling, 2004) that includes all of these references (though, if the I of the example were to coincide with the I who authors this paragraph (or one of his students) then this last item would be likely to be the starting point).
Having made a start in the field, one is then in a position to engage in a more systematic search (as you began doing in the first module of this programme). This will be necessary if one is engaging in the production of a doctoral thesis at the University of London, because you will need to be able to demonstrate that your research constitutes an original contribution to knowledge in ‘the field’. What this entails is that you will have to have defined your field or, more precisely, the problematic (see the next chapter) and demonstrated an exhaustive knowledge of it in order to be able to mark out the position of your own work in relation to this field. At masters level the requirements are not quite as demanding. Nevertheless, in producing a masters dissertation, you will need to demonstrate that you are familiar and can engage critically with relevant research literature and relate it to your own research.

Somewhere towards the beginning of the paragraph before last, I said, of your theoretical field, ‘firstly, it’s going to include all of the research literature on speech used in everyday conversations’; that’s what I’ve just been focusing on. Some of this work will, of course, be highly theoretical in the sense of ‘theory’ as introduced in the first chapter of this module. This is certainly true of all of the items that I’ve mentioned in relation to my sociolinguistic interest. However, perhaps particularly in educational studies, not all research is strongly theoretical in this sense. What is often presented seems to emphasise the findings of the research (see Chapter 5 of this module), often as if they somehow capture something about an independent reality. You will recall from Chapter 1 that my own position on this is that this is not really an appropriate way to think about research, though it is consistent with scientific realism (but more about that in Chapter 7). In any event, you may find that, even after having explored a substantial amount of research, you are still left without any theory of substance to assist in your organising of your conceptual apparatus. If this is the case, then it is generally a good idea to bring in to your theoretical field some of those theorists whose particular take on the world you find inspiring. In some cases, this kind of work may be identified in the bibliography of the research that you will have read, even if the theory as such does little work in the research itself. You should be attentive to names that keep coming up in this respect as these are likely to be key points of reference in the field that you are entering/constructing. In addition, there may be other theorists who have come to your attention, again serendipitously. Authors in this category might include those mentioned in Activity 1.2, though there are plenty of other alternatives. If I may return to the case of the doctoral student, whilst the first component of your empirical field—the research literature focusing on your empirical interest—will need to be treated exhaustively, the theoretical literature in the second component need not and, indeed, cannot be so treated. You are, to a very large extent, allowed to determine your own theoretical perspective in much the same way as you are allowed to determine your empirical interest. So, if you’ve found Gunther Kress’s work on multimodality to be inspiring, then go with it (but make sure you’ve read some of the critical work as well—see Dowling, 2005a, for example).

Having mapped out and briefly illustrated what I mean by the theoretical and empirical fields of research, I now want to give a brief introduction to some of the work of two authors who are central to this chapter, Alexander Luria and

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Basil Bernstein. Luria's work in 1930s Soviet Union has already been mentioned and is described in some detail in the main text for this module, Brown & Dowling (1998), so I will be very brief here. Bernstein's work is introduced in more detail and discussed critically in second core text for this chapter (Dowling, 2005b) and in Dowling (2004) and the work of the first twenty-five years or so of his career is introduced quite accessibly in Atkinson (1985); here, again, I will include a brief orientation.

**Alexander Luria's Social Psychology**

(I have not referenced all of the authors that I refer to here as I am really using them to represent particular traditions of thought, rather than citing particular publications: look them up on the internet, when you get a chance—I'm sure you'll find it worth the effort. See the index of the main text for this module (Brown & Dowling, 1998) for clarification of the methodological terms that have been italicized.)

Luria (1976) was entering a theoretical field that was characterised by a longstanding debate about the relationship between social and cultural development, on the one hand, and cognitive development, on the other. One side of this argument—consistent in some ways with the thought of Johann Gottfried Herder and (later) of Franz Boas—claimed that people from different cultures thought in basically the same ways, but using different categories. The other side—more consistent with Enlightenment and, broadly, Marxist philosophy and also with the anthropology of Lucien Lévy-Bruhl—held that members of primitive cultures thought in primitive ways that were fundamentally different from modern modes of cognition. Luria's project was intended to settle the argument. In terms of what might be meant by 'primitive' and 'modern' cultures, Luria was generally influenced by Marx in his focus on the organisation of production as this advanced from the individualised mode of subsistence (or peasant) production, to the collective production of the Soviet agricultural reforms under Stalin as well as industrialization more generally and that was also associated with formal schooling and literacy. Luria also generally accepted a close relationship between speech and thought as had Herder (along with Alexander von Humboldt and, much later, Edward Sapir and Benjamin Whorf) and (though in a rather less determinist way) Lev Vygotsky, Luria's mentor and colleague. So, Luria's research question might be summarised as follows: as society moves from an individual to a collective mode of production, and culture moves from an illiterate to a literate form, what happens to the terminal level of cognition; the latter refers to the most advanced stage of thinking that is possible. Clearly, Luria is constructing a very broad theoretical field, here, that includes, at least, writings from philosophy, psychology, linguistics, sociology and anthropology. Such an eclectic approach is often still reflected in more theoretically informed research in educational studies.

The Soviet Union of the 1930s was, of course, undergoing major changes, perhaps especially in the rural regions. Luria selected as critical case studies particular areas in Uzbekistan and Kirghizia that could be described as societies in transition between the 'primitive' and 'modern' sociocultural forms and in which he could identify individuals participating in either one or the
other. He engaged members of these societies in clinical interviews. In one kind of interview he would show the interviewee pictures of four items—say, a log, a hammer, a saw and an axe—and would ask the interviewee to specify which was the odd one out. In the case of this example, some of the interviewees would go straight for the ‘log’. Others would say something to the effect that there wasn’t an odd one out, because all of the items were needed to build things or to make firewood. When pressed, some of the latter group would concede that the ‘log’ could be considered to be the odd one out. Luria argued that the two kinds of answer reflected different modes of cognition. The more ‘primitive’ mode—the second one described above—organises things on the basis of their participation in some routine practice such as making firewood. The ‘advanced’ mode organises things taxonomically, here differentiating between things that are tools and things that are not tools, such as logs. In his report of his findings, Luria claimed that the individuals who were involved in the individual mode of production and who were illiterate had a very strong tendency to deploy the ‘primitive’ mode of thinking and did not tend to shift, even when pressed. On the other hand, those individuals who were involved in collective production or some other activity associated with more advanced societies and who were literate tended to deploy the more ‘advanced’ mode of thinking. Even where such individuals initially used the ‘primitive’ mode, they would generally shift to the more ‘advanced’ mode when pressed. Luria concluded, with Lévy-Bruhl et al, that people from ‘primitive’ societies tend to think in ‘primitive’ ways, whilst people from ‘advanced’ societies tend to think in ‘advanced’ ways. As Michael Cole points out in his introduction to the 1976 edition of Luria’s book, we might, nowadays, call into question Luria’s interpretation of his findings. However, the clarity with which Luria presents his theoretical field, his research question and his research method mean that the work remains, for these purposes, an excellent exemplar in the study of educational research.

The work of Basil Bernstein

As I have hinted above, Bernstein was (or, at least, appears to have been) strongly influenced by Luria (as well as by many others) especially in his early sociolinguistic work that addressed the issue that I discussed earlier—the relationship between speech and socioeconomic class. Research that he carried out and supervised in the 1960s and early 1970s included empirical research that was strikingly similar to Luria’s. Some of this work (see Bernstein, 1971, 1973) involved showing children pictures of different kind of food, asking them to choose some that they thought went together in some way, and then asking them to explain their selection. Some children would make collections such as, carrots, cabbage, beans and explain that they had chosen these because they were all vegetables. Other children would group, say, sausage, potato and beans on the grounds that this was what mother might make for dinner. Children who had initially made collections in the first way would quite readily use a principle similar to the second mode when asked if they could make different kinds of group. On the other hand, children who initially used the second mode tended not to be able to produce collections comparable with the first mode. Bernstein and his colleagues found a very strong relationship between socioeconomic class and the mode of
grouping, with children from lower working class families tending to be consistent in sticking with the second mode—grouping according to how items might be found in an everyday practice—whilst children from professional middle class families tended to opt for the taxonomic mode and shift to the second mode once asked to find another way of grouping. Bernstein argued that children from the different socioeconomic backgrounds operated in this way because they were oriented to different modes of meaning or to what he referred to as different speech codes. The working class children seemed to be oriented to context-dependent meanings; Bernstein referred to this orientation as ‘restricted code’. The children from professional middle class backgrounds seemed to be oriented to universalistic meanings. As a result, restricted code was associated with lower socioeconomic status and elaborated code with professional middle class status.

The choice of terms, ‘restricted’ and ‘elaborated’ may have been unwise, being apparently so clearly value-laden. Certainly, Bernstein’s claims were hotly contested, by some of his colleagues at the Institute of Education, such as Harold Rosen, and by others, including the sociolinguist William Labov. Bernstein (1996) eventually included a powerful rebuttal to some of these criticisms in one of his collections of papers, but did not develop his work on sociolinguistics as such after the early 1970s. However, a construction that resonates with restricted/elaborated speech codes found its way into his most mature work in which he distinguishes between ‘horizontal’ and ‘vertical’ discourses (Bernstein, 1999). Briefly, horizontal discourses are highly context dependent. They are characteristic of the kinds of everyday practices that we acquire informally rather than through formal schooling. The kinds of discourse, in other words, that might lead us to deny that there is an odd one out from the set, log, hammer, axe, saw or to group together sausage, potato, beans rather than carrot, cabbage and beans (unless, of course, we are vegetarians). Vertical discourse is acquired through some form of formal schooling. It entails sequencing and pacing, moving from novice through intermediate stages before (if ever) attaining mastery. This mode is characteristic of, amongst others, the school and university disciplines and would tend to encourage abstract or taxonomic groupings that would have ‘passed’ either Luria’s or Bernstein’s tests.

Bernstein also constructed two modes of vertical discourse. The first characterised what he referred to as ‘hierarchical knowledge structures’. Again, very briefly, this form of discourse develops from a common foundation and moves towards specialisms that are, by and large, commensurable with each other. Physics might be a suitable example. Horizontal knowledge structures, on the other hand, tend to generate a series of competing languages that are, in general, comparatively incompatible with each other. Sociology is an example of such a discourse.

A second and equally important strand of Bernstein’s work seemed to begin with his observations of different kinds of elementary school curriculum. The ways in which he ultimately conceptualized (theorised) them was heavily inspired by his reading of the sociology of Emile Durkheim—the first professor of the sociology of education. There are schools in which lessons are...
organised as well-defined subjects, taught in specialised rooms, by specialist teachers and so forth; the English preparatory school would generally fit this bill. Bernstein (1977) referred to this kind of curriculum as operating on the basis of a ‘collection code’—the student collected categories of knowledge, I suppose. On the other hand, it was supposed that the progressive English schools of the 1960s and 1970s often tended to avoid making sharp—if any—distinctions between school subjects, everything was done in the same room with the same teacher and so forth. Bernstein described this kind of curriculum as being organised according to a single integrating principle and so operating an ‘integrated code’.

The work on codes—speech and curriculum—really provided the groundwork for two crucial categories that underpin all of Bernstein’s work. These categories have been described in different ways in Bernstein’s work and I’m going to simplify here. Essentially, they mark a distinction between between and within. The category ‘classification’ (C) refers to the strength of insulation between categories, such as school subjects. The collection code can therefore be described as characterized by strong classification (C+) and the integrated code by weak classification (C-). The category ‘framing’ refers to the level of control imposed within categories. Again, Bernstein supposed that the collection code school was also characterised by comparatively rigid sequencing and pacing and teacher control over what may count as legitimate knowledge—strong framing (F+). The progressive school, he imagined would exhibit very weak control on sequencing, pacing or what may count as legitimate knowledge—weak framing (F-). Thus the preparatory school curriculum—the collection code—is characterised as C+F+ and the progressive school curriculum—the integrated code—as C-F-. Although Bernstein tended to make more use of C than F in his later work, these two categories are certainly key to an understanding of his theory and have been very important in a good deal of the research that has been informed by it (see, for example, Moore et al, 2006).

Finally, I will mention Bernstein’s work on the constitution of pedagogic discourse (see Bernstein, 2000, for the mature version). Again, this is a theme that developed over many years in Bernstein’s work. I will not trace its history, but will simply sketch what Bernstein referred to as the ‘pedagogic device’. Drawing inspiration from Noam Chomsky’s ‘language acquisition device’, Bernstein posited the ‘pedagogic device’, which is to be understood as a social mechanism that deploys of principles of recontextualisation, distribution and evaluation. The recontextualisation principles of the device regulate what and how knowledge is recruited from the site of knowledge production—for example, in the university—and reconstituted as school knowledge as what he described as an ‘imaginary discourse’; school physics, in other words, is fundamentally different from physics as practiced by academic physicists, not least because of the way in which the school curriculum, but not the professor, sequences and paces knowledge. School knowledge, furthermore, does not appear to all school students in the same form. Basically, students are differentiated according to categories such as ‘ability’, which, following a good deal of work in the sociology of education, often has a strong tendency to correlate with social class: note, here, that the early work on speech codes
was one attempt to explain this social reproduction in the school in terms of the cultural reproduction in children’s homes where they acquired the respective orientations to meaning. Students of differing abilities/social class receive different versions of school physics or, put the other way around, the pedagogic device ‘distributes’ the curriculum on the basis of social class. Lastly, for Bernstein, there could be no pedagogy in the absence of ‘evaluation’. The evaluation principles of the pedagogic device determine what can count as legitimate school knowledge and how it is to be recognised. The effect of the pedagogic device is to produce pedagogic discourse, in the case mentioned, the socially organised practices of school physics.

The theoretical categories and structures very briefly introduced here by no means exhaust Bernstein’s immensely productive and innovative career. His writing also included: a sociological challenge to the compensatory education, exemplified by the high profile initiatives of Lyndon Johnson’s administration in the US and the Educational Priority Areas (EPAs) in the UK; an interesting distinction between personal and positional parental authority in families; the concept of ‘invisible pedagogy’, hilariously illustrated with reference to two lavatories (Bernstein, 1977); an analysis of pedagogic identities in the 1990s; and much more. Bernstein was also responsible for the supervision of my own doctoral thesis (and, incidentally, that of Andrew Brown, my co-author of the main text for this module) and was certainly one of the Institute of Education’s most celebrated academics. My own interactions with him were, to use his own expression, like a workout in an intellectual gym. Though my own work now proceeds from a critical engagement with his, I remain steadfast in my opinion that there can be no better place to start a serious foray into the theoretical field of educational studies.

**Activities**

All activities will run concurrently, though you may want to start Activities 2.1 and 2.2 before starting on the others.

**Activity 2.1**

1. Read cc.1-3 of the set text by Brown & Dowling. List the key terms (they are marked out in the text) and make sure that you understand them both in terms of their definitions and the way that they are used in the research by Alexander Luria that is introduced in the text. The focus of this module is, of course, on the theoretical field. However, you should not ignore categories that are clearly associated with the empirical field (for example, in the section on operationalising research in c. 3).

   You should expect to spend 2 hours on this part of the activity.

2. Post to Board B5, Methodological & Theoretical Issues, for your team comments relating to anything that you are not entirely clear about. Try to resolve these uncertainties in discussion with other members of your team.
This activity may continue throughout the module for discussion of key methodological terms

You should expect to spend 1 hour online in discussion.

Activity 2.2

1. Your team will need to appoint a summariser, S3. In this activity, you will extend activity 2 from chapter 1 to an exploration of the problematic defined by the work of Basil Bernstein. This problematic is contained in his major works ( Bernstein, 1974, 1977, 1990 and 2000). However, it is not expected that you will read all of this. Your team will be allocated responsibility for one or more of the following areas: the early sociolinguistic work (elaborated and restricted codes); the sociology of the curriculum (integrated and collection codes); classification and framing (running through from the 1970s to his final work); the pedagogic device; horizontal and vertical discourse. You may want to delve into the references offered here. However, it is expected that you will, primarily engage in online research using the www and online journals.

Identify, define and illustrate (eg by providing an example of their empirical operationalising) the key concepts in the area of Bernstein’s work you’re your team has been allocated.

Post a brief (about 100 words) gloss for each concept on Board B6, Bernstein, for your team. Include at least one bibliographical reference for each concept (the same reference may be used more than once)

Your initial posting to B6 should be made by midnight GMT on day 5 of the week.

You should spend about 2 hours on this part of the activity.

2. Clarify your understanding of the concepts that have been posted in group discussion and modify the glosses as/if appropriate.

You should expect to spend 1 hour in online discussion.

3. S3 should compile a summary of the glossary that the team has produced and post it on Board B7, Bernstein Glossary.

S3 should post the summary to B3 by midnight GMT on day 7 of the first week of the chapter.

S3 should expect to spend 1-2 hours on this activity.

Activity 2.3

The task of this activity is the team production of a short (500-1000 words) collaboratively written article. Your team will need to appoint a coordinator
(S4) who will take responsibility for coordinating the work of the team and an editor (S5) who will produce the final version of the document to be posted. Discussion is to take place on Board B6, Bernstein, for your team.

The article is to interpret an aspect of everyday or academic or professional practice in terms of Bernstein’s categories. Here are some possible examples.

- Illustrate the differences between examples of speech in formal and informal contexts in terms of Bernstein’s categories of restricted and elaborated speech codes.
- Give concrete examples of collection and integrated codes in practice.
- Describe an aspect of the MRes or this module in terms of classification and framing.
- Consider a curriculum or part of a curriculum in terms of the rules of the pedagogic device (distribution, recontextualisation, evaluation).
- Contrast an example of popular culture with an example of academic knowledge in terms of horizontal and vertical discourse.

The examples should be real (empirical) rather than imagined, although the required word length does not allow for the use of extensive extracts or description.

The team will need to suggest and decide upon a context and an aspect of Bernstein’s language (it is likely, but not a requirement, that teams will select an aspect of the language that they focused on in task 2 of this chapter). S4 will need to distribute specific writing (eg define ‘restricted code’ as concisely as possible, produce examples of the apparent use of restricted code in everyday speech) and editing tasks (eg take one, some or all of the examples that have been offered and produce a 150 word section that makes the point). S5 will need to compile the final posting from the results and post on Board B8, Bernstein Article.

The final article should be posted to B8 by day 14 of the chapter.

You should reckon to spend 4 hours in reading, writing and discussion.

S4 and S5 should reckon to spend an additional 1-2 hours each.

Activity 2.4

1. Read the article ‘Treacherous Departures’ (Dowling, 2005b), making notes on key points and issues.
   
   You should reckon to spend 1 hour on this.

2. Post to Board B9, Bernstein Critique, for your team issues that you feel are in need of clarification and/or any points of dispute either with Bernstein’s work or with Dowling’s critique. Postings should be
discussed in your teams.

You should reckon to spend 1 hours on online discussion.

This activity may continue throughout the rest of the module.
This chapter is concerned with the level of the theoretical field that Brown and Dowling (1998) refer to as the ‘problematic’. New teams will need to define an area of common interest and explore the research literature relating to it. You will need to compile an annotated bibliography and discuss and summarise key lines of continuity and discontinuity within this literature. This is part of a key strand of activities in this module all of which will focus, in different ways, on the area of interest that is explored here.

You will need to appoint two summarisers, S6 and S7. The first discussion board—Board B10—will also be used for the next chapter and for Chapters 8 and 9, and you will certainly want to refer to and possibly add to Board B11 and refer to Board B12 in the next chapter.

The chapter addresses the intended learning outcome:

- Understand the term ‘problematic’.
- Be able to formulate a structured discussion of a problematic (literature review).

Total amount of time: 15 hours; S6 and S7 should expect to spend an additional 1-2 hours each.

**Core texts for this chapter**


**Introduction**

Last month (it’s now April 2006) I attended a play at the National Theatre—the Lyttleton, actually—in London. Now this involved a number of activities, including theatre-going, play audiencing (it has its rules, including not leaving one’s bag unattended on one’s seat because it will be reported and removed by the usher and you’ll feel rather silly having to get it back under the public gaze), and the currently rather fraught activity of travelling around London (both underground options suffering delays). But I want to focus on the notional communication between the production—of *Measure for Measure*—by the company Complicité, and myself as audience. I’ve called it a ‘production’; what I actually witnessed was a *performance* of that production, itself a *performance* of a collection of productions that all lay claim to originate in the canon text, which is a script written by William Shakespeare. The Complicité production marked itself out from at least some of the others in the totality of productions since 26th December 1604 through, for example, the use of CCTV and TV monitors on the stage, an anachronistic pastiche of costumes, and a very fast pace. However, as an audience, I can know this only by having some knowledge—first or second hand—of the totality of productions; a competence. I might also understand *Measure for Measure* as...
a *performance* of Shakespeare’s corpus or of 16th and 17th century English Drama, so that its unique qualities are to be marked out in relation to this referential context. Again, I may consider the production against the background of the repertoire of the company, Complicité: I recall a staggeringly moving scene at the conclusion of its production of *Mnemonic*—the audience gasped aloud and in unison and I can still capture the sentiment, several years after the event; *Measure for Measure* was intriguing in all sorts of ways, but it didn’t reach those heights. And, finally (though not really) I might place this performance in the context of the other performances that I’ve attended this spring (though why limit it to that?) I think my first shot at this would be to locate it as a member of a collection of genres: modern play; Shakespeare; percussion music. Then I would have to consider whether I wanted to evaluate it as an evening out, or in terms of particular issues or experiences that remain and are productive, and so forth. Well, the performance has certainly found a use here.

My purpose in discussing my evening at the theatre is to establish the more general point that all *performances* can be thought of as *performances* or instances of something that is more general. In some contexts, the something more general may be very strongly institutionalised. A football game, for example, is played out in a strongly institutionalised physical site with regular means to identify teams and players and officials to ensure that the performance is a legitimate one. The trajectories of players, officials and balls during the performance and its numerical classification in the form of a scoreline are part of what constitutes its uniqueness. The other principal context to which the performance may be referred will include the state of the competition in which the game is being played and the careers of the teams, players, managers and so forth. Football fans are able to produce their own performances in discourse by virtue of a common knowledge of at least a part of these contexts. They have acquired, in other words, a *competence* within football discourse. The reading of any *performance* text is enabled by a *competence* in relation to a referent discourse.

Research performances, including masters dissertations and doctoral theses must also be referred to a context that provides the basis for the reading competence of the audience. Now there are some fundamental differences between research performances and performances in the arts and in sports. In the latter case, there is generally an objective measure—the scoreline—that serves as the ‘bottom line’ in the disursive evaluation of performances. Performances in the arts are more likely to be authorially motivated in terms of raising issues and questions rather than foreclosing on interpretations and presenting arguments. But in educational research, the construction of an argument is generally quite fundamental; certainly, the author of a journal article or a masters dissertation or a doctoral thesis is presenting a case, making claims, selling a more or less tightly defined discursive line. That being the case, the educational researcher must attempt to take control of and, indeed, in some ways provide the competence of her/his audience.

A part of this control will entail the researcher themself acquiring competence in those aspects of the activity that are strongly institutionalised. Much of the
language of research methods would be included in this: if you perform a t-test on non-parametric data, then you probably should expect rather more than raised eyebrows from your examiners. In most disciplinary areas of educational research there will also be what we might refer to as foundational work: no contemporary sociologist would be unaware of the work of Marx, Durkheim or Weber and their ramifications, or have no inkling as to what might be meant by the term ‘symbolic interactionism’. Foundational work might be regarded as that which would be covered in an undergraduate programme within the relevant discipline. However, when embarking on postgraduate studies, the student is expected to do rather more than simply reproduce the standard work of the field; they are expected, even if in only a small way, to begin to contribute to this field.

The field that I am referring to is, of course, the theoretical field that I introduced in Chapter 2. The difficulty is that this field is always going to exceed to a very considerable extent the totality of that which any reader can hope to become familiar with. Furthermore, even if the referential context for reading an educational research performance is restricted to the academic discipline within which it is situated, there are always going to be many ways in which any given issue or problem might be addressed or interpreted. This is because, as I have argued in the introduction to Chapter 2, educational research is, unlike research in the natural sciences (and perhaps unlike football) rather weakly institutionalized. So, it is the researcher’s responsibility to delimit to that which is manageable this potential proliferation of interpretive frames in the construction of what we (Brown & Dowling, 1998) refer to as a problematic.

I have already given some illustration of what, in practice, might be meant by a problematic in Chapter 2. My imaginary foray into the field of sociolinguistics, for example, suggested an interest in socioeconomic class and semantics, but this indexes a far smaller range of research than sociolinguistics more generally, which will certainly extend beyond a focus on class and a focus on semantics. I have described Luria’s problematic in terms of a debate between those who argued that people living in ‘primitive’ cultures thought in primitive ways relative to those living in ‘advanced cultures’, and those who claimed that they thought in the same way, but simply using different categories. Now they key point to recognize here is that there is only a limited sense in which it is appropriate to think of the sociolinguistic problematic or Luria’s social psychological debate as substantively preceding the subsequent research. Of course, a research performance can generally only cite backwards in time (the device of ‘in press’ and the slightly devious, ‘in preparation’ (in your dreams) notwithstanding). And it is certainly the case that an audience that is considered qualified to read a particular research performance (e.g. examiners, editors or peer reviewers) is likely already to have competence in a part of the problematic. However, establishing your problematic is a far more productive undertaking than simply second-guessing your audience; rather, it involves, at least in part, the active construction of the context that is to constitute the basis of your audience’s competence. Furthermore, since this context, this problematic is your making, you will have to teach it to your audience; at least in part, the author of an educational

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research performance is responsible for teaching her/his audience how to read it.

So, to what extent is it appropriate to describe Luria’s problematic as a ‘debate’. Were the cited authors actually engaging with each other at conferences and by cross-referencing each others’ output? Perhaps some were, perhaps others weren’t. Certainly, the authors that I have mentioned in describing this problematic were not all alive at the same time, so we are not really talking about a debate around a table. Ian Hunter’s (1994) problematic might also be described as consisting of a debate. Here, a debate between liberal and socialist critics of the school, the one side bemoaning the failure of the school to fulfil its rightful, educational role, the other condemning it as an instrument of capitalism. Unlike Luria, Hunter did not come down on one side of his debate, rather he argued that they had both missed the point in supposing that the school is something that has a social function as such. Hunter’s analysis described the genesis of mass schooling at a particular phase in the emergence of the nation state and the problem of governance and he described the form that the school took as involving the recruitment of available technologies, notably, the panopticon (Jeremy Bentham’s design for a prison famously established as archetypal in Foucaults *Discipline and Punish* (1977) and see http://besser.tsoa.nyu.edu/impact/f96/Projects/dengberg/) or, rather, its analogues in the disciplinary society.

The problematic does not have to be constituted as a debate—real or virtual. Perhaps more commonly, it is constructed as a regionalised field of discourse. What the researcher will commonly aim to do is to establish a lack or gap in this field and this, of course, is precisely the lack that their work is intended to satisfy. Here is Rebecca Rogers’ outline of her problematic in respect of her research on the special education referral process. I am quoting an entire section, here, as it illustrates the practice of problematic construction rather well.

The beginning of the special education referral process is one of the places where questions of identity are strategically and institutionally posed. To date, much has been written on the ‘discourse of inequity’ surrounding the special education process. The work of Bailey (1998), Coles (1987), Gartner and Kernzer-Lipsky (1987), McGill-Franzen and Allington (1991) and Mehan (1996) points to inequities within the system at the policy, funding and instructional levels. Allington and McGill-Franzen (1995), for example, point out that there is no available evidence at the federal, state or local level in the United States that demonstrates the effectiveness of special education practices—highlighting that those students placed in special education often receive less rather than more of the instructional support they need. Mehan *et al.* (1986) and Ysseldyke *et al.* (1984) examine the flawed representation of data in special education decisions. Further, Patton (1998) investigates the overrepresentation of African American children in special education.

Other researchers have questioned the social construction of disabilities (Johnston, 1998; McDermott, 1987; 1996; Murphy, 1997), pointing out that disability is a cultural institution through which people acquire disabilities through ideologies—or sets of assumptions about what counts as learning, achievement and ability. There has been related work on the construction of identities through a process of being ‘textualized’ (Silverstein & Urban, 1996). There is a material
side to this entextualization process, too. As Allington and McGill-Franzen (1995) point out, the amount of money spent on the referral process alone adds to money that might be earmarked for instructional support. Others, such as Collins (1993) and Krais (1993), have examined the role of discourse in the construction of identities—particularly around split and contradictory identities, or subjectivities.

Efforts currently are being made to reposition the location of ‘disability’ from inside the child to within the instructional contexts (e.g. Luke, 1995/6; Lewis et al., 2001). This move, though, is difficult because of the cultural stronghold of the psychological assumptions underlying the testing and referral process (Nicholls, 1989). Identities are constructed through multi-voiced discourse in the special education process (Bakhtin, 1981; Holquist, 1991). They are constructed at an official level through policy and official documents and through informal discourse—as in interactions between teachers and students and teachers and parents. This work has described and critiqued the discourse of the special education process, in terms of both instructional benefits and its use as a political tool. However, there is an absence of research that investigates the connection between how these discursive practices are connected to and replicate social structures, not only in formal contexts (e.g. Committee on Special Education [CSE] meeting; Mehan, 1996) but in informal contexts (e.g. conversations between teachers).

Further, the rhetoric surrounding disabilities often assumes that children who fail to do well in school experience a significant gap between what Gee (1996) refers to as ‘primary’ and ‘secondary’ discourses. Primary discourses here are the language and literacy practices of the immediate socialization contexts of the home and community—where social roles, or what Gee (1996) refers to as ‘identity kits’, are acquired. Secondary discourses are the practices that occur through institutions such as schools, government agencies, businesses and religious institutions. People generally ‘learn’ these discourses. One increasingly common explanation of why children fail to do well in school is that there is a ‘conflict’ between their primary and secondary discourses (Gee, 1996; Knobel, 1998). That is, the more the primary discourse is congruent with the secondary discourse of the school, the easier the transition for children into schooled literacy. The distinction often made about learning and acquisition is that people are better at performing what they have acquired because it is a part of their sociocultural identity. People are better able to talk about, in a conscious and reflective manner, what it is they have learned. What this distinction fails to acknowledge, however, is the way in which problematic ideologies are acquired in learning contexts, such as school. Therefore, the boundaries between discourses as well as between learning and acquisition may be blurry. Given these boundary crossings, we need to consider the consequences of alignment between discourses, an issue I take up in this research.

(Rogers, 2003; pp. 2-3)
Bakhtin) are really theoretical references that are not in any way directly associated with the empirical focus of the research (the special education referral process) or its interpretation, so it is not entirely clear what they are doing here.

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Table 3.1
Dates of Citations in Rogers, 2003

This short list of citations presents itself as something of a ragbag and clearly cannot cover a lot of ground. It is important to point out that Rogers is writing for an academic journal and this generally imposes quite limiting restrictions on length, so, to the extent that this article is a performance relating to a larger study (and it appears to be so), then one would expect this short literature review to be representative rather than comprehensive. Nevertheless, there are very few journal articles included in the bibliography to the article as a whole—it seems that Rogers liked to do her reading at home rather than in the library—no references to articles published in the journal in which this one is published (in its 24th volume, so not a new journal) and most of the items in the bibliography are to work published in the 1980s and 1990s, with very little in the two or three years prior to publication. I note, in passing, that there are no internet references. Taking the bibliography as a whole, the distribution of dates is given in Table 3.1 (I’ve done this rather quickly, so please let me know if you notice a miscount). Some journals do have quite a long lead-in to publication, so it’s not entirely unusual for bibliographies to appear a little out of date. But Rogers does cite two items published in 2002-3—both by herself. Possibly, Rogers’ work derives from a doctoral thesis, which she completed in 2000; this would explain the lack of very recent citations, but not excuse it; it certainly wouldn’t explain the lack of references to journal articles.

Had I been advising Dr Rogers prior to the submission of this article, I would have suggested that she address some, at least, of the criticisms implied or stated in the previous two paragraphs, though clearly the editor and reviewers for this journal were less picky. The important point that I want to make,
However, is that in educational studies, the problematic is, in general, a discourse that is constructed and not one that is discovered. Now this does not entail that it is arbitrary. My criticisms of Rogers’ bibliography (which may not, of course, hold in relation to her thesis, which I haven’t read) suggest that there are indeed likely to be general expectations on the part of an informed audience that an academic author will need to be aware of. Primarily, these expectations relate to originality, which is a key criterion in recognising something as research. It is, of course, perfectly possible to limit your literature review to items published in the 1960s on the grounds that this was a period of energetic activity in your particular area of interest. However, this would not enable you to affirm that your own work had not been pre-empted in the intervening half century. Similarly, you might spend all of your time reading edited collections and monographs and ignore the journals. However, rightly or wrongly, the academic field has a tendency to presume that research performances are first published in the journals and so a survey of the journals will come closest to establishing the present state of play. There are, of course, conference proceedings, project reports for funding agencies, and researchers’ own website publications. Again, however, the journals, through the process of peer review, are presumed to give the hallmark of legitimacy to the work that they publish. I think that it is also reasonable to claim that journals are presented as addressing particular audiences—specialised in terms of discipline, empirical focus, perhaps political perspective. Certainly they seem to aspire to this in their ‘notes for contributors’. This being the case, it’s generally a good idea to address this audience explicitly by citing articles previously published in the journal to which one is submitting ones own (though I have to confess to not always having taken this advice myself).

Now, the view of the journals as the guardians of legitimate and up-to-date research is possibly more apposite in the natural sciences where, as I have suggested, discourse is far more strongly institutionalised than in educational studies. I have, in moments of frustration, referred to journals in our field as clubs (Dowling, in press)—it can be quite revealing to count how often members of editorial panels publish in the journals on whose panels they sit or in journals edited by colleagues etc. Nevertheless, edited collections are even more clubby and with publishers currently making it difficult to publish anything that cannot be marketed as an essential undergraduate textbook, there is certainly nothing to be lost by giving the journals plenty of attention in establishing your problematic.

It is clear that, however adequate or inadequate Rogers’ bibliography, she is establishing a lack in the field that she is constructing as her problematic:

However, there is an absence of research that investigates the connection between how these discursive practices are connected to and replicate social structures, not only in formal contexts [...] but in informal contexts (e.g. conversations between teachers).

(Rogers, 2003; pp. 2-3)

Given these boundary crossings, we need to consider the consequences of alignment between discourses, an issue I take up in this research.

(Rogers, 2003; p. 3)
Essentially, this is the second mode of creating a space for your work as exploring unexplored territory. The first mode was to identify an unresolved issue in the form of an on-going debate. But neither territory nor debate necessarily have to be there in advance of your construction of them. You can’t invent the literature and you can’t pretend that research that has been conducted hasn’t. But, by force of analysis and argument, you can present an attractive staging for the performance that is to be your research.

**Activities**

Although the selection of the area of common interest is important—it is to be sustained as a defining context for four chapters in the module—it must be achieved quickly in the first part of the activity. Participants will need to be flexible in negotiating with each other. The area that you decide on does not have to be close to your own professional or academic interests or to an area that you may be considering in respect of your dissertation. It is an important principle in educational research that inspiration can come from anywhere; no area of research can be ruled out as irrelevant to your own interests. In the best educational research, synthesis—even pastiche—is as productive and creative as analysis.

**Activity 3.1**

First, post to Board B10, Research, a brief (about 30 words) expression of an area of research interest. *The initial posts must be made before the chapter begins* (see the instruction in chapter 2).

S6 should then attempt to reduce the number of areas (eg by generalising a little—removing a reference to an educational phase etc—and/or synthesising). If S6 cannot immediately reconcile all of the areas, then a vote (using some form of transferable vote system) should be held.

When the area has been decided, members of the team should comment, make suggestions to enable S6 to formulate an expanded statement (60-70 words).

*You should expect to spend 3 hours on reflection and discussion (this includes the reflection and posting completed in the previous chapter).*

**S6 should post the expanded statement to B10 by midnight GMT on day 4 of the chapter.**

**S6 might expect to spend an additional 1-2 hours on this activity.**

**Activity 3.2**

This is an individual activity that requires you to identify 4 items of recent research literature having direct empirical and/or theoretical relevance to the area of interest of your team; you might use the list of theoretical concepts generated in part 3 of this activity as well as other terms from your statement in formulating your search strategies. As you decide upon an item, post its...
reference on your team board to avoid duplication.

Read all of the items carefully, taking good quality notes. Post on Board B11, Bibliography, an annotated bibliography (ie your 3 items together with a brief summary of how they each relate to your team’s area of interest, the positions and approaches taken to this area of interest etc).

You should post your annotated bibliography to B11 by midnight GMT on day 9 of the chapter.

You should expect to spend 7 hours on research, reading and taking notes, and compiling and posting your annotated bibliography.

Activity 3.3

Back in your teams, in this activity, S7 will coordinate a discussion in which you will try to identify lines of commonality and of differentiation between the collection of items on your Bibliography board (Board B11). It may be that, during this activity, you will want to do some following up, for example, by finding one or two more items by the authors of items in your bibliography. At the end of the second week of the activity, S7 should post to Board B12, Problematic, a summary of the key debates, approaches etc that have emerged during your discussion. This summary may be in note form. The summary outlines the key issues that would form the basis for a literature review.

You should expect to spend about 4 hours working on this activity.

S7 should expect to spend an additional 1-2 hours on the activity.

S7 should post the summary of your problematic to Board B12 by day 14 of the chapter.

RESEARCH & THE THEORETICAL FIELD
Chapter 4  Generating a Question  Week 6

This chapter will bring the focus onto the sharpest region of the theoretical field, the research question or problem. A research question has to be researchable. This means that it is not possible to give adequate consideration to it without thinking about the empirical field as well. That is, we will need to reflect on the operationalisation of the question, how we might go about carrying out research that will allow us, potentially, to answer the question. This chapter, therefore, must overlap with work that will be covered in more detail in the other modules on the MRes. Our location remains in the theoretical field—you are not actually going to be conducting empirical research at this time—but perhaps looking over the fence a little. For this reason, it is suggested that you study those chapters of Brown & Dowling (1998) that deal with data collection and analysis.

The B-teams set up for chapter 3 will stay together and you will again use Board B10, Research, for discussion and will need to refer back to Boards B11 and B12 (and possibly add to B11) during the activities in the present chapter.

During the course of this chapter, you will need to select a research paper for the activity in chapter 5. Read the criteria for this under activity 5.1.

The chapter addresses the intended learning outcomes:

- Understand the term ‘theory’ in the context of empirical work.
- Be able to interpret empirically a specific theoretical framework.
- Understand the relationship between the theoretical and empirical fields.
- Understand the term ‘operationalisation’.
- Be able to formulate a researchable question.
- Be able to operationalise a researchable question.
- Understand key methodological language concerning the operationalisation of a research question.

Total amount of time: 7.5 hours: S8, S9 and S10 should expect to spend an additional 1-2 hours.

Core texts for this chapter

Introduction: Generating a Question

In introduction to the previous chapter I described the problematic as the context or staging for a research performance; it is, in a sense, the competence that the audience needs in order to understand your research as you intend it to be understood. In Brown & Dowling (1998) we describe the move from a general theoretical field to a more sharply defined problematic as specialising. We can specialise further and what we achieve when we do is the research question or research problem. Here is an example of a research question:

‘Can a photometric redshift code reliably determine dust extinction?’

This is from Babbedge et al (2005) and is, in fact, the title of the paper. Since the MRes course is in the field of educational studies and not astrophysics, I presume that very few if any of my readers have any very clear sense of what this means. You may be familiar with the term ‘redshift’ from school physics and the Doppler Effect applied to electromagnetic radiation, but what is a ‘redshift code’? And what do the expressions ‘photometric’ and ‘dust extinction’ mean? Here is the whole abstract of the paper:

Photometric redshifts can be routinely obtained to accuracies of better than 0.1 in $\Delta z/(1+z)$. The issue of dust extinction, however, is one that has still not been well quantified. In this paper the success of two template-fitting photometric redshift codes (IMPZ and HYPERZ) at reliably returning $A_V$ in addition to redshift is explored. New data on the 2nd Canadian Network for Observational Cosmology (CNOC2) spectroscopic sample of $0.2 < z < 0.7$ galaxies are presented. These data allow us to estimate $A_V$ values from the observed Balmer decrements. We also investigate whether the empirical value of $\gamma = 0.44$, the ratio between gas- and star-derived extinction, as determined by Calzetti, is necessarily the best value for this sample.

When comparing the two codes with the Balmer-derived $A_V$ (Balmer $[A_V]$), a correlation between the photometrically derived $A_V$ (Phot $[A_V]$) and the Balmer $[A_V]$ is found. The correlation is improved when the empirical value of $\gamma = 0.44$ is allowed to vary. From least-squares fitting, the minimum in the reduced chi$^2$ distribution is found for $\gamma = 0.25 \pm 0.2$. For the sample of galaxies here, the factor of 2 difference in covering factor implied by the Calzetti ratio is found to be plausible. The CNOC2 galaxies with detected Balmer lines have some preference for an increased covering-factor difference, which perhaps implies that they are undergoing more rapid, ‘bursty’ star formation than the galaxies Calzetti used in her derivation.\footnote{Abstract at is available at http://adsabs.harvard.edu/cgi-bin/nph-bib_query?bibcode=2005MNRAS.361..437B&amp;db_key=AST&amp;data_type=HTML&amp;format=&amp;high=443caf21d317875.}

Whilst this might not clarify very much, it does give us a better sense of the methodological syntax of the question. It seems that the authors have compared measurements using two photometric codes with those using another, presumably more conventional method. They have established the
problematic—cleared a space—for this research performance in the first two sentences of the abstract. This sets up the rationale for the research question itself. From the abstract, the answer to the question would appear to be a qualified, 'yes'; in the conclusion to the paper, the qualification is revealed to be in terms of low 'accuracy'—we shall discuss 'accuracy' and 'reliability' in the next chapter.

In this kind of research, the research question or problem would have had to be in place more or less in its final form before any empirical work was undertaken. Indeed, it would have had to be in place before any decisions about empirical work could be made. Once the question has been formulated, the researchers must produce a methodological protocol for answering it. They seem, not surprisingly, given the discipline, to have decided on an experimental design, deploying three methods of data collection and analysis on the same sample of objects and conducting statistical analysis of the results. The production of this methodological protocol is referred to as the operationalisation of the research question.

As I have indicated in earlier chapters, theory and methodology in the natural sciences is generally far more strongly institutionalised than is the case in the social sciences and humanities. It is notable that the researchers in the physics example do not seem to need to define their terms for their audience, even though they are using what appears to the non-specialist to be a highly arcane jargon. This jargon essentially defines the 'universe' in which the researchers are operating; there are objects, such as 'galaxies' that may or may not exhibit 'Balmer lines', processes, such as 'star formation' ('bursty' or otherwise) and there are qualities, such as 'gas-derived extinction' and 'star-derived extinction', 'redshifts' and so forth and. This 'universe' is, for the most part and in the short term, known in terms of these objects, processes and qualities (nouns, verbs, adjectives and adverbs). What Thomas Kuhn (1970) refers to as 'normal science' generally proceeds by more accurately computing the relationships between these terms. Now and again, a new term will be constructed (the scientific realist—see Chapter 7—might want to say 'discovered') and the 'universe' will be enriched. Generally, though the 'universe' is known. This entails that laboratories can be established. My use of this term, here, is intended to refer to a situation in which all variables other than those in which the researcher is specifically interested can be controlled. In the case in question, differences between galaxies seems to have been controlled by using the same sample for each measurement protocol; had they used different samples for each protocol, it would have been difficult to compare their performances meaningfully.

I have used quotation marks around the term, universe, in the previous paragraph. This is because the 'universe' that the researchers are working in is the 'universe' defined by the theoretical jargon within which they are operating and not the universe that, in a commonsense kind of way, we consider astrophysicists to be concerned with. The relationship between the notional 'real' universe and the physicists' theoretical 'universe' is something that is of philosophical interest and will be picked up in Chapter 7. What seems to be clear, however, is that most of the language that the researchers
use did not precede research in the natural sciences; the ‘real’ universe did not come into existence complete with linguistic labels, so, minimally, the scientists are textualising something; to turn something into text is clearly to transform it. So, putting the philosophical questions on the backburner for a while, we can at least say that the astrophysicists are operating within a textual and so theoretical ‘universe’.

In more general terms (we’re not all astrophysicists), we can refer to the theoretical space within which a research performance is operating. This is the ‘universe’ within and about which the researcher is to make claims. This is going to be defined by that region of the problematic that is theoretically consistent with the research that is to be carried out. Alexander Luria, for example, was operating within a theoretical space that consists of the following:

- Societies that are defined by the mode of material production (individualised, peasant production or collective production);
- Cultures that are defined as being either non-literate or literate;
- Cognitive functions that are either limited to the participative mode or that may exhibit both participative and theoretical modes and, in the latter case, may privilege one or the other.

The question that he puts to this space (and these are my words not his) is: as society moves between individualised and collective modes of production and culture moves from non-literate to literate, what happens to cognitive functions in terms of participative and theoretical modes. The formulation of this question allows Luria to operationalise it as an experimental design, because he ‘knows’ all of the variables—these are the objects, processes and qualities that populate his theoretical space. This is what he did. First, he decided upon an initial sampling strategy that involved the selection of critical cases of societies in transition between the two modes of the sociocultural possibility space, that is, non-literate/individualised production and literate/collective production; this defined his independent variable. These societies would consist of some members involved in the more ‘primitive’ form and some in the more ‘advanced’ form, so that he could find all of his participants in the same societies (this would involve a second sampling procedure that he actually doesn’t tell us much about). Just like the physics example, this allowed him to control for variations between societies. He then devised an experimental design that consisted in giving the same ‘tests’ to all of his participants. The dependent variable was the mode of cognition, which was indicated by the participants’ responses to the tests. The research design essentially defines which are the independent and which the dependent variables. Luria might have tried to argue that the mode of cognition determined the sociocultural mode (ie more advanced thinkers construct more advanced societies) and that, for example, society develops as the human species evolves biologically. As a (very broadly) Marxist theorist, though, this would have been an unlikely line for him to take. In the case of the astrophysics example, we might infer that the independent variable is the
measurement protocol (Balmer/photometric) and the dependent variable the result of the measurement.

Not all research is like this. Anthropology, for example, has a long tradition of ethnographic research. This is very different from the experimental design. Now there is no general agreement on the precise meaning of the term ‘ethnography’, but a fairly commonly held view would lay claim to the attempt to achieve what the philosopher Gilbert Ryle (1968) referred to as thick description. Here is the anthropologist, Clifford Geertz, who famously recruited Ryle’s expression:

… ethnography is thick description. What the ethnographer is in fact faced with—except when (as, of course, he [sic] must do) he is pursuing the more automatized routines of data collection—is a multiplicity of complex conceptual structures, many of them superimposed upon or knotted into one another, which are at once strange, irregular, and inexplicit, and which he must contrive somehow first to grasp and then to render. And this is true at the most down-to-earth, jungle field work levels of his activity: interviewing informants, observing rituals, eliciting kin terms, tracing property lines, censusing households … writing his journal. Doing ethnography is like trying to read (in the sense of “construct a reading of”) a manuscript—foreign, faded, full of ellipses, incoherencies, suspicious emendations, and tendentious commentaries, but written not in conventionalized graphs of sound but in transient examples of shaped behaviour.

(Geertz, 1973; pp. 9-10)

Quite clearly, anthropology as described by Geertz is a game in which the ‘universe’ certainly is not known, not, at least, at the start of the research. Furthermore, it is concerned with coming to know only in the sense of the construction of a reading amongst, presumably, a range of possible alternatives. Geertz describes anthropological analysis as resembling, in a sense, the work of the literary critic (p. 9). There are, of course, many different approaches to literary criticism, some of which do not much resemble ethnography. However, he does intend to foreground the importance of the subjective in anthropology (see also, Geertz, 1998). Nevertheless, Geertz does establish a theoretical space. He is always concerned with cultural practices—what he referred to in the above extract as ‘shaped practices’. In this brief extract he has introduced some of the specific terms of his space: rituals, kin terms, property lines, households. These are theoretical in the to the extent that they are constituted as common to the range of empirical settings that the anthropologist might encounter. This brief list is only a beginning, of course. The anthropologist's theoretical space is highly complex and its terms are, in comparison with those of the natural scientist, generally very loosely defined, weakly institutionalised. The fluidity and complexity of this theoretical space would make the construction of a laboratory entirely non-viable, ruling out the experimental design.\(^2\)

\(^2\) It is worth pointing out that one response to the weak institutionalisation of a theoretical space is the recourse to probability theory. This will be dealt with in other modules. Just to mention here, though, that a random sample is constructed by arranging that every member of the set to be sampled (called the sampling frame) has an equal probability of being included in the sample—like a lottery. Under these conditions, probability theory asserts that
The expression, ‘research question’ might not be entirely appropriate in the context of this kind of ethnography. This mode of research sets out to establish an understanding of the way that the culture works and of the meanings of ‘shaped behaviours’. So it may be better to refer to this as the research problem. One would expect it to be stated in very general terms at the outset. By the time that the work has been completed, the ethnographer will have established their reading of the culture, given it a particular character that marks out its singularity (and so also its continuities with other cultures) in terms of how its members think about their world. Geertz’s reading will be presented as thick description and, to the extent that this captures the character of the culture, this may be regarded as the conclusion to the research.

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Table 4.1
Mary Douglas’s ‘Cultural Theory’ (modified from Douglas, 1996; p. 43)

Some approaches to anthropology make use of more structured theory. Mary Douglas, for example, claims that there are ‘four distinct kinds of culture, no one of which can flourish in the conditions predicated for any of the others.’ (Douglas, 1996; p. 142). Her four kinds of culture are differentiated on the basis of two binary variables as in Figure 4.1. Douglas refers to this as ‘cultural theory’. Consistent with this approach, we might constitute a research question that seeks to verify (or refute or transform) the theory, thus: under what conditions can different cultural forms co-exist; how do cultures change between forms; can we find a society that excludes one or more cultural form? The point, here, is that it is the theoretical space that is opened up by

the most likely distribution of any given variable in the sample is the same as its distribution in the sampling frame. So, if the sampling frame consists of equal numbers of males and females, then the most likely outcome from taking a random sample is that the sample will also have an equal distribution of males and females. Perhaps a better way of putting this is that there is an increasingly small probability of a random sample differing substantially from the sampling frame. What this means is that, for example, you can take two random samples and make the assumption that, for most purposes, the properties of the samples can be considered to be the same. However, careful consideration has to be given to the size of the sample—just the size, its size relative to the sampling frame is not relevant.

3 I have modified Douglas’s table to conform to my own preferred style of representing cross-products of two binary variables. There is an important difference, however, between Douglas’s structure and the kinds of analytic apparatuses that I generate (see, for example, Dowling, 2005a, 2005b, in press; Dowling & Brown, 2006). Essentially, Douglas’s modernism fixes cultures within one or other of the four cells. My, more postmodern or amodern (Latour, 1993) approach presents a 2x2 space as a map for exploring the dynamics of a setting.
Douglas’s ‘cultural theory’ that has enabled questions to be formulated in this more precise way and this is the general situation.

One error that I have frequently encountered in the supervision and assessment of masters dissertations has been the assumption that research can somehow directly address the untheorised world; it cannot. Of course, theory may be downplayed in the early stages of research, and this is the approach favoured by exponents of grounded theory. Here, the researcher tries to avoid making assumptions about a setting until they have become immersed in it. Here, ‘theory’ is understood to be properly very local and so not to be imposed on a new setting. We may criticise the claims of the grounded theorists on the grounds that it is never possible to enter a setting without some preconceptions—perhaps the kind of general cultural language that Geertz indexes in the above extract. We might also point out that research is of limited value if its outcomes do not generalise beyond the original performance and that which enables generalisation is precisely theory, which must, thereby, be relevant to other settings, breaching the fundamental thesis of grounded theory. Nevertheless, there are situations in which we wish to maintain as open a mind as possible, trying to make explicit our assumptions and holding them up to critical scrutiny in terms of the setting within which we are working. Under these circumstances, a clearly defined research question is simply not possible, because we have, by definition, no language in which to formulate one. The response is often to try to formulate a question in non-technical language with the assumption that the terms of the question directly and non-problematically refer to the ‘real’ world. This is often accompanied by a strong desire to operationalise the question in terms of an experimental design. Julie Nicholson and colleagues (1998) present research questions that seem to beg a whole lot of further questions about what the terms might mean:

- What types of interaction patterns are observed with same-sex and mixed-gender groupings of children composing on computers?
- Does open-ended software help mitigate gender inequities in children’s use of computers in schools?

(Nicholson, et al, 1998; p. 5)

As this stands, we may not really know what to look for. What are: ‘interactions’, ‘composing’, ‘open-ended software’? Is the software being considered to be the active agent here (there is no mention of a teacher or other aspects of classroom context)? How are ‘gender inequities’ being conceptualised? Arguably, if these questions cannot be answered precisely, then there is not much point in formulating research questions in such apparently precise terms. Better, perhaps, to keep the question loose at the beginning: does software type have any impact on classroom-based groupwork in terms of gender relations? This is now formulated as an exploratory study. It would be possible to formulate an experimental design, but given the very loosely defined nature of the theoretical space, this would probably not be a good ideal. The loosely defined terms of the question provide pointers: we want a mixed gender environment; we want children working in groups; we want different kinds of software. The exploratory study would enable us to formulate some more precisely defined theories.
concerning the relations between software and gender relations in groupwork from which we might move on to an experimental study. Of course, in the context of a masters dissertation, there is unlikely to be the time or space (in terms of wordcount) for two phases, but the subsequent research can always be carried out later. In fact, Nicholson et al are not quite as atheoretical as I have pretended, thus:

In addressing the above questions, we are operating under several assumptions related to successful collaborative composing. We consider the ideal standard for successful collaborative writing to involve participants who have a shared goal or purpose for the activity, a mutually agreed upon strategy for regulating turn-taking, and the skills for building upon and incorporating one another's ideas. We also believe that successful collaborative partners share in a range of social roles while interacting and composing and do not differ dramatically in their relative status within the interaction. Finally, successful collaborations within this specific context should result in a product where the majority of elements (e.g., text and illustrations) were jointly produced.

(Nicholson et al, 1998; p. 5)

But all of this remains quite loose.

So, there are traditions of research that exhibit strongly institutionalised theoretical spaces, most particularly, the natural sciences. Here, insofar as the 'universe' is 'known' in advance, we expect a predominance of experimental research designs operationalising tightly framed research questions. Alternatively, there are traditions of research that do not exhibit such strong institutionalisation of theoretical spaces. Here, each new empirical setting is more likely to be thought of as the relatively unknown, untheorised. The extended fieldwork demanded by ethnography and thick description may not be plausible in the context of a masters degree. Nevertheless, exploratory research is perfectly viable and can be highly productive. In the case of exploratory research, we do not want to formulate a precisely worded research question in advance, indeed we cannot do so if we do not have available the required theoretical terminology. Rather, we are likely to begin our research with a far more loosely defined research question or problem. Naturally, by the end of the research process, we hope to be in a position to provide a conclusion that constitutes a more well-defined theoretical space. Of course, there is a whole range of possibilities between these extremes where there is a sufficient definition of the theoretical advance to enable the formulation of a meaningful question—Douglas’s ‘cultural theory’ would be an example (though this is not to say that this is necessarily how she herself proceeds). Here, we may introduce an element of experimental design, for example, in choosing to explore two contexts that differ in one important respect, but that are arguably similar otherwise. The reformulated groupwork/gender/software question, for example, might be operationalised by:

1. setting up two mixed gender groups that are as similar as we can make them;

2. setting them tasks using two different kinds of software;
3. reversing the order of the software forms between the two groups, thus controlling for the order in which the tasks are carried out.

Data collection and analysis, however, would be more open-ended than in a true experiment. Were we to find, for example, that the two groups were not as similar as we had hoped, this would not destroy our research; we would simply factor the differences between the groups into our analysis of the processes and mechanisms of the groupwork. At the end of the day, neither the logical structure of the experimental design based on a precisely defined research question, nor the thick description of ethnography is a necessary requirement in research. What is necessary is that the claims that you make are expressed in theoretically well-defined or (in the case of ethnography) well-elaborated terms—at whatever stage of the research performance this happens, and that these claims can be justified in terms of the decisions that you have taken in respect of operationalisation.

**Activities**

Your team will need to appoint two coordinators, S8 & S9.

**Activity 4.1**

Under the coordination of S8 and drawing on the statement of your area of interest, list of key concepts and literature review that your team produced in the previous chapter (on Board B10), you should produce a question that you consider to be potentially researchable and a description of the theoretical space that the question addresses. The question and description of the theoretical space should be no more than about 100-200 words, the final version being produced by S8 and posted on Board B13, Research Question.

**Example**

Referring back to the chapter 2 work on Bernstein, a response to this task might look something like this:

**Question**

In terms of their organisation as knowledge and development and recruitment in cultural practices and in social relations, what are the continuities and discontinuities between informal literacy practices on fanfiction websites, on the one hand, and literacy practices in formal educational sites?

**Theoretical Space**

The question is to be explored sociologically. So, the theoretical space is concerned with social relations and cultural practices, including those knowledge and literacy practices that are associated with formal and informal education.

The terms in bold are key, though high level, theoretical concepts that would need to be explored and be themselves subject to analysis as the research would be developed.
Examples (not definitions) from other perspectives

A question that is to be explored in a more anthropological manner may place more emphasis on practices than on social relations.

A question that is to be explored psychologically may emphasise psychological states and processes.

A linguistic question may emphasise language use and/or structure.

A historical question may be concerned with periodisation and with trajectories and ramifications within a given period.

A philosophical question may focus on conceptual analysis and logical argument and be concerned with issues of epistemology, ontology, deontology and so forth.

Questions that are expressed in terms of regions of study rather than disciplines—for example, policy or management studies—would need to define a theoretical space in terms that are at a higher level of analysis than is commonly found in the technical language associated with the particular region. Thus ‘critical management discourse’ might be concerned with the challenging (a comportment for research that is distinct from that of exploration, perhaps) of the particular social relations that are established and maintained through conventional management practices.

**S8 will need to post the team’s question on Board B13, Research Question, by midnight GMT on day 3 of the chapter.**

**You should expect to spend 3 hours of reflection and online discussion on this part of the task. S8 should expect to spend an additional 1-2 hours.**

**Activity 4.2**

Under the coordination of **S9**, teams are now required to consider how they might operationalise the question that they generated in **Activity 4.2** and produce a research proposal. The question of operationalisation should be addressed by considering at least some of the following:

a. Research design (eg exploratory, experimental, ethnographic);

b. Sampling (eg: case study, comparative case study, critical case study, some form of randomisation);

c. Data collection strategies (eg: participant observation, interview, self-administered questionnaire);

d. Data analysis strategies (eg inductive or constant comparative method, in terms of a particular theoretical framework or method such as discourse analysis);
e. Practical issues (such as access).

It is suggested that team members are delegated to explore particular aspects, a-d, and that all reflect on item e.

**S9** will need to set deadlines in order to allow time for them to produce the final version of the research proposal. This version should be 500-750 words in length.

*The final proposal should be posted on Board B14, Research Proposals, by S9 by midnight GMT on day 7 of the activity.*

You should expect to spend 3.5 hours on this activity. **S9 should expect to spend an additional 1-2 hours on the activity.**
Chapter 5  Generalisation  Week 7

The work in this chapter is organised on an individual basis, though the team and module boards as well as Boards B3 and B9 remain open. The focus now is on what it is that enables research conducted in one empirical setting to be relevant in the consideration of other settings, that is, we are concerned with the issue of generalisability. As with the previous chapter, we shall again have to give some consideration to the empirical field. This time this consideration will be more concrete because the object of interrogation will be a single piece of empirical research. Students are asked to use the ‘mode of interrogation’ introduced in Brown & Dowling (1998) to produce a critical review of a single piece of research, paying particular attention to strengths and weaknesses of the claims to the validity of the local findings of the research in relation to the more general question of problem that the research addresses. The review may be presented as answers to the questions listed in activity 5.1.

Each participant will have their own board to which only they will be able to post, but these boards will be readable by other participants (a bit like a blog), so comments and questions can be made via email or the General Module Board, B0.

The chapter addresses the intended learning outcomes:

- Understand and be able to deploy the mode of interrogation introduced in Brown & Dowling.
- Understand key methodological language concerning the generalisability of research findings.

Total amount of time: 7.5 hours.

Core texts for this chapter


Introduction: Generalisation

I have been describing an individual piece of research as a performance and, in the introduction to Chapter 3, I introduced the term by reference to the performance of a play. From the perspective of the theatre company, we might think of a performance of a play as in of a series of similar performances constituting a ‘production’. This production then stands as an addition to the ‘repertoire’ of the company. We might further suppose that the theatre company and each of its members will take something from a critical review of each performance that will feed forward to the next and that they will take something from a critical review of the production that will inform the next
production. The organisation of productions as collections of performances and repertoires as collections of productions is, in the way that I have described it, a strongly institutionalised structure and it is easy to see where any particular performance or production stands within it. Members of theatre companies will have acquired competencies that will enable them to review performances and productions in a more or less consistent way—at the very least, they will have some common technical terms in the language that they use in discussing them. We might refer to this competence as a language or mode of interrogation of theatrical performances and productions. In this chapter, I want to think of research in the same kind of way. In particular, I want to think of the language of research methods that we are developing in the MRes as a competence that serves as a mode of interrogation (see Brown & Dowling, 1998) of research performances.

Of course, research performances do not always fit quite so neatly into the kind of structure that I’ve outlined for theatrical performances. In general, it is the distinctiveness of each research performance—its originality—rather than its place in a series of similars that tends to be foregrounded. We might think of the problematic that the researcher establishes in their literature review as a kind of ‘repertoire’, then the individual performance stands as a contribution to this repertoire. Individual researchers or teams may develop a consistency of approach that might be thought of as a mode of production, then each performance stands as a contribution to this and the particular mode of production stands as a contribution to the repertoire, which is the problematic. But these metaphors probably should be pushed much further than this. The key point is that each research performance, whilst of necessity having something unique about it, is also seen as contributing to something bigger than itself that is of interest not just to the researcher, but to a field of researchers and quite possibly others as well (as we shall explore in Chapter 6). The question for this chapter is, how does research establish this generalisability?

I have described (in the introduction to Chapter 2) the theoretical field of research as being concerned with general claims and debates; and the empirical field as consisting of local instances of practice and experience. The theoretical space of a research performance is, as I suggested in the introduction to Chapter 4, in a sense the ‘known universe’ of the research—a universe that may be known in advance or on completion of the research and to very many or very few people, but is ‘known’ at some point by someone. Of necessity, this theoretical space must be capable of describing more than the very particular setting of any given research performance. Theory, in other words, is one assurance of generalisability. But is is not a sufficient guarantor of generalisability or, at least, not of productive generalisability. Otherwise there would be no way of choosing between theories, no way of discarding incompetent work. My claim, of course, is that it is the mode of interrogation that is being presented on this MRes that constitutes this competence. It is the subjection of a research performance to this mode of interrogation that constitutes a critical review in terms of the practice of research. It is important to recognise that ‘critical’ does not necessarily mean negative and certainly not destructive (unless it’s really warranted). ‘Critical’, in this context, means
opening up to scrutiny on the basis of the principles of research practice, the *mode of interrogation* in order to explore the extent to which the performance has value beyond itself, to assess its generalisability. Such a review may implicate a very wide range of methodological concepts. Take *sampling*, for instance. There are many ways in which the sampling strategies that have been deployed may impose on the generalisability of the research. One is the impact of *random sampling error* on the *accuracy* of quantitative research—there is a brief discussion of this below. However, the choice of sampling strategy can influence generalisability in a variety of ways. Nicholson et al (1998)—briefly discussed in the introduction to the last chapter—chose to focus on primary age children. Now the size of their sample—crucial in the measure of *random sampling error*—is almost irrelevant to the question, ‘to what extent and in what ways does their research generalise to other phases of education, or to children of any age in different sociocultural settings or even to primary age children in 2006?’ In Brown & Dowling (1998) we go into some detail on the ways in which particular choices taken in research performance relating to a range of methodological concepts might serve to enhance or delimit generalisability. Here want to look at just three key terms in the *mode of interrogation*.

Now it is important to reassert that there is a wide range of modes of research and generalisability does not work in the same way in all modes. As I have indicated, research in the natural sciences is probably the most strongly institutionalised field, so I’ll start there. Let’s have another look at the question introduced in the last chapter, from Babbedge et al (2005):

‘Can a photometric redshift code reliably determine dust extinction?’

Now, despite an ancient BSc in physics (including a course in astrophysics, as I recall, and read at the same institution as the principal author of this paper), I cannot claim to have a very clear idea of what this research is about. Nevertheless, its title and abstract (see the introduction to Chapter 4) together with a Google search⁴ give us some clues. It seems that physicists can infer a good deal about the stellar evolutionary history of a galaxy from its intrinsic spectral energy distribution (SED), that is, by the intensity of light transmitted by it at different frequencies. However, dust in the galaxy absorbs and reflects some of this light; this effect is called ‘dust extinction’. Essentially, physicists need to be able to correct for dust extinction in order to determine the SED. Unfortunately, it seems to have proven difficult to devise simple methods to measure dust extinction. Babbedge et al have produced a performance that explores the potential in terms of ‘accuracy’ and ‘reliability’ of using photometrics for this purpose. Even in the absence of a great deal of competence in the field, it’s fairly easy to see who might be interested in this research and this group would certainly include those interested in researching the formation and evolution of galaxies. The key to the nature and extent of their interest is going to be in these terms, ‘accuracy’ and ‘reliability’ and in a third term not mentioned here, ‘validity’.

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⁴ See, for example, http://spider.ipac.caltech.edu/staff/mxt/research.html.
Babbedge et al report that ‘the two [photometric] codes are in reasonable agreement about the extinction of a given source’ (p. 12 in pdf version). This may be taken to indicate a ‘reasonable’ level of reliability for the use of photometrics. The term, reliability, generally has to do with repeatability. For example, in my own research, I have developed the concepts esoteric domain, descriptive domain, expressive domain and public domain in relation to any given field of practice, such as school mathematics. The esoteric domain may be glossed as those practices that are most highly specialised to the field. At one point (see Dowling, 1998), I wanted to compare two sets of school mathematics textbooks in terms of the proportion of esoteric domain text that they contained. So, I divided each of a sample of pages from each book into four and coded each quarter page as either esoteric domain or not-esoteric domain. I then produced tables showing the proportion of esoteric domain text in each chapter of each book in each series. This enabled me to compare the two series in terms of, shall we say, their respective levels of specialisation and also to compare the level of specialisation within different topics (ie chapters) within school mathematics. For the record, I was able to confirm that books directed as ‘high ability’ students contained more esoteric domain text and those directed at ‘low ability’ students contained more non-esoteric domain text. I was also able to reveal that, even within the ‘high ability’ books, the topic, ‘statistics and probability’ contained relatively little esoteric domain text (plausibly a reason for its notorious difficulty amongst school students). This was a small scale study and I was working alone. I had generated a set of coding principles that enabled me to determine the appropriate coding for each quarter page and I simply applied this to my sample. But who is to say how much subjective judgement entered into my application of these principles? Well, this was only one aspect of my analysis of the textbooks. I also engaged in close textual analysis in which I was able to demonstrate how I was applying the principles by an extended or elaborated description (Brown & Dowling, 1998) of the interpretation of a given textual fragment. However, to augment this, I might have taught another individual my coding principles and had them re-code part of my sample of pages. I could then have computed a measure of correlation between the results of the two coding operations and this would have been a measure of inter-coder reliability. In the astrophysics example, two different ‘photometric codes’ are deployed and the results found to exhibit a ‘reason able’ level of correlation (though the researchers used a scatter diagram to represent this rather than a coefficient of correlation). This speaks to the reliability of the use of photometrics generally, as represented by these two codes: a method is reliable if it consistently produces comparable results.

Babbedge et al also point out that although the results from the photometric method do not exhibit a strong correlation with the Balmer-derived results, when other factors—principally, a lack of precision in all three methods—are taken into account, the correlation can be interpreted as ‘in fact quite good’ (p. 15 in pdf version). This statement might be taken to indicate that, whilst all of the methods are fairly reliable, none is very accurate. Accuracy, here, refers to the range of measurement within which the actual dust extinction level is expected to lie. You may have come across the use of the term accuracy in relation to opinion polls. Here, the figure most commonly stated is the
sampling error or standard error. This is a calculation based purely on the size and spread (standard deviation) of the sample and relates to the fact that we cannot simply assume that a random sample will have exactly the same characteristics as the whole population that is being sampled. Thus, a Gallup Poll of Americans views on immigration claims:

These results are based on telephone interviews with a randomly selected national sample of 1,004 adults, aged 18 and older, conducted April 7-9, 2006. For results based on this sample, one can say with 95% confidence that the maximum error attributable to sampling and other random effects is ±3 percentage points. In addition to sampling error, question wording and practical difficulties in conducting surveys can introduce error or bias into the findings of public opinion polls.

(Saad, 2006; no page numbers)

 Basically, then, if sampling errors were the only errors involved, the claim that 79% of Americans 'say that controlling the borders is important' (ibid) would entail that the author is saying that in 95% of such polls, the figure would be between 76% and 82%. As the extract makes clear, though, there are plenty of other sources of error. Measurement of the accuracy of the photometric measurement of dust extinction involves a comparable kind of calculation.

Where qualitative rather than quantitative methods are being used, the term accuracy really has little meaning. We are, however, concerned with the validity of our interpretations. Essentially, all research involves, minimally, a textualising of a setting. The setting may involve galaxies or educational or other cultural practices, cognitive or linguistic processes, and so forth, but the research will always represent these settings in textual form. So, Basil Bernstein provides the following definition of 'universalistic' and 'particularistic' orders of meaning:

we might be able to distinguish between two orders of meaning. One we would call universalistic, the other particularistic. Universalistic meanings are those in which principles and operations are made linguistically explicit, whereas particularistic orders of meaning are meanings in which principles and operation are relatively linguistically implicit. If orders of meaning are universalistic, then the meanings are less tied to a given context. The meta-languages of public forms of thought as these apply to objects and persons realize meanings of a universalistic type.

(Bernstein, 1973: 175)

Bernstein refers to the ‘universalistic’ order as ‘elaborated code’ and the ‘particularistic’ order as ‘restricted code’. He then offers the following ‘stories’ as respective examples:

(1) Three boys are playing football and one boy kicks the ball and it goes through the window the ball breaks the window and the boys are looking at it and a man comes out and shouts at them so they run away and then that lady looks out of her window and she tells the boys off.

(2) They're playing football and he kicks it and it goes through there it breaks the window and they're looking at it and he comes out and shouts at them because they've broken it so they run away and then she looks out and she tells them off.

(Bernstein, 1973: 178)
He is referring to research by a colleague who showed a series of photographs to five-year-old children who had described the series in terms of stories. Now, the question of validity asks: as responses to the set task (telling a story on the basis of the series of photographs), does story (1) really exemplify ‘elaborated code’ and does story (2) really exemplify ‘restricted code’ as these have been defined in Bernstein’s theory? I’ll leave you to decide, though there is a discussion in Dowling (2005b). Having made your decision, you may care to reflect on just why Bernstein and his colleague chose not to present actual stories composed by the children; these stories were actually constructed by the colleague and not the children.

Thinking back to Mary Douglas’s ‘cultural theory’ that was introduced in the introduction to the last chapter, we can quite easily see how the terms validity and reliability might be applied. We might have the impression that a particular cultural setting should be described as a ‘conservative hierarchy’. This would entail that it exhibited a complex structure with individuals strongly incorporated into it. Having an impression, however, is not enough. If we are to persuade our audience, then we will need to explain the basis on which we have determined that the structure is complex and incorporation strong, in other words, we need indicators for these categories. We might suppose, for example, that visible and durable authority structures would be an indicator for a ‘conservative hierarchy’; it would certainly seem to be inconsistent with the other categories. In quantitative work, indicators need to be stable because it is generally to indicators that data is coded. We might, for example, consider that a measure of the ratio of pronouns to nouns in an utterance might be a valid indicator for speech code (high ratio indicating restricted code, low ratio indicating elaborated code). In this case, we would measure this value for each utterance in our sample. In qualitative research, indicators are often less stable and perhaps ‘interpretation’ is a better term to use instead of ‘coding’. Stable and explicit indicators allow for the measurement of intercoder reliability; unstable and tacit indicators do not and reliability must be established by argument, by elaborated description. In the latter case, the elaborated description also establishes the validity of the interpretation. With quantitative research this needs to be established separately. This often also involves statistical analysis, but the most straightforward test of validity is face validity, which, again, can be established on the basis of argument.

Mary Douglas notes that ‘cultural theory’ is a technique for thinking about culture without indulging subjective bias (Douglas, 1996; p. 45); this is certainly consistent with my earlier claim that theory is one assurance of generalisability. Clifford Geertz (1998), however, seems to be arguing for the importance of subjectivity and for an approach to anthropology that has similarities with (at least some forms of) literary criticism. This doesn’t dispense altogether with the three terms that I’ve been discussing in this introduction—accuracy, reliability and validity—though we might think of them in a rather different way. All anthropologists, it seems to me, count things at some point and one would imagine that there would be little point in doing so if accuracy were no kind of an issue at all. Though in the more interpretive anthropology of Clifford Geertz a discussion of sampling error might be surprising. The aim to thick description suggests a keen interest in at least
surrogate forms of validity and reliability. The interpretation of culture is just that, an interpretation, a reading, but it is an interpretation that is informed by intensive and deep involvement in the culture. Ultimately, it is the result of a transaction between the subjective anthropologist and other subjects implicated in the culture and, for the narrative outcome of that transaction to be persuasive, subject and subjects must be brought very close together and generally for an extended period of time. The principal form of the generalisability of such studies may be that they provide believable alternatives to the culture or cultures with which the audience is already familiar. Indeed, this description comes very close to the way in which Geertz (1998) describes Ruth Benedict’s (see the 2006 edition) The Chrysanthemum and the Sword: patterns of Japanese culture in its ironising of American culture of the 1940s. An ethnography, then, is a performance, but one that must establish itself as accurate, valid and reliable if it is to distance itself from pure fantasy and present plausible additions to our repertoire of ‘known’ cultures.

Activities

Activity 5.1

This activity is an individual one. You need first to have identified a piece of recent empirical research that addresses a research question that is close to your own research interests. It is suggested that you concentrate on items published in research journals, rather than monographs or chapters in edited collections (unless the item is a journal article that has been reprinted in an edited collection). You may select an item that you have come across earlier in this or in the previous module on the MRes or you may choose something completely new to you. It is suggested that you avoid research involving highly technical forms of data collection and/or analysis, such as work involving sophisticated statistical analysis, unless you have expertise in the relevant area. Essentially, you should choose something that you will be able to follow without extensive further exploration of web- or library-based resources.

You should have identified your piece of empirical research before the start of this chapter (see the instructions for chapter 4).

Review the mode of interrogation presented in Brown & Dowling (1998) and pay particular attention to c. 8.

You may also care to look at the reviews produced by students on other Masters modules that have been posted on Paul Dowling’s website (http://homepage.mac.com/paulcdowling/ioe/studentswork/coursework.html). Remember, though, that you are not being asked to produce anything as extended as this nor, indeed, is it a requirement for this activity that your review be presented in essay form; you may simply present the answers to the questions, below, together with a summary of the research.

Write a brief (about 200 words) summary of the research.
Answer the following questions in relation to the research:

1. What is the research question that is addressed by the research?

2. How is this question operationalised in terms of research design, sampling, data collection and analysis strategies, practical issues?

3. What are the findings of the research?

4. What are the strengths and weaknesses of the validity and reliability of the findings?

5. What are the limitations to the generalisability of this research? An example of a limitation might be that the empirical setting involves children of primary age and there are good reasons (what are they) to suppose that it may not generalise to other phases. You may care to answer this with particular reference to your own interests in respect of your dissertation research.

Post your summary and review, together with the bibliographical reference for the research on your team’s board for this activity.

You should post your review to your individual B15 by midnight GMT on day 7 of the chapter.

You should expect to spend 6.5 hours on this activity.
Chapter 6  
*The Use-value of Research*  
Week 8

In the previous chapter, the issue of ‘generalisability’ might be interpreted as the use-value of research in relation to other research. Here, the use-value of research is concerned with the relationship between research as a distinct kind of activity and other activities, such as professional educational practice, educational policy, and so forth. The position that is being advanced by Brown and Dowling (1998) rejects any idea of research as prescribing—or even proscribing—policy and practice; sometimes even ‘inform’ is too strong a term. Rather, educational research is being understood as interrogative and, it is to be hoped, inspirational with respect to policy and practice. It is this approach that you are being encouraged to adopt in this chapter.

Students will be arranged in C-teams of 5-6 for this chapter. There will be a single discussion board for each team.

The chapter addresses the intended learning outcome:

- Understand the issues concerning the relationship between research and practice/policy.

Total amount of time: 7.5 hours.

Core texts for this chapter


Introduction: The use-value of research

The Report of the Review Panel—Strategic Review of Research in Education (1992) claimed that there was a perception amongst educators and administrators that much educational research was irrelevant to them. This perception was despite the respectable profile of Australian educational researchers in the international research community.

(DETYA, 2001)

The report from which this extract is taken presents a rather more optimistic picture of the relationship between research and educational practice and policy that would possibly be unduly optimistic if applied to the situation in the UK (see the discussion in Dowling & Brown, 2006). The various ‘modern mathematics’ initiatives in the 1960s, led by the Cambridge Conference on School Mathematics (1963) might be described as a push, largely by mathematicians, to shape the school mathematics curriculum by bringing it into line with a particular philosophy of school mathematics (see Cooper, 1983, 1985; Moon, 1985, see also Dowling, in press). This, in a sense is the opposite side of things, with researchers—in this case mathematicians—regarding research as legitimately imposing upon educational practice and policy (the design of the curriculum relating to both). Rejection and imposition both reject any possibility of transaction, any dialogue between the two fields. Well, if we think that dialogue is an important facilitator of learning, then we would presumably want to avoid both monologic forms. But there are different forms of dialogue as well. Before considering how we might describe these different forms, I want to give some further thought to two key issues: firstly, how we might conceptualise the way in which one activity views another and, secondly, how we might think about theory and practice.

In the introduction to Chapter 5 I introduced a part of my own theoretical language, social activity theory (SAT, see Dowling, 1998, 2004a, 2004b, 2004c) that establishes four domains of practice in relation to any given specialised activity, such as school mathematics or educational research. For my purposes here I need refer to just two of these domains. The esoteric domain is the region or text associated with the specialised practice that is most strongly institutionalised. In the case of educational research, this domain will include, in general terms, the language of research methods that is being introduced in the MRes and also the theoretical space relating to the particular research performance. Now, in the introductions to Chapters 1 and 2, I described research as a transaction between three areas: theory, research methods, and the empirical setting, in other words, between the research esoteric domain and the empirical setting. However, the empirical setting is at least in part shaped by methodological decisions, such as research design, sampling and data collection and analysis strategies as well as by the theoretical space, so this is a rather one-sided transaction. I therefore want to reformulate the earlier description; let’s look at it like this: the esoteric domain of educational research (the theoretical space and methodology) casts a gaze upon the world beyond itself, the empirical field (Brown & Dowling, 1998) and creates the empirical setting in its own image—or, at least, according to its own principles. The findings of a research performance appear to be about the more general empirical field, but actually
concern the *empirical setting*, an artefact of the esoteric domain of the research in transaction with the empirical field. The empirical setting is what I refer to as the *public domain* of educational research; it is established by the *recontextualisation* of the empirical field.

Clearly, the researcher must recontextualise the empirical field in some way, minimally, by textualising or re-textualising it; research, after all, is presented in textual form. Where the esoteric domain is very strongly institutionalised and, in this respect, the researcher’s actions and conceptualising constrained, then we might suggest that the empirical field acts as a kind of catalyst or lever for the internal development of the esoteric domain. Again, this would be rather like ‘normal science’ in Thomas Kuhn’s (1970) terms. In educational studies, however, we often find that the esoteric domain—theoretical space and methodology—are comparatively weakly institutionalised, so that the researcher’s options are, in this respect, more fluid and the empirical field potentially has more ‘voice’ in the transformation of the esoteric domain. Only potentially, though, because we need also to factor in the subjectivity of the researcher, which, as I noted in the previous chapter introduction, is sometimes considered to be very important in some areas of research.

I have for some time argued (see, for example, Dowling, 1995) that the recontextualising the empirical by educational research is potentially very productive. However, it has implications. Most particularly, that research findings are recontextualisations of the empirical entails that any attempt to impose them back on the empirical field as monologic prescriptions for practice is always unwise and, in many cases likely to be impossible; educational research and educational practice and policy are different kinds of activity. I’ll say a little more about this shortly. So what kind of opportunities might educational research offer? Essentially, research involves motivated *analysis*. This involves putting some things together and keeping other things apart, conceptually, in ways that, at least from the perspective of the empirical field, are new. Mary Douglas’s (1996) organization of cultures in ‘cultural theory’ (see the introductions to Chapters 4 and 5) would be a case in point; she presents a new way for us to think about cultures that are familiar and, perhaps, others that are unfamiliar to us. Rebecca Rogers (2003; see the introduction to Chapter 3) encourages us to see a problem in certain alignments between home and school cultures, rather than or as well as in certain discontinuities between them. This is a reorganizing of the way we think about cultural reproduction in/by the school. Basil Bernstein (1973) distinguishes between elaborated and restricted speech codes and associates the former with the school and with middle class students and the latter with working class students. For him, at this time, it was this discontinuity rather than the alignment between home and school that constituted the problem and he pronounced his famous chiasmus:
If the culture of the teacher is to become part of the consciousness of the child, then the culture of the child must first be in the consciousness of the teacher.

(Bernstein, 1974: 199)

Bernstein and Rogers are, of course, not necessarily inconsistent in terms of thinking about practice, though their theoretical spaces are more than a little out of alignment.

Much later—shortly before he died—Bernstein (1999, 2000) produced another important distinction between what he referred to as horizontal discourses and vertical discourses (see the introduction to Chapter 2). These resonate somewhat with restricted and elaborated codes in which we can see the origins of the later conceptualization. Now I won’t reprise Bernstein’s schema, here. Instead, I’ll offer an alternative, which is at a lower level of abstraction than Bernstein’s, but is not entirely inconsistent with it. I have referred to the esoteric domain of educational research as comprising the theoretical space and methodology. Now I want to add to this discursive structure a practical space that is not necessarily explicitly principled in quite the same way. Rather, it concerns the practicalities of the educational research activity. For example, for many of us, our research activities involve the production of publications. And, as I suggested in the introduction to Chapter 3, not just any publications. The strong institutionalization of theory and methodology in the natural sciences entails the prevalence of experimental method and objectivity—objectivity in the sense that a given research performance can be made transparent with respect to methodology. The high economic cost and potential commercial and political opportunities associated with much natural science research also places a very high premium on both originality (or course) and nowness. These two factors clearly privilege the learned journals and peer review over other forms of publication. The strong institutionalization of the natural sciences alongside their association with all other forms of research in such governmental processes as the Research Assessment Exercise (the RAE, which evaluates and ranks the research productivity of all institutions, departments and, in effect, individuals) certainly entails that this privileging of work published as short articles in peer reviewed journals hegemonises educational studies, at least. For some areas of work, including working with theory in a weakly institutionalised field, the short journal article may be far from ideal.

Furthermore, the weak institutionalization of the field outside of the natural sciences entails that some areas are in a more or less permanent state of ‘revolution’ (cf Kuhn, 1970). Indeed, this has been said quite explicitly in respect of literary studies (eg Rosenberg, 1962). Certainly ‘normal’ or strongly institutionalised research in educational studies is limited to far smaller groups, even, perhaps, individuals; this renders peer review and even the examining of doctoral theses a rather more risky and certainly more problematic business. One response to this in educational studies seems to be the avoidance of coherent theory altogether in favour of naïve empiricism—more of that in Chapter 7. I should also mention the value placed upon funded research in terms of generating income, the careers of contract researchers, the prestige of large research contracts etc. Again, many forms of research activity are not well suited to large-scale funded programmes, but
the privileging of the latter does have a tendency to bias the field. And the reviewing of research proposals in bids for funding and of funded research reports exhibits the same kind of problems as peer reviewing. Finally, the economics of publishing entail that it is now comparatively difficult to have a book length work published unless it can be demonstrated that it is likely to sell in large numbers as an essential text on undergraduate or, at least, masters programmes. There is some evidence that the use of the use of digital technology and ‘publish and print’ protocols may be changing the situation and certainly many academics make good use of their own and their institutional websites for publication, though the value of this in terms of the RAE etc is in question. In any event, these and other factors of the practical space of research activity clearly impose on what can be and what is produced and how it is produced and represented. Those who believe that academics live in ivory towers, insulated from the harsh realities of the ‘real world’ really do need to think again.

Now, of course, the activities of educational policy and practice have their esoteric domains as well. I have looked at certain aspects of this. In Dowling (1998), for example, I describe how school mathematics recontextualises domestic and other non-mathematical fields in constituting its public domain. But the esoteric domain of the school mathematics teacher is far more complex than subject knowledge. In particular, the practical space of the school teacher is, like that of the academic, heavily dominated by practices of accountability. Teachers are, of course, expected to control and inspire their students and to enable them to pass public forms of assessment.

Teachers are also routinely subject to local and national inspection and, in some instances, held by the state to deploy specific teaching methods—the use of ‘synthetic phonics’, for example. The edict on synthetic phonics was a response to a government-sponsored report by a former government inspector of schools, Jim Rose (Rose, 2005, 2006). Rose did not entirely ignore educational research in his report, though there is no explicit discussion of it (certainly none on methodological grounds). Most of what informed the report seems to have been the work of government inspectors. Paragraphs 31-2 of the final report seems to sum up the attitude to research that Rose adopted:

31. Research, Inspection and leading edge work of settings and schools may inform best practice. However, findings from different research programmes are sometimes contradictory or inconclusive, and often call for further studies to test tentative findings. While robust research findings must not be ignored, developers of national strategies, much less schools and settings, cannot always wait for the results of long-term research studies. They must take decisions, based on as much firm evidence as is available from a range of sources at the time, especially from replicable and sustainable best practice.

32. It is important, too, that those working directly in settings and schools do not feel they are at the mercy of ‘rows of back seat drivers pointing in different directions’. Practitioners and teachers who have contributed to the review were clearly looking for consistent guidance that offered them structure, simplicity and some flexibility.

(Rose, 2006; p. 15)

A footnote included in paragraph 31 makes reference to another government sponsored report, this time a systematic review of research by academic authors (Torgerson et al) who point to the limited nature of the research evidence. The Secretary of State fully accepted the interim report with praise:

I welcome the common sense approach you have taken, focusing on what works best in the teaching of reading and the use of phonics. You have given us a clear way forward, and cut through the arcane and distracting debates about terminology and marginal differences in teaching practice to concentrate on identifying the key issues which will help more children to learn to master and enjoy reading.


She goes on to note that:

I am pleased that your report recognizes the vital role that the Primary National Strategy has played in strengthening teaching and raising children's achievement in reading; and in developing the systematic teaching of phonics in school. Since the Strategy was launched in 1998 and the introduction of the literacy hour primary teaching has been greatly important in increasing the prominence given to phonic work. Since its inception the Strategy has evolved to take account of the latest research and developments in best practice. Your report now points us to the directions we need to take to build further on past success.

(ibid.)

Now, both Rose’s report and Kelly’s letter claim that they have been informed by research. But both also seem to dismiss it: Rose notes that it is sometimes contradictory and inconclusive and seems to associate researchers with ‘back seat drivers’. His use of the expression, ‘robust research findings’, would seem quite clearly to limit legitimate research to that adopting the experimental model of the natural sciences, whilst the expression, ‘replicable and sustainable best practice’—that which is identified as such by government inspectors, presumably, seems to associate to associate the activities of inspectors with that of scientists and elevate both above other forms of ‘contradictory and inconclusive’ research. Kelly values ‘common sense’ over the ‘arcane and distracting’. It is perhaps not insignificant (or surprising) that Kelly is also pleased with the recognition of existing government policy. These documents could certainly be read differently, of course. Nevertheless, it is certainly unclear how or in what ways educational research has substantively informed either.

The privileging of newness and originality in the research field (see Dowling & Brown, 2006) is always going leave today’s research performances behind very quickly. And as I have indicated, the weak institutionalization of the esoteric domain of educational research, compared with research in the
natural sciences is also going to entail more or less continual development in this domain of competence. Insofar as policy is frequently time consuming to design and implement (and may require space on the parliament calendar, though this is not the case with the phonics example) and insofar as frequent policy change is going to generate confusion in the professional field, antagonism amongst the electorate and glee in the opposition parties, we might expect that policymakers will demand a rather longer shelf life for any given policy than might be consistent with keeping up to date with the latest research.

Essentially, then, the practical spaces of professional educational practice and of educational policy are different, both from each other and from that of research. Furthermore, as I have indicated earlier in this introduction, the principle of *recontextualisation* that establishes that the empirical setting of research is a more or less radically transformed territory vis a vis the more general empirical field that it appears to address. On the face of it, the monologic rejection signaled in the extract at the head of this introduction and inferred by me from the Rose and Kelly documents would seem to be entirely appropriate. Are we, as researchers, then properly divorced from educational policy and practice?

My view is that, if educational practitioners and policymakers are looking for a one-size-fits-all solution to questions, such as, how shall we teach children to read, then educational research has very little if anything to offer them. I don’t think I can speak for policymakers, but, having been a schoolteacher for fifteen years prior to becoming an academic, I see plenty of scope for a productive relationship. But in order for this to be achieved—in any context, however local or general—we need a move from the monologic mode of either rejection or imposition to a dialogic mode. Given the incompatibilities between the esoteric domain of research—especially in respect of its practical space—and that of other fields of activity, the notion of a dialogue on equal terms is a non-starter, I think; at any given point, one has to be dominant. This establishes the basis for the schema in Figure 6.1.

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<tr>
<th>Dominant Voice</th>
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<td>Policy/Practice</td>
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<td>Research</td>
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<td>Monologue</td>
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<td>Dialogue</td>
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Table 6.1
A Schema for the Relation between Research and Educational Policy & Practice

Now I’ve already spoken about the monologic mode; let’s just reject that. In dialogic mode, I would suggest, also, that it is very difficult for the research voice to be heard within a policy/practice context if its voice is subordinate.
This is precisely because of the incompatibilities that I’ve discussed above. At best, what I think is likely to happen is what I’ve called colonization. This was exemplified in the 1960s, for example, when the genetic epistemology of Jean Piaget became associated with the conservative notion of ‘readiness’: children were not supposed to engage in certain kinds of activity—abstract mathematics, for example—until they were ‘ready’. This was inconsistent with Piaget’s work and was probably responsible for a certain amount of ill-advised pedagogic practice in primary schools (see also Walkerdine, 1984).

In order for research to be heard, it has to be allowed to speak and this entails that its voice must be the dominant one in the interaction. If a teacher wants to know what Jean Piaget might have to say to them that may potentially be productive, then they will have to study Piaget, try to get inside his schemas. This, in effect, will take them out of the classroom into the field of research. But, as I have emphasised, neither Piaget nor any other research voice should be directly informing classroom practice. Rather, what research does is provide a new position from which the teacher can interrogate their own practices. In the case of Piaget, a teacher may review a lesson asking, where did I provide scope for the active encouragement of cognitive conflict? If the teacher had been reading my work on the esoteric and public domains, they might ask, how am I helping students to move between these two domains, how am I apprenticing them into the esoteric domain? The research, ultimately, doesn’t tell the teacher what to do; it simply provides new questions that they might put to their practice to stimulate its development. In order for it to do this, however, the teacher has to give the research sufficient attention for it to be able to speak to them. Once back in the classroom, of course, it is quite clear who is in charge.

I should also point out that the boot should be on the other foot, as it were, in the case of at least some aspects of research production. The engagement with the empirical field should not be a colonisation either. If research is to learn, if theory is to develop, then the empirical field, including teachers’ and policymakers’ voices have to be heard.

One approach that has, perhaps, particularly productive potential in both direction is action research. This will be dealt with in more detail elsewhere on the MRes. Here, it is sufficient to describe it as research carried out by practitioners, on research questions that directly concern their own practice and that is primarily motivated by a desire to develop that practice. Such work is often carried out under the supervision of professional researchers who are there to provide the voice of academic research. Again, however, it is important that the practitioner-researcher be apprenticed into at least some aspects (that is, as much as they wish) of that voice if it is to have a productive impact. The Australian report cited at the head of this introduction points to the potential productivity of postgraduate research generally; we in the UK are, I think, yet to receive such a vote of support from our own government.
Activities

The first activity involves an individual task. The second involves a discussion based on the outcomes of the first activity.

Activity 6.1

You will need, firstly, to identify an aspect of your own professional practice or an aspect of educational policy with which you have been involved in some way or with which you are familiar. You should then conduct an online search for research literature that bears directly on this aspect of practice or policy. As with the activities in chapter 5, you should concentrate on research journals or articles published on the personal or institutional sites of academic authors rather than monographs or edited collections, though these can be useful as well. Identify a single research paper that you feel has implications, in one way or another, for the practice or policy aspect that you have chosen. As with the work in chapter 5, you should select an item of research that does not involve highly technical methodology that would make it difficult for you to understand at this stage of your studies.

Write a brief (200 words) summary of the aspect of practice or policy that you have selected and a brief (200 words) summary of the research—this should include a statement of the principal research question.

Address the following issues:

1. Does the author of the research make explicit proposals or suggestions about its implications for practice/policy? What are these?

2. Identify additional implications or suggestions for practice/policy that emerge, for you, out of the research.

3. Choose one or more implication or suggestion and consider it:
   a. In relation to the validity, reliability and generalisability of the research findings as answers to the research question;
   b. In terms of your own knowledge and experience of the aspect of practice/policy that you have chosen.

4. In formulating your answers to 3a & b, what assumptions are you making about the generalisability of research and/or about the relationship between research and educational practice and/or policy?

Formulate your answers to issues 1-4 as an 'executive summary' of the implications of the research for practice/policy.

Post your summaries of your aspect of practice or policy, of the research, and your executive summary on Board B16, Use-value.

You should make your post by midnight GMT on day 3 of the chapter.
You should spend 4.5 hours on this task.

**Activity 6.2**

Read the posts by other members of your team. Ask questions and/or offer suggestions that:

1. Seek clarification;
2. Challenge or explore the implications and suggestions for practice/policy that have been presented;
3. Suggest further implications for practice/policy;
4. Identify and explore further assumptions that seem to be being made about the relationship between a piece of research and that which lies beyond it (either further research or practice/policy).

*Postings to Board B16 (including responses) should be complete by midnight GMT on day 7 of this chapter.*

You should spend about 2 hours on this task.
Chapter 7  

**Metatheoretical Issues**  

**Weeks 9-10**

By metatheory, I mean the consideration of the nature of theory and of research. Metatheory is concerned with, amongst other things, the nature of knowledge (epistemology) and with being and existence (ontology). These fundamental issues are explored, primarily, within the field of philosophy, though researchers in other areas may also take an interest in them. The MRes is not a course in philosophy and so we shall not be delving too far into the classifications of metatheoretical positions. The approach that will be adopted here is to explore these issues in the context of the work of particular theorists. The writings of many of the theorists that will be named in this chapter are often very difficult to read, both because of the density of their texts and the demands that are made in terms of prior study. Fortunately, however, we have the effectively infinite resource of the WWW on which lessons and lectures and encyclopaedia articles abound.

The position that is adopted here is that it is possible to explore metatheoretical issues very widely and deeply by starting with the work of a sufficiently inspiring author, who may not necessarily be a philosopher, but whose work explicitly engages metatheory. The activity, in this chapter, therefore asks you to start by picking an author from amongst those named (or alternatives that you may propose), cross their name, initially, with the terms such as ‘epistemology’ and ‘ontology’ and surf, reporting back to your teams.

Brown and Dowling (1998) take the view that metatheoretical decisions, *per se*, do not have definitive implications for research methods. Rather, the relationship between philosophy and educational research (apart from research in the philosophy of education, of course) is, in some ways, similar to the relationship between research and policy or practice—interrogative, inspirational, but not prescriptive. It is, of course, for this reason that, unlike some courses in research methods, philosophy is located towards the end, rather than at the beginning of this module. This is also why the approach being adopted is even more open and student-centred than is the case in the other chapters.

There will be one posting board—Board B17, *Philosophy*. I’d like you to try to keep this well organised, so perhaps you should nominate a moderator to be responsible for making the actual posts.

The chapter addresses the intended learning outcomes:

- Understand key metatheoretical terms and positions.
- Understand the issues concerning the relation between metatheory and educational research and its application.

Total amount of time: 15 hours.
Core texts for this chapter


Introduction: Metatheoretical Issues

Now, I am not doing philosophy and, I would imagine, nor are most people who are reading this as a part of their MRes studies. What does this mean? Well, as I argued in the introduction to Chapter 3, a performance has to be interpreted—by its author and by its audience—in the context of a more general discourse; the interpreters, in other words, must be competent in respect of their readings or interpretations. Where I am the author, then I would like to think that my competence lies generally within the rather loosely defined and interacting fields of sociology and educational studies—that’s my language. Here, I am assuming that my audience, though in the position of acquiring the discourse and maybe emphasising a discipline other than sociology, is in broadly the same area, but this isn’t necessarily always the case. Some of you may recall a TV commercial for Barclaycard in which Rowan Atkinson played a bungling secret agent—Richard Latham—who was always outdone by his calmly efficient assistant, Bough (Henry Naylor). In one of the ads, Latham attempted to haggle in the vernacular with an apparently Tuareg carpet seller, to little avail. ‘You’re very fluent, sir’, remarked Bough (and I’m drawing on memory for the dialogue). ‘We are both fluent, Bough,’ Latham replied, ‘unfortunately in different languages.’ A lot of this goes on in the academic field.

Here is an attempt to haggle over the truth.

All accounts have, first, to theoretically construct the world they go on to describe in various ways and, in principle, be able to demonstrate non-tautologically (Bernstein, 1996, Chapters 6 and 9) that the world is in fact as such. What voice discourses suppress is the manner in which they covertly exempt themselves from the condition they prescribe and hold to be true for everyone else. This exemption is always a form of the basic contradiction of relativism. The truth that all truths are relative must exempt itself in order to be true; there is one truth that is not relative: the truth that all truth is relative. But then, of course, it is not true that all truth is relative. Positions that deny that anything can be ‘in fact’ the case (because what is the case is only ever so from a particular perspective) implicitly suppress the claim that it is in fact the case that the world is thus and, furthermore, can be shown to be so. In fact, we know full well that it is not!

(Moore & Muller, 1999; p. 201)

(What on Earth is the Bernstein citation doing in the middle of the first sentence of this extract?) Let me summarise the argument in this extract as follows:

1. All accounts of the world have a duty to demonstrate, not just assert, their conformity with that world.
2. Voice discourses claim that all truth is relative.

3. The claim that all truth is relative is a claim to the truth and is therefore relative within voice discourse.

4. Therefore voice discourses are self-contradictory.

5. However, they conceal this by ‘covertly’ exempting their own truth claim as an object of itself.

6. And, anyway some truths are not relative because they meet the requirement of 1 above.

1 is a moralising of research. But it is more than that. What would it mean for an account to conform to a world other than itself? First of all, the account will be a form of text (discourse) that is other than the other world (largely non-discursive), so there must be principles that facilitate translation between the non-discursive and the discursive, to affirm validity and reliability. Ultimately, there is going to be some uncertainty, here, because there is clearly nothing that can mediate. In other words, there is always space for doubt and dispute and absolutely no telling how big that space is. And what is meant by ‘the world’, anyway, are we talking about perceptions or do we mean something else, something that putatively lies behind perceptions and is in some sense their cause?

2-5 is the standard attack on relativism. It exhibits a questionable understanding of propositional logic. But let’s put the situation like this. I have a schema that asserts that all claims to truth are defined by the discourse within which they are made. That clearly includes truth claims being made by my own schema. And this schema also accepts that there are others that establish that truths are not relative to the schema; it does not necessarily contradict such positions (as Moore and Muller seem to think it does), it merely questions their helpfulness in some instances.

6 This is simply an assertion. Interestingly, it seems to be tantamount to an empirical claim that simply negates a theoretical claim: voice discourse claims that all truths are relative, but in fact some truths are not relative. This is rather odd.

Now an alternative to the schema that I have proposed above, would be explicitly to exclude the truth claim of a voice discourse (ie that all truth claims are relative) as a possible object of itself. There is nothing wrong with that: this is simply a proposition that operates on all members of a set of which it itself is not a member. A plausible principle of exclusion might be to define possible objects as members of the set of all truth claims that do not define the conditions of their existence in terms of social relations of power. In effect, this would be constituting a metadiscourse that stands in judgement, as it were, of all others. This is what Moore and Muller are accusing voice discourse of doing, except that they claim that this is being done ‘covertly’ rather than explicitly. Following their own principle in 1, they should demonstrate this rather than simply assert it. But, in fact, it seems to me that 1
is precisely itself a metadiscourse that stands in judgement over all others. Whether it too excludes itself from its own range of objects depends upon whether Moore and Muller are able to justify their claim about voice discourse. As far as I can see, they have, themselves, produced no close textual analysis that would seem to be required in order to establish the validity of their claims either that the category that they are calling ‘voice discourse’ does claim that there are no kinds of truth claim that are not relative or that it covertly exempts itself from this set.

This kind of haggling sometimes gets rather heated. In particular, realists—who consider that it is crucial to postulate some kind of world that is independent of our knowledge of it, but that is, in some sense, the condition of this knowledge—can often be very drawn to using sarcasm and insults when referring to their opponents. Here is Rom Harré and Michael Krausz on Richard Rorty:

‘Facts’, for him, are ‘sentence-shaped things’, a charming if shallow metaphor. One might be tempted to think that the world helps us to decide between say, ‘Strychnine is poisonous’ and ‘Strychnine is nourishing’.

(Harré & Krausz, 1996; pp. 202-3)

And in reference to Goldstein’s argument to the effect that ‘existence is relative to the equipment available’ (ibid; p. 122):

Does a relativist seriously expect us to suppose that the potsherd dug up in an archaeological excavation was not there all along waiting to be found? Would its ontological status have been different if it had been lying on the surface for millennia, glanced at each day by passing shepherds?

(Ibid; p123)

And here is the physicist, Alan Sokal, in a footnote, smugly casting aside another line of relativist thought:

By the way, anyone who believes that the laws of physics are mere social conventions is invited to try transgressing those conventions from the windows of my apartment. I live on the twenty-first floor.

(Sokal, 1996; no page nos. in the version on Sokal’s site.)

For Harré and Krausz and for Sokal—and apparently for Moore and Muller as well—whilst our ways of knowing the world may be problematic, uncertain, subject to critique and revision and so forth, the idea that we can simply dismiss the existence of such a world that has real, material (ie relating to the body) effects on our lives makes a nonsense of our ways of life. Loosely speaking, questions concerning the existence or otherwise of the world and other entities are questions of ontology; questions about how we come to the knowledge that we have and to the nature of this knowledge—including the establishing of such hierarchies as Plato’s division between opinion and knowledge—are questions of epistemology. Rorty’s (1979) contention that ‘facts’ are constituted sociolinguistically and that there is no direct link between ‘truths’ that are established in this way and the way ‘the world really is’ clearly irritates Harré and Krausz, but it’s not clear that they are fairly representing him, here. I suspect that it is no more likely that Rorty would agree to a strychnine supper than any non-suicidal relativist would be likely to
take up Sokal’s offer. I doubt, either, that there would be much support amongst even suicidal relativists for the idea that the archaeologist’s trowel spontaneously materialises that which it only apparently uncovers (though I have to confess to not having read Goldstein’s work).

A better way of understanding these positions might be that, rather than actively denying the existence of the world, they are claiming simply that reflection upon a world that is independent of our knowledge is of no particular value in the pursuance of such knowledge. Categories, such as ‘strychnine’, ‘poisonous’, ‘nourishing’ are not considered to refer to entities that exist as such, but are constructed in the discourses of the natural sciences. Furthermore, the ways in which they are constructed in these discourses is likely to be rather different from the ways in which they are constructed elsewhere. Even within western science, poisons can be, in some sense, nourishing when used in the context of chemotherapy. Similarly, the ‘facts’ constructed by passing shepherds are likely to be very different from those constructed by archaeologists on encountering the potsherd and, to an extent anyway, this difference is constituted in the divergence of their instruments—the archaeologists’ tools designed to preserve the integrity of certain kinds of objects; those of the shepherds designed to preserve the safety and well-being of others. Sokal does add a parenthetic comment in his footnote:

(P.S. I am aware that this wisecrack is unfair to the more sophisticated relativist philosophers of science, who will conceded that **empirical statements** can be objectively true—eg the fall from my window to the pavement will take approximately 2.5 seconds—but claim that the **theoretical explanations** of those empirical statements are more-or-less arbitrary social constructions. I think also this view is largely wrong, but that is a much longer discussion.)

(Sokal, 1996; no page nos. in the version on Sokal’s site.)

Easy to say. Given that we accept that no one would accept Sokal’s offer to test out levitation as an alternative to gravitation, all that he is doing with this sarcasm is demonstrating that he has not understood what he has read. The paper in which his footnote appeared is an ‘afterword’ to a paper that he had managed to have published in the journal, **Social Text**. The original paper was intended as a parody of the genre. This is from the ‘afterword’:

Like the genre it is meant to satirize -- myriad exemplars of which can be found in my reference list -- my article is a mélange of truths, half-truths, quarter-truths, falsehoods, non sequiturs, and syntactically correct sentences that have no meaning whatsoever. (Sadly, there are only a handful of the latter: I tried hard to produce them, but I found that, save for rare bursts of inspiration, I just didn't have the knack.) I also employed some other strategies that are well-established (albeit sometimes inadvertently) in the genre: appeals to authority in lieu of logic; speculative theories passed off as established science; strained and even absurd analogies; rhetoric that sounds good but whose meaning is ambiguous; and confusion between the technical and everyday senses of English words. (N.B. All works cited in my article are real, and all quotations are rigorously accurate; none are invented.)

But why did I do it? I confess that I'm an unabashed Old Leftist who never quite understood how deconstruction was supposed to help the working class. And I'm a stodgy old scientist who believes, naively, that there exists an external world, that there exist objective truths about that world, and that my job is to discover some of them. (If science were merely a negotiation of social conventions about
what is agreed to be "true", why would I bother devoting a large fraction of my all-too-short life to it? I don't aspire to be the Emily Post of quantum field theory.)

But my main concern isn't to defend science from the barbarian hordes of lit crit (we'll survive just fine, thank you). Rather, my concern is explicitly political: to combat a currently fashionable postmodernist/poststructuralist/social-constructivist discourse -- and more generally a penchant for subjectivism -- which is, I believe, inimical to the values and future of the Left.

(Sokal, 1996; no page nos. in the version on Sokal's site.)

I wonder just what kind of genre Sokal considers himself to be writing in here. Steven Ward reports on a similar kind of politically-motivated condemnation by two other scientists:

In their condemnation, Gross and Levitt portray scientists as the good and virtuous defenders of rationality protecting themselves from the onslaught on the evil and misguided people of postmodern and feminist irrationality. They accuse academic groups that critique science as being guilty of 'intellectual dereliction' [...]. From now on Gross and Levitt advise scientists to be on the guard against the erosion of scientific rationality wherever it may occur. Scientists are encouraged to attend seminars given by nonscientists about science in order to set the record straight. They are invited to scrutinize the tenure decision of science critics and evaluate the science education curriculum at their respective universities to make sure it has not been infiltrated by anti-scientists [...]. Gross and Levitt's critiques go so far as to argue that if the humanities faculty were to walk out of an institution such as MIT, that the science faculty could manage to put together a respectable humanities program. On the other hand, if scientists were to walk out, the humanists would be unable to carry on the science curriculum [...].

(Ward, 1996; pp. 49-50)

Here, the politics are not coming from the same direction (the 'left'), but the rancour is still there, as is the claim that the scientist is quite capable of doing (or, in Sokal's case, successfully imitating) the work of the 'humanists'. Why are Gross and Levitt so concerned about what non-scientists think about scientific activity? Ward suggests that the daggers of their relativist critics cut to the heart of scientists' faith in scientific realism and that it is this faith that is indispensable to their activity as scientists. Not all scientists, it seems, share this faith, here is Stephen Hawking:

I take the positivist viewpoint that a physical theory is just a mathematical model and that it is meaningless to ask whether it corresponds to reality. All that one can ask is that its predictions should be in agreement with observation.

(Hawking, 1996; pp. 3-4)

Though Roger Penrose, Hawking's co-author in this book does take the realist view. Hawking doesn't seem to come in for the same kind of treatment as non-scientist anti-realists, why is this? Well, possibly, Hawking is able to be very successful at doing what other scientists do without the need for faith in the real. So he is not in any sense attacking science, just doing it. Presumably, then, Gross and Levitt (and I haven't read their book, either—I'm relying on Steven Ward's discussion of it) see a more material danger in the assaults of the 'humanists'.

Alan Sokal doesn't see any substantive threat to science—'we'll survive just fine, thank you'—but does see a material danger to leftist political action in the

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‘postmodernist/poststructuralist/social-constructivist discourse’. Essentially, this seems to be because it is a weapon that backfires along the lines of the argument that Moore and Muller make about voice discourses in 2-5 above. This being the case, its seductive powers must be resisted. The seduction presumably lies in the explicit challenges to prevalent patterns of domination and oppression that are made in much of the work that these critics are challenging. Michael Young makes a similar point in the context of educational studies:

... there could be serious consequences if, during their training, intending teachers learn not only that all curriculum knowledge is socially constructed, but that it inevitably reflects the values and interests of the dominant class. For example, it could appear to follow that the same claims to objectivity could be made for the everyday mathematics of the street market as are made for the mathematics of the textbook. From a postmodernist perspective, the only difference between the two types of mathematics would be that the latter reflects the dominant perspective shared by professional teachers and mathematicians. The limited scope, beyond a very specific set of contexts, of street or what has become known as ethnomathematics, can be easily forgotten. This kind of sociological approach to mathematics can undermine the curriculum rationale for teaching formal mathematics at all. The issue is, of course, not just concerned with mathematics; it applies to all curriculum subjects. If, in literary studies, students learn that there are no criteria for claiming the superiority of Jane Austen over Neighbours or Home and Away, then the only basis for selection of texts for the English literature curriculum that we are left with is the white middle-class biases and prejudices of teachers or curriculum policy-makers, on the one hand, or what students want, a kind of consumer approach, on the other. It is the possibility that a sociological view of knowledge might actually influence the ways that teachers think about how and what they teach that makes the knowledge question so much more problematic in the sociology of education than in intellectual fields such as cultural and literary studies, which are far more insulated from any practice external to themselves.

(Young, 2000; pp. 528-9)

Writing with Rob Moore a year later, Young gives us some indication of why he thinks that Jane Austen should be considered to be superior to Neighbours or Home and Away:

There are good reasons why we still want people to read Jane Austen's novels, which are not weakened by the narrow community that she wrote about. Her novels are situated in time and context, but they are also timeless in the issues that they explore. One can make a slightly different kind of argument for keeping Newton's laws of motion and Mendeleev's Periodic Table on science syllabuses; both are examples of knowledge that remains powerful and transcends its origins in a particular social context.

(Moore & Young, 2001; p. 450)

Moore and Young are arguing for what they refer to as a social realist approach that grounds objectivity in the practices of legitimate communities or networks of experts; so that which physicists as physicists regard as ‘true’ is ‘true’. This view, they claim, stands opposed to ‘postmodern theories’. Oddly, a similar kind of claim can also be made by a prominent postmodernist literary critic, here is Stanley Fish:

I assert, and assert without contradiction, that post-modernist accounts of how disciplines come into being are correct, but that such accounts, rather than telling
us that disciplines are unreal tell us just how disciplines came to be as real and as productive as they are.

(Fish, 1995; p. x)

Are things beginning to look a bit confused? Perhaps it’s time for some simplification. It seems to me that the central concern of those who explicitly or implicitly adopt realist positions is that research performances, or other performances that that are important to them, have some referent beyond themselves that underwrites their value. This is most clearly necessary in relation to the issues of the generalisability and use-value of research (Chapters 5 and 6). More generally, contemporary scientists, it seems, tend to view science as progressive and some version of realism would be necessary in order to ground this claim. Stanley Fish wants to establish that there is a ‘thing’ that is the legitimate practice of literary studies. Self-confessed ‘old Leftists’, like Alan Sokal, need to be able to establish that the working class really is oppressed and that leftist political strategy really can be effective in liberating it. Michael Young wants teachers to be able to believe that Jane Austen really is superior to Neighbours and Home and Away. People with certain religious commitments seem to want to believe that there really is a meaning to life. For at least some of these people, it seems necessary to counter anything that appears to undermine the possibility of anything having any kind of necessary value beyond itself.

There are others who claim to establish methodological implications on the basis of their realist positions. A particularly sophisticated approach and one currently much in vogue is critical realism, the principal exponent of which is Roy Bhaskar (1997, 1998). Bhaskar distinguishes between the ontological intransitive dimension of knowledge and the epistemological transitive dimension. The conflation of these two dimensions is what Bhaskar refers to as the epistemological fallacy and is tantamount to taking what we ‘know’ (transitive) to be what really is (intransitive). It is the separation of these dimensions that puts the ‘critical’ in critical realism: we must always maintain a degree of scepticism about what we ‘know’, however secure it may seem to be in terms of making predictions. Indeed, for Bhaskar, itself is problematic, even in the natural sciences. Reality consists in three levels. The real consists in structures and mechanisms that give rise to events in the natural world and relations that give rise to behaviours in the social world. Events and behaviours constitute the actual and produce our experiences in the empirical. Here, it is important to note that the events of the actual are produced whether or not they are experienced, so the answer to old question of whether a sound is made by a tree falling in the forest when no one is around to hear it is, ‘yes’. Bhaskar claims that the real world is generally ‘open’, so that regularities in events and behaviours are not generally produced; they may occur locally in the natural world, but not at all in the social world. Thus reliance on the constant conjunction of events and the inference of laws on the basis of regularity is inappropriate and prediction, certainly in the social world, is not possible.

Now this last point may sound a bit strange and susceptible to the same kind of jibe that Sokal was making. After all, I can predict pretty reliably that a whole bunch of students will turn up at my institution on the first day of term.
But, of course, this is focusing entirely on the transitive dimension in dealing with the knowable; it isn’t getting anywhere in terms of what actually exists, the structures, mechanisms and relations of the real, to assume that it is, is to commit the epistemological fallacy. This kind of criticism is also applied to quantitative forms of research. In general terms, quantification must presume qualitative regularity (the word count for this introduction makes all of the words the same) and so, in a sense, presumes what the real does not generate. Social constructionist approaches that understand reality to be constructed socially also, quite clearly, commit the epistemological fallacy in failing to recognise the need to investigate the underlying structures, mechanisms and relations. Triangulation is an approach that is consistent with critical realism. Here, different strategies are combined in order to reveal some of the limitations of each.

This is very clever stuff—rather more so than some of the other material that I’ve introduced in this introduction—and it’s worth spending some time exploring it. However, it seems to me that it makes an assumption that contradicts the claim with which I opened this discussion, that is, that I am not doing philosophy. Now, this is what an author of an introduction to critical realism thinks about this claim:

A good part of the answer to the question ‘why philosophy?’ is that the alternative to philosophy is not no philosophy, but bad philosophy. The ‘unphilosophical’ person has an unconscious philosophy, which they apply in their practice—whether of science or politics or daily life.

(Collier, 1994; p. 17)

Now I’ve had this kind of argument before with the exponents of ‘ethnomathematics’ mentioned by Michael Young in the extract from his paper above (see Dowling, 1991b, 1998). These are educationalists, such as Paulus Gerdes (1985,1988), who believe that anybody doing anything that can be described in mathematical terms—such as building a traditional African house—is actually doing mathematics and that, furthermore, revealing this to them is an act of emancipation. This is what Gerdes suggests:

‘Had Pythagoras not ... we would have discovered it’. The debate starts. ‘Could our ancestors have discovered the “Theorem of Pythagoras”? ’ ‘Did they?’ ‘Why don’t we know it?” ’ Slavery, colonialism ...’. By ‘defrosting frozen mathematical thinking’ one stimulates a reflection on the impact of colonialism, on the historical and political dimensions of mathematics (education).

(Gerdes, 1988; p. 152)

And here is the mechanism of emancipation:

The artisan who imitates a known production technique is—generally—not doing mathematics. But the artisan(s) who discovered the techniques, did mathematics, developed mathematics, was (were) thinking mathematically.

(Gerdes, 1985; p. 12)

As I argued in Dowling (1998), Gerdes is constructing the practices of those he observes as the public domain of his gaze that is a mixture of European school mathematics (Pythagoras), Fordist production techniques (production is imitation), and European historiography (industrial practices were invented
by ‘great men’). He is also prescribing his own version of conscientisation therapy. What he is not doing is allowing the African cultures that he surveys to constitute values in and of themselves and with their own voice: they are not doing mathematics, they are making their own culture. Similarly, I am not doing philosophy just because what I do can be described in philosophical terms. To claim otherwise is to engage in what I refer to as mythologizing: treating the public domain as if it were ‘real’; but it’s not, its recontextualised practices (see, particularly, the introduction to Chapter 6). I am not doing what Roy Bhaskar seems to think that I ought to be doing. I am quite unashamedly operating in his epistemological transitive domain. However, I deny the charge of epistemological fallacy on the grounds that I am not looking for or claiming to have found truths or real mechanisms, structures and relations. Rather, I am attempting to build a culture, which, in my case, adopts some of the practices of what I refer to as Social Activity Theory (Dowling, 1998) and this entails producing some kind of regularity in the same ways, in some respects, as the builders and designers of other artefacts; I am a theory or research engineer, providing an organisational language that potentially allows people to see the world in new ways that may be of interest or may be productive for them. I use the tools of sociology and methodology because they are the ones I have to hand and I have developed a small fluency with them; they are a part of my language, philosophy, in the sense of its problematics that span millennia, is not.

My position is explicitly anti-realist, but not in the naive sense ridiculed by Sokal and the others; I strongly suspect that adherence to that kind of doctrine is an empty set. I don’t deny the existence of Bhaskar’s ontological, intransitive domain, I simply do not feel that faith in it has any clear implications for what I do. I suppose I lack the conviction that science or society is in any clear and general sense improving, though local ‘improvements’ (and the opposite) are palpable. I guess I can just work on the arrangement of my little corner of the world without the need to be sure that I am doing something of ineffable, but certain value. Walking, today, past the cemetery near where I live in Yokohama, my friend noted that her brother had stated quite explicitly that he did not want any of the Japanese, Shinto-Buddhist pomp and ritual performed after his own death, but rather wished his ashes to be simply scattered, Hindu-style (he didn’t mention running water, so this didn’t seem to signal an actual conversion). My comment was to the effect that death rituals were for the living, not for the dead and it was not really his place to dictate the preferences of others. Unless, that is, he had an ontological commitment in some kind of afterlife or other after-death mechanisms, structures or relations that would justify his intrusion into the grief of those who survived him. Personally, I find the cemetery a rather attractive, peaceful place to get away from the traffic and to remember. If all I’m building is a cemetery, that’s fine by me.

Activities

There is only one activity in this module. However, if a cadence point is reached before the end of the chapter, you should start it again focusing on another author. It may also happen that the work of the activity branches as
you follow up particular lines of interest. That is also acceptable, provided that summaries of your discoveries are posted Board B17.

You will probably need to appoint a moderator and make posts through this individual in order to keep B17 well-organized. You may also request additional boards for discussion or use your teams general board, BC.

**Activity 7.1**

You will be in the same C-teams as for the previous chapter. The task of each team is to generate summaries of the philosophical issues and positions that are associated with key authors and summaries of the meanings of terminology associated with, in particular, epistemology, ontology, metatheory.

The activity will begin by each team member selecting one of the following authors (or another of their own nomination in negotiation with the moderator). I should point out that the philosophers, as such, in the list below are in a minority. However, all of these authors have, in one way or another, dealt with the metatheoretical issues such as the nature of knowledge—epistemology.

- Roy Bhaskar
- Judith Butler
- Jacques Derrida
- Mary Douglas
- Émile Durkheim
- Paul Feyerabend
- Ludwic Fleck
- Michel Foucault
- Sigmund Freud
- Clifford Geertz
- Donna Haraway
- Sandra Harding
- Julia Kristeva
- Thomas Kuhn
- Jacques Lacan
- Bruno Latour
- Jean-François Lyotard
- Karl Mannheim
- Jean Piaget
- Karl Popper
- Richard Rorty
- Gayatri Spivak
- Benjamin Whorf
- Ludwig Wittgenstein

Having selected your ‘inspirational author’, type her/his name and the term ‘epistemology’ into the internet search engine of your choice and begin your exploration. You should report back to your team board each day on what you discover about your author and what you discover about metatheory. You may restart with another ‘inspirational author’ at any point, provided that your team has posted to the Philosophers board something on each author that you explore.
Postings to Board B17, Philosophy, must be completed by midnight GMT on day 14 of this chapter.

You should expect to spend 14 hours on research and posting.
I am interpreting the expression *general approach* to signify something that exists at a lower level of analysis than, say, *discipline*. So, for example, within the discipline of sociology, ethnomethodology and symbolic interactionism are general approaches as, in the interpretation I am using here, are methodologies associated with particular authors, such as Bernstein, or Dowling. More generally, ethnography might be referred to as a general approach, as may situated cognition, critical management theory, multimodality, and so forth. Cognitive science is probably better thought of as a discipline, but sharp classification, here, is not important. General approaches suggest certain regularities of method and/or interpretation, without necessarily constituting substantive theories about particular regions of the empirical field (although, in the case of named authors, they may do this as well). I tend to refer to my general approach as a methodology.

The B-teams that were formed in chapter 3 will reform and the activity in this chapter will be based on their work in chapters 3 and 4 and the same team boards will be used for discussion.

The chapter addresses the intended learning outcomes:

- Understand the term ‘general approach’ and the differences between specific approaches.
- Be able to design research strategy in relation to a specific general approach.

Total amount of time: 8 hours

**Core texts for this chapter**


**Introduction: General Approaches**

I want to start this chapter by picking up an issue that might have occurred to you following your reading of the introduction to the last chapter. If I am not concerned with truths and with real entities that exist independently of our knowledge of them, then why all this attention to close argumentation, why theory, indeed, why advocate regularity and integrity in research methods at all? Furthermore, a good deal of the language that I have been using does seem to make claims about reality, especially, perhaps, in the introduction to Chapter 5 on *generalisation*; is this an inconsistency? Well, let me address the second question first. There are two answers, the first of which is a practical one. I might attempt to gain more control over my use language through the use of neologisms and routine qualifications, such as quotation marks around just about everything. The result would be uncomfortable to
write and probably impossible to read. In the absence of a truly formal language, such as those used in mathematics or programming, I think I have to compromise. So I lay out my store, so to speak, and then I stock it with items that are comprehensible to my audience. The second answer is in fact precisely to do with marketing. I have indicated that I am not inclined to the view that a faith in an unknowable reality has any implications for my work. However, I have to admit that I am probably in the minority, here. So, I make use of the language of reality and causation etc in order to avoid alienating audiences who might find my theoretical constructions and analyses of some use. Since I detach ontology from method, this has no implications for my own interpretation or use of the theory that I generate.

As to the first question, ‘why research methods etc?’ I have generally found that dialogue is more productive than monologue in respect of generating new ideas—and that’s what I’m interested in. So an important part of my approach is dialogic. However, dialogue can really only take place between two or more positions that each have some distinctiveness. So another part of my approach is concerned with establishing a degree of coherence and consistency in the various contributors to the dialogue. In approaching this, I begin from where both my audience and myself are located, in the discourses of educational research. There are ready at hand tools that facilitate coherence and consistency in theory and in methodology. In general, then, the kind of dialogue that I engage in is one between theory and methodology—the theoretical field—and the empirical field. Both must be allowed to speak their specificity if the dialogue is to be productive. But if either becomes unduly coherent and consistent, too sclerotic, then it can do no more than necrotise the other; both must have sufficient closure to generate a voice and sufficient openness to be able to hear; this was also my point in my introduction to Chapter 6.

You may note that there is a strong authorial voice in these paragraphs (lots of emphasis on the ‘I’) and, indeed, in most of the introductions in this module. I think that this is generally appropriate and quite widely preferred in writing on and about educational research. However, in this particular chapter introduction it is especially relevant. The chapter is about what I have referred to as general approaches, following Michael Crotty (1998). I have already mentioned a number of categories that might be considered as general approaches, starting with the references to Basil Bernstein. Although his corpus is very wide ranging indeed, there is a clear coherence to it, so that it is meaningful to talk about a ‘Bernsteinian’ approach to research; you can follow up examples of Bernsteinian research in Moore et al (2006). There are other general approaches that are associated with other names in educational studies, Pierre Bourdieu and Jean Piaget are two examples. The names of other general approaches signal both their initial inspiration and that they have moved on, neo-Vygotskian, neo-Marxist, and so forth. Yet other approaches do not include a name in their labels, whether or not they are associated with a single originator, critical discourse analysis (Fairclough is an important figure, but there are others), personal construct theory (George Kelly, 1955), and so on; critical realism might be described as a general approach in philosophy, though, in my view, it wouldn’t be appropriate to refer
to it as a general approach within educational studies or the social or natural sciences. So, a general approach imposes rather more on a research performance than the broader term, discipline. Also, it is not the same category as the problematic, which really refers to a body of literature focusing on a particular issue or set of issues and may involve different, even inconsistent general approaches.

Researchers will frequently combine general approaches to generate a new, hybrid general approach. This will inevitably involve a degree of recontextualisation. This isn’t a problem; there is no rule that insists that a researcher be consistent with the approaches that have inspired them. The important thing here would be to ensure that the hybrid form has at least the same level of consistency as the approaches from which it is constructed. An unfortunately not uncommon practice in educational research is to claim to be operating within a particular general approach, but then to make use of it in only a trivial way. One occasionally finds the work of Pierre Bourdieu treated in this way, for example, his category habitus being used as an ill-defined bin into which empirical observations can be tossed (I’ll let you find examples). This kind of is practice is, to paraphrase Mark Twain, using a general approach as a drunk uses a lamppost, for support rather than illumination.

I have said that the strong authorial voice is particularly relevant in this chapter’s introduction. That is because I have decided that the best way to illustrate a general approach and its application is to work within the one that I know best, my own. This approach I refer to as social activity theory and you will find more about it in the items in the bibliography that are authored by me and on my website. There will also be a section on it in one of the methodology books that I am currently working on (Brown et al, forthcoming—I hope you’ve forgotten what I hinted at regarding this form of citation). I want to start with some examples focusing on this module and on the practice and teaching of research methods in general as the empirical setting.

The first question that I want to put to my empirical setting is, what authority strategies are being deployed in the module? Now, there is a substantial extent to which these introductions, at least, are constituted as what I refer to as pedagogic text. That is, the authorial voice presents itself as in control of the principles of audience performances. The bracketed claim, above, that George Kelly was the originator of personal construct theory, even though it is implicit, is not meant to be open for discussion. If, in your coursework, your stated that Lev Vygotsky was the first to publish in this general approach, then you’d need some very strong evidence that he got in before Kelly. The opposite kind of text characterises my presentation of my position in relation to philosophical issues. I say that I tend towards an anti-realist position, but I frequently use language that is more consistent with realism and I market my theory as potentially being of interest to readers of both persuasions. This is what I call exchange text. In this mode, the authorial voice deploys strategies that hand control of audience performances to the audience themselves; you decide on your own ontological commitment. The texts associated with this module, like most texts, tend to combine both modes. An analysis of the
distribution of these modes will reveal something about the activity that we are engaged in, specifically, what is negotiable, what is less so.

Now in constituting pedagogic text, the authorial voice will deploy strategies that serve to legitimate its authority; I am interested in the modes of strategy that are available. Let me present some examples. Take a look at the bibliography for this module. I want to make a distinction between two kinds of reference. The majority are to publications in academic journals or in academic books published by independent publishers. Now I want to suggest, that, in referring to these independent academic institutions, here, I am effectively locating authority in a practice that is independent of myself. The other kind of reference is to items that are not published independently, but are published, in essence, by their authors on their own internet websites. In citing these items I am taking the whole load of the responsibility on myself, because there is no other institution—no independent publisher, no academic journal, no peer review process—to affirm the academic legitimacy of these works—indeed, most of these references are to my own work. I want also to make a division in the first category between references to my own work and references to the work of others. This division is important because, by referring to my own work that is published by independent publishers, I am claiming that I am a recognised member of the community of academics; I could do the same thing by referring to my academic affiliation (as a member of academic staff of the Institute of Education) or my academic qualifications (most pertinently, a PhD in the sociology of education). In marking out these differences, I have defined two dimensions: authority may be located in the author (in this case, me) or in the institutionalised practice (lets say, educational studies), or both (me as an institutionally recognised authority in educational studies). Putting this another way, the category of the author may be open, where authority is located exclusively in the institutionalised practice (anyone can cite *The British Journal of Sociology of Education*) or closed, where either authority is identified exclusively with the author or where it is located in the articulation of author and practice. Similarly, the category of practice may be closed, where reference is being made to something that is institutionalised, or open, where no such reference is being made. So, I have two variables, ‘author’ and ‘practice’, each having two possible states, open’ and ‘closed’. The theoretical space that is opened up by these variables is shown in Figure 8.1.

Now the first thing to notice is that there are four modes—the cross-product of two binary variables is always going to open a space with four categories—but I have introduced only three. This is because, in my illustrations, I was referring to pedagogic text in which authorial authority is claimed. The liberal strategy, in the bottom lefthand corner, closes neither the category of author nor the category of practice, in other words, it establishes no authorial authority at all. This, then is exchange text. The second point worth mentioning is that the terms that I’ve used for the three pedagogic modes are terms used by (the translators of) Max Weber (1964 edn) in his identification of ideal types of authority. An ideal type is a category that arises out of observation, but that is subsequently made theoretically explicit in terms of its characteristics. Ideal types thus formed can be used in the analysis of
empirical settings, which will generally exhibit a combination of two or more types. My theoretical space has similarities with an ideal typical schema, in that it arises (originally) from observation; in fact I generated it from an analysis of a letter sent internally in my own institution. It differs from the kind of ideal types that Weber generated in that it is presented as a logically complete space. I am claiming that the categories of author and practice exhaust the possibilities for the location of authority (made possible because the category of practice, in particular, is rather loosely defined) and that authority operates either by opening or closing each category; there are no other alternatives. My schema identifies the majority of my bibliography—the items referring to authors other than myself, published by independent publishers and refereed journals—as bureaucratic; those items authored by me and published independently are identified with the traditional mode; and those published on the author’s own website as charismatic. Try thinking about other aspects of the MRes using this theoretical space.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category of Practice</th>
<th>open</th>
<th>closed</th>
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<tr>
<td>Category of Author</td>
<td>closed</td>
<td>charismatic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>open</td>
<td>liberal</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 8.1
Modes of Authority Strategy

My next example concerns modes of interaction. I don’t have much data relating to interaction on the MRes as, at the time of my writing this, it hasn’t started yet. So I’ll think about its formal structure and stray a little from the MRes to include my own experiences teaching on other postgraduate programmes. Each of the chapters in this module lists at least one ‘intended learning outcome’. Tutor and student initially come together having different competences in relation to research. In particular, we expect that the tutor has been apprenticed into a strongly institutionalised form of research practice and its associated language; the student has (probably) not been thus apprenticed and so their competence is best described, I think, as informal—though this is still competence, not incompetence. The significance of the ‘intended learning outcomes’ is that the student is to acquire at least part of the competence of the tutor. Insofar as the student does not themself provide intended learning outcomes for the tutor, the structure of the programme establishes the tutor competence—I’ll call it discourse, here—as dominant. Indeed, the student will be required to demonstrate their acquisition of the dominant discourse in the assessment procedures.

Some of the activities in this module require collaborative writing. Now here, the general assumption seems to be that there is no dominant discourse
amongst the collaborators. Indeed, it is probably reasonable to describe them as sharing a discourse—presumably, the partially acquired dominant discourse of the tutor. The activity of collaborative writing, then, seems intended to promote the stabilising of this discourse as the differently nuanced understandings of the students become adjusted in a coherent piece of writing. This is clearly a different kind of situation from the tutor-student relationship. In a number of the courses that I have taught (CMC and f2f), assessment is by coursework essay. I generally require drafts of these essays to be submitted some time prior to the formal ending of the course in order to incorporate a peer review process. Now this looks rather like the collaborative writing that I introduced above. However, sometimes it doesn’t work this way. What I have occasionally seen—and this was probably my fault for poor management of the process—is no engagement at all. Students have presented their essays and their peers have asked non-threatening and unproductive questions and have generally failed to offer very much at all; they were, broadly speaking, in the same discourse, but it wasn’t going anywhere.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Alliance</th>
<th>Target of Discursive Action</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>singular</td>
<td>closure</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>equilibration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>plural</td>
<td>exchange of narratives</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>hegemony</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>pastiche</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 8.2
Modes of Interaction

As with the previous example, I now have the basis for two binary variables. The first I’ll call the nature of the **alliance**: the alliance between tutor and students in coming together for the programme is **plural**—there are at least two discourses; the alliance between students is **singular**—only one discourse. The second variable I’ll call the **target of discursive action**. In the first two cases that I introduced, this target is for **closure**—whether it’s the domination of the tutor discourse or the collaboration of the student discourse. In the third case the target is **open**—there is no attempt to close things down, because differences remain silent. Once again this gives rise to a $2 \times 2$ theoretical space and once again there is a residual category. The space is in Figure 8.2.

This table labels the situations that I have introduced. The final category, **pastiche**, is the mode of interaction that I have proposed in the introduction to Chapter 6 for the relationship between educational research and professional educational practice and policy. Plural discourses retain, at least to a degree, their integrity, but are sufficiently open to be able to hear each other.

My final example concerns the practice of research methods more generally. Much of what is being presented on this MRes is explicitly principled
discourse in which the key terms and procedures of research methods are defined and described and related to one another. Furthermore, much of this is strongly institutionalised discourse in that you might expect to find considerable similarities between what is being presented on this course and the content of other postgraduate programmes and texts on educational research methods. In some contrast to this is the kind of writing that students are expected to produce for assessment. In general terms, the course tutors will be asking students to produce a coherent academic argument. Tutors are, in my experience, very good at identifying and assessing academic arguments; there is rarely (on courses that I have taught on) been much disagreement between first and second internal markers and the external examiner. What they are not so good at is providing explicit principles defining exactly what constitutes an academic argument. Generally, then, this is a strongly institutionalised practice, but its principles are not explicit. The distinction between these two strongly institutionalised aspects of the programme is in terms of the extent to which strategies are put in place to establish the principles of the practice explicitly within discourse. I refer to this variable as the level of discursive saturation; principled research methods are high discursive saturation (DS⁺); the evaluation of writing in terms of the appropriateness of its academic argument is comparatively low discursive saturation (DS⁻). The other variable that I am concerned with here is the level of institutionalisation. Both of the forms that I have thus far introduced exhibit high levels of institutionalisation (I⁺). We might argue that the basis of the strong institutionalisation of these forms is that they are established publicly within what should broadly be understood as an economic activity, insofar as the university must establish the general marketability of its courses and qualifications. Programmes, such as the MRes, may also come under the scrutiny of agencies such as the ESRC, where institutions apply for such courses to be recognised as legitimate routes into, say, the ESRC three-year doctoral studentship programme.

Other aspects of research education are less public. When you engage on your dissertation, for example, you will need to perform analysis on the data. Indeed, conducting a literature review entails analysis as such a review also has to establish a line of argument, each item will need to be distinguished from some other items in some ways and identified in various ways with others etc. Clearly, there will be scope for discussion with your tutor, but the bulk of this kind of work is most frequently done in private, by the student. In the case of quantitative analysis, the analysis of the data may be considered to be comparatively public insofar as standard protocols are used. However, the conceptual work that is essential in designing the research is, again, mostly conducted in private. Of course, the outcomes of these processes are open to scrutiny, but not the actual tactics employed, which generally remain invisible. This is why there is comparatively little written in the research methods literature on the actual details of doing analysis: this is DS⁻/I⁻ practice. As I have said, the outcome of your analysis is rendered available to public scrutiny and, insofar as it articulates DS⁺/I⁺ theory, then it will have to be of this form. To the extent, however, that the analysis claims to generate new theory, then it will be moving into the area of low institutionalisation, DS⁻/I⁻. The schema is presented as Figure 8.3.
In my descriptions, I have associated the competence categories, *discourse* and *skill*, with the public, and the performance categories, *idiolect* and *trick* with the private. At the point at which a trick or an idiolect becomes publicly recognisable, it begins to become an institutionalised skill or discourse.

The schemas that I have introduced in Figures 8.1-3 can be deployed at any level of analysis. That which seems to members of a group to be a private trick may, at the level of the individual performing the ‘trick’ be understood as something that has been achieved and is repeated, in other words an acquired competence, a skill. The items by Alan Sokal in the bibliography suggest the possibility that much of the discourse and skill of so-called postmodernist writing may be regarded as private idiolects and tricks at the level of the more general academic field. Similarly, the interaction space in Figure 8.2 may be applied at the level of individual cognition, where interaction is between cognitive shemata. Interpreted in this way, hegemony and also exchange of narratives and pastiche would be regarded as pathological forms from a Piagetian perspective that constructs cognitive development as the free play of equilibration. For Piaget, this can occur only within a liberal environment that is consistent with the lower lefthand cell of Figure 8.1. One or more of the other, authoritative strategies would be needed to sustain non-equilibrating interaction. Thus, the general approach that I have introduced here exhibits a *fractal* quality. That is to say, the analytic tools and forms of description are independent of the level of analysis: the cognitive individual, the group, the society, the species, all operate in the same way. To this extent, my general approach is consistent with that of Piaget (1995), though it is very different in most other respects. See Dowling, 2005b, for a discussion of its inconsistencies with the Bernsteinian general approach.

There is, of course, a good deal more to say about this general approach, most fundamentally, it constitutes the sociocultural as an agonistic terrain in which subjectivities—at any level of analysis—engage in autopoietic or ‘self-making’ action in the establishing, maintenance and destabilising of alliances and oppositions. What we see as apparently substantive alliances and oppositions, including, for example, social class and gendered patternings, are interpreted as emergent at a higher level of analysis than that at which autopoietic action is being studied. That is, general patterns emerge from the welter of local actions. Insofar as these patterns become visible at the level of
action, they are available as resources for deployment in that action. Described thus, my general approach has resonances both with Giddens’ (1984) ‘structuration’ theory and with approaches adopted by some advocates of critical realism (see the introduction to Chapter 7). The approach is cumulative in terms of its development of new theoretical spaces, such as those in Figures 8.1-3, and in terms of the partial articulation of these theoretical spaces. As I have suggested above, the organisation of the spaces as an entirely closed structure would render the system useless in that it could no longer learn and would only be able to reproduce itself in its descriptive performances: the theory needs to establish sufficient closure to generate a voice and maintain sufficient openness to be able to ‘hear’ the empirical. The approach therefore proceeds by asking of any empirical setting: what strategies are deployed in the establishing, maintenance and destabilising of alliances and oppositions; how are these strategies articulated and distributed within the setting; and what alliances and oppositions emerge from this autopoietic action. In coming to a new setting, the relevance of existing theoretical spaces is considered and new spaces are developed following the simple method of establishing the cross-products of binary variables as illustrated above.

Now, as to the question, why do this, my rationale is as I indicated at the beginning of this introduction. I am not concerned with truths, whatever the philosophers might think. Rather, I am interested in engineering theory as a machine for organising and generating commentary on empirical text. Of course, I could do this randomly or, at least, without explicit method (see Jerome McGann’s (2001) method of making random Photoshop mutations of a digitised version of a painting by Gabriel Dante Rossetti). But that would deny me the opportunity to see development in my work. And I wouldn’t really be doing research, which term cannot really be applied to an activity that has no specificity and no articulation with other research; I would not be engaging in or constructing, shall we say, a community of research practitioners; and I would have nothing to market apart from my tacitly motivated commentaries and that would place unmeetable demands on charisma.

Activities

The activity in this chapter involves the identification and exploration of a specific general approach and the redesign of the research proposal prepared in chapter 4 (see Board B14). Rather than being provided with a definitive list of general approaches (and producing an exhaustive list is not viable), you are being asked to identify a general approach yourselves, in discussion with the module moderator.

Activity 8.1

1. Your first task for this activity is to identify a general approach that you are going to use in redesigning your research proposal from chapter 4. The places to look are either in the curricula of the general discipline within which you consider yourselves to be working, or in the work of one of more of the theorists that you have encountered on this or the previous module. In either case, you will need to engage in WWW
research in order to identify and define the general parameters of the approach.

You will need to have agreed on a general approach and a general interpretation of the approach by midnight GMT on day 3 of the chapter.

2. You will now need to redesign your research proposal from chapter 4 so that it is consistent with the general approach that you have defined. This task may involve further exploration of the general approach. Terms and research strategies will need to be reconceptualised, and you will probably need to reformulate your research question and its operationalisation. It may be that very substantial reformulation is necessary. This is fine. What is needed is a research proposal that is consistent with your general approach and not necessarily one that is consistent with your original interests.

Post an outline of your general approach and your reformulated research proposal on Board B14, Research Proposals. This post will need to be negotiated within the team, so you may want to appoint a moderator.

You will need to make your final posting to B14 by midnight GMT on day 7 of the chapter.

You should expect to spend 6.5 hours on this activity.
Ethical considerations have always been important in educational research. This is particularly the case because educational research frequently involves collecting data from people who may not, at least initially, have a clear idea of the possible implications of this. Much educational research involves children or other vulnerable people and this heightens the importance of taking ethical issues into careful consideration. Even research that does not involve collecting data from people may have implications and so need to be thought about in ethical terms.

Nevertheless, there are generally no simple, or even single, answers to questions concerning ethical practice in research. What is important is that all educational researchers are aware of the issues that may potentially be involved, the main stances taken by educational researchers on the issue of ethical practice, and the procedures that are in place for the governance of research in their institution.

The B-teams from the previous chapter will continue, using Board B10, **Research**, for discussion. You will need to refer also to Board B14, **Research Proposal**, and there will be a new board, Board B18, **Ethical Approval**, for your final posting. B18 should be well organised, so you may want to appoint a moderator.

The chapter addresses the intended learning outcomes:

- Understand the key issues and debates relating to the ethics of research.
- Understand the IoE process relating to obtaining ethical approval
- Be able to formulate an application for ethical approval.

Total amount of time: 7.5 hours

**Core texts for this chapter**


See also the PowerPoint presentation by Priscilla Alderson and Virginia Morrow, available at http://homepage.mac.com/paulcdowling/ioe/r%26d/index.html/alderson&morrow
Further Reading


Introduction: Research Ethics

This is an online course, so I can be fairly confident that everyone participating on it owns or has regular access to a computer—probably quite an up-to-date model—and a good level of internet access. In my own case, I have the latest and highest specification Apple MacBook Pro, the latest operating system, LAN and WLAN broadband connection to the internet in my office, at the IoE, at my apartment in London, and in the house in Shinyokohama, where I spend several months each year and I have the IoE internet service, another run by the Japanese company, So-net, and a .Mac internet account and a number of email addresses and websites. I have been using email as my principal, non-f2f means of communication since 1987 and I am so completely tied in to this technology that it feels like an extension of myself and I cannot imagine life without it. On the odd occasion when my machine has broken down and I’ve had to leave it for a couple of days at the Apple Centre in Ginza, Tokyo, for repair, I have felt desolate. Indeed, now I take two computers with me wherever I go, just in case. Perhaps many of you know what I mean.

Now, of course, not everyone has access to this kind of technology. Some people tend to shy away from technology, but very many others just could not possibly afford even a low-end computer and telephone internet connection. I wonder how such people, having no real experience of this kind of connectivity would make use of it. Wouldn’t it be a good idea to run a research project to see. If we found that it substantially improved people’s quality of life, then we could perhaps motivate for government support to increase internet access provision for low income groups. We could apply for funding for the purchase or hire of equipment and, say, six months internet access for several volunteer families. We could arrange for technical support etc. And we could interview family members at various points during the period of the research. We would obviously need the consent of the families taking part; what would we tell them?
Melinda Bier and colleagues (1996) describe a research project that is very similar to the one that I have described. It is not irrelevant that it was carried out over ten years ago, when internet access was far less common than it is today. The researchers were very careful in ensuring that their participating families were fully informed about the project and their part in it, presumably they would have explained about the processes of data collection and, most importantly, how their privacy would be maintained both during the project and afterwards, especially with the publication of results and so forth. Unfortunately, something happened that the researchers did not predict, though they might, were the research being carried out today. Essentially, the lives of at least some of the participants became very substantially changed for what they saw as the better. However, this involved the development of a dependency upon the technology, which, come the end of the project, they were expected to return. Being low income families, they were certainly in no position to replace it:

As one participant put it, only half tongue-in-cheek, “Oh yeah, you university people are worse than the dope peddlers; now that we’re hooked, you’re going to take it away.” They feared they would not be able to maintain the daily routines they had established on this ideal Internet access. In addition to losing Internet access, they feared the loss of positive personal transformations they had undergone as a result of their Internet experiences. Specifically, participants feared losing their newly acquired sense of identity, education, and community.

(Bier et al, 1996; pp. 146-7)

This story had a happy ending, in the sense that the researchers were able (and willing) to extend indefinitely the loan of equipment and internet access.

The principles of informed consent and avoidance of harm are well enshrined in the tabernacle of research ethics. There is a clear basis for this in the ‘human subjects’ interpretation of research. This interpretation subordinates the rights of the researcher to those of the researched subjects (see, for example, Basset & O’Riordan, 2002). Deciding just what ’rights’ human subjects should be able to claim is itself not without its problems. But, as my illustration suggests, whatever one decides, there remains the difficulty that researchers cannot guarantee to be able to anticipate all possible implications of their research activities, however well-intentioned they may be. Indeed, even the most routine of guarantees offered to most participants in research—the guarantee of anonymity—may be impossible to deliver and may be seen to be substantively undermined at every stage of the research process (see, for example, Van Den Hoonnaard, 2003).

Furthermore, social—and this includes educational—research clearly feeds on the lives and activities of people who are not themselves always in a position to benefit from it and, even if they are, may not feel that the ends justify the means. Academic careers are routinely measured by the number and influence of publications, rather than by their contributions to individual or social quality of life, however altruistic researchers may consider themselves to be. Clearly, something similar might be said of any social activity: professional footballers are, presumably, in it for themselves—the elaboration
of their skills, glory in competition, financial gain—and not for the general benefit of society. It is also the case that everyday life encounters frequently involve hidden motives, routine deception, and taking advantage of opportunities (see Goffman, 1990) very often (and very often deliberately) at the expense of others. Why should educational researchers be concerned to behave more righteously than other people?

There are at least three kinds of answer to this question: moral, legal and collegiate. A moral argument would simply assert that educational researchers should uphold certain values and may go on to delineate what these values are. The Ethical Guidelines of the British Educational Research Association (BERA, 2004) state that:

The Association considers that all educational research should be conducted within an ethic of respect for:
- The Person
- Knowledge
- Democratic Values
- The Quality of Educational Research
- Academic Freedom

(BERA, 2004; p. 5)

There are, of course, a lot of other items that might have been added to this list. It doesn’t mention animals or the environment, or the law (although this area does get in elsewhere), or society, or God(s), or motherhood, or apple pie. Even so, who could possibly disagree with the BERA list? Well, anyone who considers that ‘democratic values’ signifies little more than an alibi for the US and UK governments to invade Iraq, for a start. The point is that ‘values’ expressed like this are either too vague to determine action or, if rendered precise, are certain to invoke opposition within any group of any size.

The legal argument has rather more force, because, generally speaking, the law is rather more specific and comparatively non-negotiable. The BERA guidelines, for example, draw attention to the Data Protection Act and, of course, there is also the more general Civil Law and the possibility of litigation where a research participant considers themself to have been harmed or libelled by a researcher. One difficulty, of course, is that very few educational researchers are trained in the law or have routine access to expert legal advice. So, following a code of practice that will have been constructed with the benefit of such advice is probably not a bad idea if we want to protect ourselves and our institutions from prosecution and lawsuits.

The collegiate argument proposes that researchers have responsibilities to the community of researchers that include the need to avoid bringing educational research into disrepute or making it more difficult for colleagues to gain access to research settings by virtue of one’s own research practices. Some time ago, for example, a piece of research carried out by a student at the IoE was interpreted as claiming that teachers do not do what they say they do. There was a degree of outrage on the part of teachers in London as a result and university-based educational researchers were pretty much barred from carrying out research in inner London schools until the Inner London Education Authority was abolished in 1985. Another example of
collegiate responsibility is realised in the general interdiction on plagiarism. This relates to both collegiate and legal arguments through the concept of intellectual property rights.

The legal and collegiate arguments are sufficiently compelling to give me confidence in asserting that a serious consideration of ethical issues should be part of all research activity. Many institutions (including the IoE) have policies on research ethics and procedures for the ethical review of planned research, indeed, some of the research funding agencies require that research that they fund does undergo a formal, independent review in respect of research ethics. In such reviews, the issues that must be considered include:

- Are there possible negative effects of the research in terms of material or symbolic harm caused to individuals (whether or not they are consenting participants)?
- How is the informed consent of participants in the research—and, where appropriate, individuals, such as parents, who are responsible for the participants—to be obtained?
- How is the privacy of participants to be ensured?
- How might participants and/or others benefit from the research?

Now sometimes these questions may be difficult to answer positively. I’ve already mentioned that some consider that an absolute guarantee of anonymity is all but impossible in much qualitative research (in quantitative research, individual responses are generally anonymised by aggregation). If absolute anonymity cannot be guaranteed, then participants will need to be apprised of the risks to their privacy that this might entail. Some researchers argue that there are circumstances in which obtaining the informed consent of participants may be impossible or impractical (eg with some internet research) or that it would render the research impossible to carry out (eg research into criminal activity). It is also argued that there are circumstances in which the knowledge that a setting is being researched or even the knowledge of the possibility that would result from seeking informed consent may itself be damaging to participants. For example, members of an internet community may be deterred from further activity upon realising that they may be under scrutiny in an activity that they had believed to be private; whether or not this belief was realistic is not really the point. Most codes of ethical practice allow for covert research provided that it is fully justified. The BERA code proposes that informed consent should be sought post hoc if obtaining prior consent is deemed to be inappropriate. This strategy, however, clearly does not address all of the concerns mentioned here. Some authors argue that there are no circumstances under which covert research is justified; cases for both sides are put by Homan (1980)—for—and Herrera (1999)—against.

In his argument defending the use of covert methods, Roger Homan draws attention to a very important mode of research that many of us are involved in routinely:
... I and many sociologists spend available Saturday afternoons observing professional football: as far as we are aware we hope for skilled and creative performances, an enjoyable match and possibly a victory for the favoured side, and are much less motivated to attend matches by the opportunity to observe crowd behaviour or interaction between professionals. Inevitably, however, there are moments when one’s observation is guided by sociological principles and I have even recorded notes after a match. It would be absurd to announce that there was a sociologist on the terraces making casual observations and to explain his purpose and methods. For those who pay their money at the turnstile sociological observation is, unlike throwing beer bottles or running on to the pitch, an acceptable and unobtrusive activity.

(Homan, 1980; pp. 56-7)

No, I’m not talking about football research, but informal or opportunistic research. Homan makes the point that sociologists (and presumably educational researchers as well) often regard the world with a researcher’s gaze even when they are not on duty, so to speak. Certainly this is true in my case. One example is described in slightly different ways in Dowling, 2004b and 2004c. At the start of each of these papers is a brief description of my observations from the window of a bus whilst on a holiday in India. Here’s the story as told in the latter paper:

Picture a scene in rural Rajasthan in December. A narrow, roughly metalled road divides fields of mustard plants. The road is sparsely lined with trees, foliage a darker, greyer green than the emerald mustard leaves. A tourist coach chugs along the road passing, every now and then a village of grey-brown low dwellings, men in drab walking or cycling along dirt paths. Women are working in the fields, brightly visible in their bright-coloured saris, each one different. Now: how do you read this visual text?

***

Some years ago I took a coach tour in northern provinces of India. The fields of green mustard leaves behind the trees sparsely lining the road between Agra and Jaipur were radiant against the pale blue mountains in the distance.  
"Look at the women in the fields," prompted one of my fellow tourists, "aren’t their colours beautiful." And indeed they were. Though quite a distance away and mainly bending down, working in the leaves, the women dazzled in purples and blues and reds, each one different, jewels in Rajasthan’s own vast emerald silk sari. The other passengers on the coach agreed and cooed and photographed and felt happy in the warm sun and the mild intoxication of beer at lunchtime. As a sociologist I felt obliged to speak.

“What about the men?” I asked.
“What do you mean, there aren’t any men, we haven’t seen any men?”
“Yes you have, you saw them in the villages that we’ve driven through. What colours were they wearing?”
“Well, mainly drab khakis and greys.”
“So you probably wouldn’t notice them even if they were in the fields.”
“No.”

Tell me, in an agricultural environment in which people work spread out over a large area that is pretty much monochrome, what do you think is the best way to ensure that you can keep control of your women and still be free to get up to whatever takes your fancy?” My colleagues were aghast.
“You’ve ruined our afternoon.” And so I had, and perhaps mine as well. Jeremy Bentham could not have designed a more efficient rural panopticon; the vivid markings of this particular beast now merely warned of the sting in its tail; idyllic culture had been stripped of its lustrous garment to reveal the hard core of the social structure that wears it as a veil: sari-technology. Tourist discourse was a cutaway to an idyllic dream; sociological discourse here, a beauty’s awakening, but I was no Prince Charming.

(Dowling, 2004c; no page numbers)
Who are the participants here? Well, the people in the fields, clearly, but also my fellow passengers on the bus. The point that I was making about patriarchy is not really an original sociological research finding—any competent student of sociology or cultural studies might have made the same observation—but these participants are being recruited in the construction of a research output, the paper itself. But not only did I not seek the informed consent of these participants at the time, I did not do so subsequently. Indeed, since the holiday had taken place more than ten years before the paper was written and I do not recall the precise location on the road from Delhi to Agra (was it, or Agra to Jaipur?) nor do I have the names far less the addresses of the passengers, it clearly would have been impossible. You might note, also, I have presented my conversation with my fellow tourists as direct speech—is my memory that good or did I take fieldnotes or record the conversation? Well, the fact is, I put the conversation together from an imperfect memory. If I had been using the story as a research finding, then I would have had to use indirect speech. But it’s a pedagogic illustration, so I took author’s licence (and you might consider this alongside my comments on Basil Bernstein’s use of fictional data in Dowling, 2005b).

The recontextualising of a holiday experience in this way may seem harmless enough, but there are ethical issues to be considered. I am speaking with, in my own terms, traditional academic authority (see the introduction to Chapter 8), making pronouncements on a culture—two cultures, actually—that I clearly have not properly researched. There is clearly scope for causing offence to the Indian culture—even if not to the anonymous individual participants themselves—and I clearly did rattle (and have possibly misrepresented) some of my fellow passengers. In all of this, I take the view that the risks of harm are small, but I also take the view that I have a responsibility to make visible instances of patriarchy where I am able to describe it, even if the ‘research’ consists only of such a minimal textual analysis. To this extent, I might even argue that causing harm in the sense of outrage in the face of critique is a positive thing. Fields of research such as cultural studies (which also features in some educational research) include researchers holding overtly political principles; confronting research ethics with research politics generates even more uncertainty.

There is a long tradition of informal research in which researchers have observed their own children. Jean Piaget (1932), for example, observed his own children at play in formulating his early ideas on moral development; Gunther Kress (1993) has used his own children’s drawings in his work on social semiotics; Robert Lawler (1985) studied the cognitive development of his own six-year-old daughter over a six-month period of intensive observation (thus solving his research and childcare problems at a stroke). Each of these and many other studies has produced important educational research results, though it is not clear to what extent informed consent was formally sought or obtained; certainly, the children are not anonymous.

Returning to the issue of the possible political interests of researchers, this is not something that is confined to the social sciences. Stanley Fish (1995), for example, is very concerned about what he perceives to be a prominent line in
literary studies that is concerned to effect political, social change. The kind of work that he is referring to is the new historicism of Louis Montrose:

On its face he seems to be saying something like this: ‘I have surveyed the various approaches to Shakespeare and Spenser now in play and have decided to employ in my own work those (like gender studies) that will be the most subversive of the political powers oppressing us. But when I read Montrose I find his analysis informed by a conviction that the accounts he offers of Shakespeare and Spenser are true. He may believe that by producing these true accounts he will be participating in the reformation of contemporary society, but his belief in their possible political efficacy is independent of his conviction that they are true, Were he to be persuaded that there was no particular political benefit to be had from putting forward these views of Shakespeare and Spenser, they would still be his views, and they would remain so until they were changed by the usual kinds of argument one associates with literary studies, It is surely the case that his views of Shakespeare and Spenser could change, but one thing that won't change them (if they are really his views and not merely politically convenient sentiments) is the realization that they aren't doing the kind of political work he hoped they would do. (What might change, if he experienced that realization, is his determination to remain a professional reader of texts; he might get into another line of work.)

(Fish, 1995; pp. 47-8)

Fish believes that no one, outside of literary studies will be very interested in what Montrose has to say qua literary critic and so his political will is, insofar as he is performing literary criticism, impotent. The danger, however, seems to be that Montrose and the other new historicists may succeed in transforming the practice of literary criticism out of all recognition. This is possible, because, in Fish’s view, literary criticism is as it is by convention and, this being the case, is vulnerable to collective transformative acts:

A conventional activity […] lives and dies by the zeal with which we ask its questions and care about the answers. A conventional activity is one whose possibility and intelligibility depend on a specialized and artificial vocabulary which is generative of the phenomena it picks out, in this case the range of verbal nuances that emerge when one takes up the tools of close reading, semiotics, and poetics, If that vocabulary falls into disuse, the facts it calls into being will no longer be produced or experienced. If no one any longer asks ‘What is the structure of this poem?’ or ‘What is the intention of the author and has it been realized?’, something will have passed from the earth and we shall read the words of what was once literary criticism as if they were the remnants of a lost language spoken by alien beings.

(Fish, 1995; p. 70)

The supposed political gains of a shift in the discipline towards new historicism are, therefore, imagined rather than real, whereas there is a very real danger in the loss of what, to many now working in the field, is a worthwhile activity.

The dispute between Stanley Fish and the new historicists really highlights the fundamental dilemmas that are at the base of all of the assertions, challenges, rationalisings and decisions that constitute the agonistic discourse of research ethics: just to whom does the researcher have responsibility and precisely what are those responsibilities. Fish may by sympathetic with the new historicists’ claim to have responsibility towards oppressed groups, but he questions whether the nature of that responsibility should lie in the
transforming of literary criticism on the grounds that this cannot assist the
oppressed or in any way deter the oppressors. On the other hand, Fish might
say, these wayward colleagues do have a responsibility to others in the field
who, after all, are likely to constitute their biggest audience. And the nature of
this responsibility lies in treating the traditions of the discipline with greater
respect, especially since these traditions—concerning the grounding
principles of questing for meaning and the truth—can be revealed as the real
basis of even new historicist criticism.

We can ask similar questions in educational studies and, perhaps because it’s
a bit closer to us, the situation is even more complex; I won’t catalogue all of
the possible stakeholders, but they certainly include, in rather abstract terms,
the ‘community’ of educational researchers and, in even more abstract terms,
educational knowledge. It is perhaps of more than passing interest that it is
not from these directions that the researcher and their institution faces the
greatest risk of a lawsuit.

Activities

The activity in this chapter involves, firstly, students familiarising themselves
with relevant literature and codes of practice relating to educational research.
Secondly, the research proposals prepared in Chapters 4 and 8 are to be
considered from an ethical point of view and a proposal constructed for
obtaining ethical approval to carry out the research. Discussion should be on
Board B10, Research, and final postings on Board B18, Ethical Approval.

Activity 9.1

1. Read the set texts and the relevant code of professional research
practice published by the relevant research association for the
research proposals that you produced in chapters 4 and 8. The
relevant research association is likely to be one of these:

- British Educational Research Association
- British Psychological Association
- British Sociological Association

An alternative may be chosen in negotiation with the module
moderator. You need to negotiate within your team which code you are
going to follow.

2. Revisit your two proposals (Chapters 4 and 8, Board B14). Consider,
with reference to your reading, what ethical issues might arise in the
conduct of this research and in the subsequent publication of its
results.

Discuss as a group how you are going to deal with these and what
decisions you are going to take. Add a section on research ethics to
your proposal and post this on Board B14, Research Proposals.
3. Investigate the procedures for educational research governance that obtain in your institution. If there are no specific procedures, then refer to the procedures for the Institute of Education.

4. Prepare an application for ethical approval to carry out each of your two research proposals. Post the applications on Board B18, Ethical Approval.

Applications should be posted to B18 by midnight GMT on day 7 of the chapter.

You should spend about 6.5 hours on tasks 1-4.
References


# Discussion Boards

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<th>BB B-team Boards</th>
<th>BC C-team Boards</th>
<th>B1 Towards an organisational language Summary</th>
<th>B2 Organisational Language</th>
<th>B3 Theorists</th>
<th>B4 Theorists Summary</th>
<th>B5 Methodological &amp; Theoretical Issues</th>
<th>B6 Bernstein</th>
<th>B7 Bernstein Glossary</th>
<th>B8 Bernstein Article</th>
<th>B9 Bernstein Critique</th>
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**A-teams**

Bracketed codes (S1, S2, etc) signify that posting is limited to this member.

**B-teams**

1.1, 1.2, etc refer to activity numbers.

**C-teams**

B15.1-n signifies one board for each student.

**Individual**

- **Plenary**
### Diary

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<tr>
<th>Day</th>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>Student Posting Action</th>
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</table>
| 1   | 1.2      |                        | **A-teams must be formed before the start of the module.**  
**Allocate authors to teams.** |
| 2   | 1.1      | **Post summary to B1.** |              |
| 3   |          |                        |              |
| 4   | 1.2      | **Post definitions to B3.** |              |
| 5   |          |                        |              |
| 6   |          |                        |              |
| 7   | 1.1      | **S1 post summary to B2.** |              |
|     | 1.2      | **S2 post definitions to B4.** |              |

#### Week 1
**Towards Theory**

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<th>Student Posting Action</th>
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| 1   | 2.2      |                        | **B-teams for c. 3 must be formed during this chapter.**  
**Allocate aspects of Bernstein’s work to A-teams.** |
| 2   |          |                        |              |
| 3   |          |                        |              |
| 4   |          |                        |              |
| 5   | 2.2      | **Post gloss to B6.**  |              |
| 6   |          |                        |              |
| 7   | 2.2      | **S3 post summary to B3.** |              |

#### Week 2

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| 14  | 2.1      |                        | **Post and discuss difficulties to B5 (may continue throughout module).**  
**S5 post article on B8.**  
**Post to B9 (may continue throughout module).**  
**Post to B10 by this date (for c. 3)**  

#### Week 3

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<td>4.1 • S9 post research proposal to B14</td>
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<td>• Identify research item for Activity 5.1 in next chapter.</td>
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<td>• Organise C-teams for c. 6 during this chapter.</td>
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<td>5.1 • Post summary &amp; review to B15.1-n</td>
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<td>The Use-value of Research</td>
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<td>6.2 • Complete postings to B16.</td>
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| 1      | 7.1 • Negotiate moderation.  
• B-teams to be reformed for cc. 8 & 9 during this chapter. |
| 2      |                            |
| 3      |                            |
| 4      |                            |
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| 11     |                            |
| 12     |                            |
| 13     |                            |
| 14     | 7.1 • Completion of moderated postings to B17. |

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