

Questioning Research as a Contextual Practice

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Abstract: It is argued that authoritative texts on research in adult education rarely question how research practice is shaped by its context of application. There are key matters surrounding how researchers are constructed by their engagement with reality. The paper attempts to develop a knowledge production perspective on research as contextualised practice, one that highlights the relationship between researcher understandings and the situations, participants, processes and texts of 'research'. The paper works first with a concept of researcher understandings which constitute and are constituted by context of practice. The analysis then moves to the critical questions surrounding policy production as research, examining how researchers and policymakers adopt and reciprocally shape each other's understandings in negotiating the meanings of research. The analysis then turns to understanding research as a textual practice, exploring one theorisation of the genres of commissioned research as a case of contextualised practice.

The problem of research in context

We take the problem of research-as-practice to be one of understanding how research is shaped in context. There are obstacles to developing such an understanding – first because of the dominance of paradigm theory in thinking about education research and also because of a number of neglects. The first neglect is of social theoretical perspectives in the adult education literature, the second is a neglect of the diversity of contexts which comprise the field and shape research within them and finally, the third is a neglect of understandings of the way researchers are constructed by their engagement with the context of research.

In approaching this problem, there is little help to be had from the idealised views of research depicted by textbook authorities for audiences of academics and postgraduate students engaged in scholarly inquiry. An alternative view sets out to question the orthodoxies of educational research and particularly to the dominance of 'methodology' as an idea governing research practice. Research practice can be analysed as something constituted by the contexts in which it is conducted as well as in terms of the researcher's framework of presuppositions, and paradigmatic choices, though too much academic breath has been wasted on the latter.

It may be more interesting to understand research as an ordinary and practical process, a profane and political one, in which the researcher defines and pursues a problematic, influenced by questions of power and relationship with others, of ethics and negotiation with participants, of naming and theorising concepts, of design and method, of project management, writing up and not least, all the textual practices that go into manifesting research.

Paradigm and the idealisation of practice

Without traversing the literature on research paradigms, it is a useful start in making an argument about research practice. In brief, the preoccupation of the educational research literature with paradigm and its confusion over the different meanings and levels of analysis of paradigm has constructed a supposed 'philosophical' discourse of research that serves our understanding of research practice very poorly.

This failure is in part because the educational research debate has tended to deny the social theoretical account of paradigm associated with Thomas Kuhn (McIntyre 1993, 2000) providing an account of research practice that leaches out the politics of institutional power inherent in the Kuhnian formulation. Abstracted philosophising about research is interesting, but research is operationalised through institutional frameworks and power relationships. Reinstating the analysis of research as powerfully institutionalised leads us to ask how research is shaped by its engagements with educational realities. Research in adult education is always institutionally located and defined by values and ideologies which have roots in different traditions, and adult education is distinctive in dealing with 'practice' in a wide range of contexts - workplaces, adult education centres, community organisations, political activities, literacy campaigns, to name a few.

This rich contextuality opens up questions as to how a particular context of inquiry constructs or constitutes the researchers' understandings. It draws attention to the values and interests that drive researchers and the value conflicts arise from different ideas about adult education and training; and that therefore, researchers need to look to their guiding assumptions, values and interests as part of the framework for inquiry (McIntyre 2000).

If we re-instate the idea that educational research is an institutionalised activity then this directs attention to the research traditions (such as North American behavioural science, German interpretive sociology or social critical theory, Althusserian structuralism, Foucauldian post-structuralism and so on) that embody taken-for-granted assumptions about methodologies, literatures, research ethics and so on. It also means that some of the eminently researchable things in the field are to be found in what is distinctive about the context of practice.

Not only do particular contexts of adult education and practice shape researcher understandings, but academic research itself has been encountering new challenges to the idea that it is safely removed from the politics of education and the interventions of the state in education policy, its commissioning of research for policy and its wholesale restructuring of institutions (McIntyre 1997).

The contemporary state has taken a much more direct role in shaping educational realities, under the political-economic pressures of the shift to global capitalism (Yeatman 1991, 1994, 1998; Sullivan & Yeatman 1997). This has had several consequences. In particular, the new bureaucratic state has employed strategic research to engineer policy changes—for example, in making vocational education and training respond to the needs of industry or learner 'clients' through competition policy and drawing private and community providers into a national training system. Educational policy has itself become an important focus of research and critique (eg Ball 1990, 1994; Halpin & Troyna 1995; Peters & Marshall 1996; Marginson 1993; Taylor, Rivzi, Lingard & Henry 1997). The context of policy provides a leading case for examining research as contextualised practice.

Researcher understandings and policy research

Some concept of researcher understandings is useful in theorising the way research is produced by the researcher in context. The term 'understandings' is a privileged one in ethnomethodology (eg Garfinkel 1969, Heritage 1992). 'Background understandings' are key yet unstated constituents of a research account (or text) – a rich field of 'constitutive assumptions' or sets of competing understandings that may be paradigmatic, philosophical, policy-related or pragmatic. These understandings originate in the multiple contexts of the researchers' work and come into play in the negotiation of the meanings of research (McIntyre & Wickert in press).

It is not possible here to elaborate on an ethnomethodological account of such understandings, though it can be noted that this provides one way to bridge paradigm theory to questions of the researcher's agency or 'praxis'. In its radical form popularised by Garfinkel, ethnomethodology has the potential to subvert the pretensions and idealising tendencies that are so evident in some influential conceptions of qualitative research. It exposes to analysis the discrepancy between descriptions of method and procedure and the

manifold 'hidden work' that is glossed in researchers' descriptions of their activity. A focus on researcher praxis also makes political and ethical questions, such as what adult education research is for and who it is for, the most significant questions to be asked.

An ethnomethodological account foregrounds the 'ordinary and practical' of the researcher's engagement with context. Such an account enables us to theorise what happens when that context is policy work - when research goes to work for policy. By no means is the 'policy context' to be taken for granted, but needs theorising in terms of an account of the contemporary state and the conditions that it sets for policy work. Thus the 'new contractualism' (Sullivan & Yeatman 1997) sets up new demands for research to work for policy production, creating a need and rationale for commissioned research (McIntyre & Wickert in press). Yeatman's analysis of the 'shift' in the nature of the contemporary state has been influential in Australasian accounts of public policy (eg Marginson 1993, Taylor Rivzi Lingard & Henry 1997, Considine 1994, Peters & Marshall 1996). These conditions redefine the domains of 'research' and 'policy' and their relationships, and generate new roles for agents in the policy process. In turn this raises key questions about the ability of researchers to influence the policy agenda that has required their services. Are they mere agents of the state or is there scope for 'policy activism' (Yeatman 1998).

Such questions are only answerable by some analysis that understands how researcher understandings are constituted by the relationships of research and policy in particular contexts. Paradigm is almost irrelevant to this analysis, and it is necessary to turn to other constructs to grasp the connections between researcher understandings, practices and research outcomes. These include questions of the nature of the working relationships that are predicated by the new conditions of policy production particularly the working of the research contract.

McIntyre & Wickert (in press) argue that the nature of the 'knowledge resource' for policy making has shifted from a closed knowledge-base captured within the portfolio to a relatively open system where relevant knowledge can be assembled or constructed around immediate policy requirements. The critical thing is the way that meanings of policy are negotiated by and how they mutually shape the understandings of parties to the process - researcher and bureaucrat alike. This leads to an account of the co-production of policy meanings in which the policy and research 'understandings' in play are a key element in grasping the contextualisation of research practice.

The genres of commissioned research

A textual analysis is one way to examine the complex dynamic at play in understanding the way researchers construct and are constructed by the context of their research. Furthermore, such an analysis can show that notwithstanding the complexity of the dynamics, 'at many points in a research commission there are issues to be resolved as to its scope, meaning, direction and implications' (McIntyre & Wickert).

This account might begin with an examination of the co-production of authoritative texts that do the work of re/presenting new kinds of knowledge. Such an account could involve an analysis of the various textual features of the genres of commissioned research. These might include, for example, an examination of the submission and the final report. This kind of analysis can offer useful insights into the constructions of knowledge in collaborative institutional relationships. However, we would suggest that this analysis can be more productive when informed by a consideration of genre theory where the focus of analysis is not on genre as a textual product but on genre as a set of textual *practices*. In this framing, *genre* is understood as a social category where texts are understood as social processes (Freedman & Medway, 1994) — this offers an important framing for considering the complexities of the context/s of collaborative research practices. Furthermore, understanding genre as a social process has a resonance with the current focus on process in contemporary research discourses. These include, for example, the work of Gibbons et al (1994) on *modes* of knowledge production and the work of Stronach & MacLure (1997) that portrays contemporary research as research *games*.

Genre theory has an appeal as it draws our attention to the central role of language in research (Usher 1997, Game 1991 etc), where language is not a neutral or innocent medium that transmits information, but works as a technology for producing social realities, for creating domains of thought and action. As argued elsewhere (Solomon work in progress), governmentality is a powerful complementary theoretical partner for genre theory in any examination of the relationships between government, institutions and subjects. While this paper does not allow for a full explication of this hybrid theorisation, here we will just allude to the strengths of such a theoretical partnership.

In exploring the contextualisation of research, governmentality provides an understanding that assists in exploring the politics and the 'language' work that are re/presented in commissioned research publications. It helps to link this work to their various institutional sites and the various academic positions that are reflected in and through the publications. Miller & Rose (1993) use the term 'intellectual technology' to capture the significance of language in contemporary governing. For Miller & Rose, language provides 'a mechanism for rendering reality amenable to certain kinds of action' (1993, p. 81). In other words language renders aspects of existence amenable to inscription and calculation and thus amenable to intervention and regulation. Language is therefore understood as part of the complex process of negotiation involved in bringing persons, organisations and objectives into alignment. We suggest that the collaborative arrangements of commissioned research are one such alignment where the academy, industry and government are brought together to construct new language(s), new subject positions, new products and new processes that work together as governmentality by furthering the productive potential of the population.

The placement of genre into a governmental framing, 'takes-up' the challenge posed by Freedman & Medway:

Genre studies are a particularly promising instrument for illuminating the social process in its detailed operation, and afford an opportunity we should not refuse of examining what it means to be part of an institutional process. What does participation in a genre do to, and for, an individual or group? What opportunities do the relationships reflected in and structured by a genre afford for human creative action, or, alternatively, for the domination of others. (1994, p. 12).

This uptake of genre can profitably adopt Rose's notion of inscription, which are of a particular form and include statistics, charts, graphs and drawings and written reports. We would like to suggest that genres are inscriptions that render actions and events into information in a way that 'serves' the objectives of programs of government. Genres can therefore be understood as a technology for linking the government of others with the government of the self. They are a technical device that provides structures that allow for play and that foregrounds the relationship between texts and practices — all of which offer possibilities for subject positioning including that of the researcher.

This view allows for an understanding of commissioned research texts as a site of intersection between governmental technologies, institutional locations and the position of the writer. Texts produced within those institutional arrangements are both processes within and products of those institutions and importantly, at the same time, they have also produced, and been produced by, particular kinds of subjects. '... the production of genres are inextricable from the social, institutional apparatuses which 'obligate' certain kinds of subjectivities for their ongoing maintenance.' (Fuller & Lee, 1999)

This hybrid theorisation is a useful one in exploring the contextual production of knowledge in commissioned research. It enables a consideration of the complexities of academics doing collaborative research where each of the institutional partners is located within different histories and politics and where their working together brings to the surface a range of methodological and epistemological tensions. Genres of commissioned research are textual practices that are central to the struggles within the hybrid space in which the partnerships between government, university and industry are played out. They are the site through which new knowledge is negotiated and where new kinds of researchers (academic subjects) are constructed.

In other related writing (Scheeres & Solomon 2000, Scheeres & Solomon in press), we have focused on these struggles by arguing that it is unhelpful to understand academic participation in commissioned research simply as one of compliance. Indeed, the discourse of compliance is one we have been struggling with in our own research work and reflections on that work. We now argue that the compliance discourse is particularly problematic because it fails to take account of the complexities of the new times for work: a global context within which traditional boundaries are blurring and one where ideas about what constitutes knowledge and workplace practice are in a continual state of change and migration been changing rapidly. But, also importantly, compliance discourses fail to give academics a space for a more active role in their collaborative relationships with industry and government partners. The creation of a space for academic researchers to take up positions as 'active subjects' creates a third or hybrid space for them to 'be' at work.

In this work, the textual practices of a number of commissioned research projects were examined, understanding the practices as sites of knowledge production as well as exemplars of self-regulating academics. The examination was 'contextualised' by exploring not just the written genres but also a number of spoken genres through which the research unfolded. These included the spoken interactions during the construction of the submission; the negotiations at steering committee meetings and with project team members; as well as the numerous interactions during the empirical research stage. Together these spoken and written genres, it was argued, established the social relationships and textual boundaries of the research and the new knowledge. Each genre served to discursively mediate the historical, functional and hierarchically differences of the various players. Each became a boundary marker representing a stage in the process of knowledge production. Each is a kind of inscription that renders a particular domain of thought not just thinkable but also doable and accountable.

An analysis of the genres of commissioned research, using this framework, works with the complex contextual conditions that underpin contemporary academic research. It draws attention to the way the various participants, through the research textual practices, play within the new hybrid spaces that are created by the opening up of institutional and disciplinary boundaries. These new spaces challenge the comfortable familiar distinctions between public and private domains, between disciplinary knowledge and working knowledge and between the workplace and the academy, that once ruled academic work and academic subjects.

Conclusion

This paper has addressed the theoretical neglect of educational research as contextualised practice, questioning the tendency of authoritative texts to present accounts of research that are philosophically idealised. It was suggested that such decontextualised accounts of research are puzzling in the field of adult education and training, given its diversity of institutions and practices.

The paper has suggested that educational policy work has emerged as a key context for academic research practice in the contemporary state, and that the engagement of researchers 'at work' for policy is rich in possibilities for analysis of practice as it shapes and is shaped by context. Several possibilities for this analysis are explored, including the significance of 'researcher understandings' that are present in framing research, negotiating the 'research meanings' in play and producing research outcomes. Practice is also theorised as a policy knowledge production process through the analysis of commissioned research as genre, meaning the process and textual practices that realise research texts. This analysis shows the 'ordinary and practical' activities of research in contexts of engagement as teeming with possibilities for theoretically exploring language and power in the work of research.

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