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Demystifying the Academic Workplace: A Workshop Strategy from Educational Research

Abstract

In this workshop report, we acknowledge the difficult nature of the academic workplace and the challenges this brings to new academics' socialization. We introduce a potentially generalizable strategy which has been used successfully with academic colleagues to demystify the field of research into higher education. Our strategy builds on BOURDIEU's concepts of 'field', 'habitus' and 'capital' to explore the issues which make this aspect of academic practice mystifying. We note the limitations of a workshop approach in satisfying individual needs, and look to future virtual and personalized provision.

Keywords

Academic socialization, Bauman, Bourdieu, liquid learning, workshop

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1 Context

In this report, we introduce and critique an exemplar workshop intended for those new to educational research and the scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL). It was BOYER (1990) who originally proposed SoTL, highlighting the important contribution that educational research could make to all disciplines by calling for a more integrated scholarship through which teaching, learning, research and collegiality might mutually benefit. He maintained that “[t]eaching, at its best, shapes both research and practice” (BOYER, 1990, p. 16). This workshop supports SoTL and educational research more generally, yet also demonstrates how theory can be used to help socialize new university staff, be they teachers, managers or discipline-based researchers.

Starting out as a new academic is a daunting experience where effective socialization involves understanding one’s place in a complex and often contradictory workplace (BOYD, 2010; KING et al., 2014). The challenging process of academic socialization has been conceptualized by ENNALS et al. (2015, p. 5) using an occupational health framework comprising “four interacting dimensions, namely *doing, being, becoming* and *belonging*”. Their study of the difficult experiences of expert practitioners, attempting to convert themselves into expert academics, reveals an asocial environment which impedes academic progress (ENNALS et al., 2015). Internationally, academic development focuses on improving the ‘doing’ of academic practice but tends to leave the individual to resolve their ‘being’, ‘becoming’ and ‘belonging’. Ideally, socialization should be an intrinsic aspect of departmental culture (MATHIESON, 2011); today, senior and established staff may have limited time in which to mentor new arrivals in an academic workplace which is in a state of perpetual change. BAUMAN (2000, pp. 166-7) uses the terms *précarité* and *Unsicherheit* to capture the notion of an insecure, unsure, and unsafe workplace in a constantly changing world. The formerly secure, predictable, and stable higher education workplace (BROWN & CARASSO, 2013) has responded to change and uncertainty partly through the use of temporary academic posts and part-time employment; teaching-only contracts; and fuzzy boundaries between

academic and non-academic roles (NADOLNY & RYAN, 2015; WHITCHURCH & GORDON, 2013). An increasingly heterogeneous academic workforce experiences *précarité* and *Unsicherheit* through expectations of flexibility, entrepreneurship, and agile responsiveness to organisational goals, as well as through an awareness of conflicting or ambiguous institutional policies and priorities which change according to the needs of the internationally competitive higher education marketplace (BOLDEN, GOSLING & O'BRIEN, 2014; WHITCHURCH & GORDON, 2013).

To deal with *précarité* and *Unsicherheit*, individuals require new ways of thinking which demystify the academic workplace. GUICHARD (2004) outlined a process he calls *se faire soi* (self-construction) which builds on the view that identity is self-constructed and that self-construction depends on the individual's chosen perspective and agency. Originally conceived as a counselling intervention, *se faire soi* suggests that individuals achieve greater sense-making by moving beyond a subjective identity derived from 'I – me' (dual) reflexivity to a triple 'I – you – s/he' reflexivity. Triple reflexivity implies that moral and ethical considerations should inform identity construction, and that this can be achieved by thinking of oneself in relation to others (GUICHARD, 2004) – students, colleagues, collaborators. Alternatively, one could view the academic world, not as a predictable journey from graduate to permanent employee and thence to full professor, but as a game of chance and skill. LUCAS (2006), drawing on BOURDIEU's *Homo Academicus* (1984/1988), deconstructed the UK academic research context as a game, recommending that individuals take a proactive stance in managing the research aspect of the academic role within their own developmental process.

Over recent years, our own research has led us to regard Bourdieu's "thinking tools" of field, habitus and capital (BOURDIEU & WACQUANT, 1992, p. 160), as helpful in supporting newer academics in understanding academic life (BILLOT & KING, 2015) and actively managing the demands placed upon them. In the remainder of this paper, we detail our exemplar workshop and suggest how it provides a model for other contexts.

2 Exemplar workshop to support academic staff new to research into higher education

2.1 Background to the workshop

This workshop is called ‘*Essential Skills for Disseminating Your Higher Education Research*’. It was designed to support academic colleagues who wish to turn a teaching innovation, or other educational initiative, into publications. Attendees come from a variety of disciplines and include doctoral students who have undertaken some university teaching; colleagues experienced as researchers in their own disciplines but new to educational research; and probationary lecturing staff who are undertaking a postgraduate certificate in teaching and learning. Probationary staff include recent post-graduates as well as individuals with significant experience in other professions (such as nursing or architecture) who have recently been employed as academics.

The workshop has run five times. Participant evaluations have been consistently positive, particularly in terms of the insights and strategies it provides. Encouraging numbers of participants have since presented their research internally; however, it is early to expect to see publications. A follow-up study of attendees found that they still had difficulty in prioritizing research, suggesting the need for ongoing support.

The publicized objectives for the workshop are:

- Targeting an outlet – how to identify a suitable place to disseminate your educational research
- Packaging your innovation – how to appeal to different audiences
- Working out what gate-keepers want – how to increase the likelihood of your submission being accepted
- Next steps – how to make time to write, where to get more help.

However, the ‘essential skills’ which participants encounter in the workshop, are to:

1. Recognize educational research as a ‘field’
2. Play the educational research game according to its unwritten rules (‘habitus’)
3. Recognize what is valued in the educational research field (‘capital’).

Thus Bourdieu’s ‘thinking tools’ effectively provide a theoretical framework for the workshop activities, drawing together the conceptual landscape of the academic domain with the experiences of the new academic. By using these concepts, the workshop engenders a broader understanding which could apply to other aspects of academic practice.

2.2 Step 1: Recognizing educational research as a ‘field’

In the context of the university, BOURDIEU (1984/1988) describes a field as a site of struggle where those with established power and influence attempt to maintain the boundaries they control. In terms of educational research, this would mean that recognized academics define what research is legitimate. Clearly, this definition has changed over time, for example, to allow new research methods (such as phenomenography), new sub-fields (such as e-learning), and new researchers to become established. However, it is still a challenge for new academics to identify the outlets where their own research might fit, and this, we argue, is because of different conceptualisations of what constitutes ‘valid’ educational research. A further complication for the academic is that journal quality influences not only the readership ‘reach’, but also how individuals’ publications are assessed for promotion and external audit. In order to communicate the ways in which research conceptualizations vary, the first major task in the workshop is for groups of participants to categorize a bowl of *metaphorical* research according to criteria that the group agrees on. This seemingly trivial task effectively challenges preconceptions.

Each group is given a bowl filled with a random assortment of items. Usually, the selection comprises chocolates, sweets, Asian sweetmeats and fruit. The groups are startled at first. Then they begin to discuss how these items could be clustered; for

example, by colour, content, size, shape or country of origin. Discussion as to the correct allocations can become lively. One participant argued for an historical grouping according to when the items had been personally encountered. She said things like, “I first had these when I was six, but I didn’t eat those till I was nearly twenty”. When all the groups have finished sorting the contents of their bowls, they are encouraged to go and look at each other’s results and debate the merits of their chosen ways of clustering.

What transpires is an understanding that the same item, say a bar of chocolate, could belong (for example) to the ‘red’ group, the ‘chocolate’ group, the ‘rectangular’ group or the ‘unhealthy’ group. This insight is then relocated into an educational research context, suggesting that a piece of scholarly work could suit a range of different journals or conferences according to how it is scoped. It is made clear to workshop participants that attempting to submit the ‘wrong’ kind of article to a given outlet is likely to end in rejection, whereas, appreciation of the aims, objectives and style adopted by a publishing outlet could be used to adjust the same article to suit the chosen outlet, or to find a more appropriate outlet. The framework employed by TIGHT (2012) to conceptualize higher education research is used to validate this part of the workshop. While it is acknowledged that other frameworks exist, TIGHT’s (2012, p. 7) division of the field into eight themes² provides a useful starting point for debate and allows participants to begin to scope their particular interests within or beyond SoTL. Using examples of the participants’ research, we then discuss how it might be possible for authors to present a particular piece of research as primarily concerned with one theme or another, depending on the outlet they might target.

We then display MACFARLANE’s (2012) visualization of educational research as an archipelago where islands are separated by a Sea of Disjuncture. In MACFARLANE’s (2012) view, there is a rough “split between policy-based and teaching-

² teaching and learning; course design; the student experience; quality; system policy; institutional management; academic work; and knowledge and research.

and learning- oriented researchers who rarely, in [his] experience, have much awareness of each other's scholarship" (pp. 129-130). Although intended as a focus for debate rather than an expression of fact, this conceptualization of educational research and its theorists as separate islands has the ring of truth. It comes as a surprise to participants that the field is so diverse and fragmented.

At this point, BOURDIEU's (1984/1988) concept of a field as a site of struggle is specifically introduced, and briefly discussed. We suggest to participants that the first essential skill they will require is to recognize educational research as a field and to begin the struggle to make a place therein.

2.3 Step 2: To play the game according to unwritten rules (habitus)

The main activity used to support the next part of the workshop is a review of collections of abstracts of recently published educational research articles. We use printed issues of *Research into Higher Education Abstracts*³ which contains summaries of selected articles from a wide range of relevant international journals. Using the keyword index, participants are encouraged to identify two or three articles that could provide models for their own writing.

What begins to emerge here are differences in the research methods and methodologies employed within the articles (TIGHT, 2012). This provides an opportunity to discuss the research approaches with which participants are familiar, and how they would suit educational research.

We then move on to examine two exemplar educational research articles, considering their titles, keywords, abstracts and authorship. We debate the way the titles are structured and look at guidance on title-writing from online sources such as DUNLEAVY's (2014) blog. Participants then study a current 'call for contributions' and

³ <http://srhe.tandfonline.com/db/crhe>

consider how they could address it with their own research; think, in broad terms, what they would submit; and propose a title and keywords for their submission.

These threads are drawn together in a brief discussion of habitus. Workshop participants tend to accept the idea that a social context operates through largely unwritten and unspoken rules. However, BOURDIEU's (1984/1988) explanation that habitus concerns how one 'plays the game' is more difficult to convey, since some participants object to the notion that life is a ludic pursuit. We put it to participants that the first three workshop objectives will have been addressed if they accept the second essential skill. That is, to recognize and analyse the rules of the educational research game, and to decide how they will play it.

2.4 Step 3: To recognize what is valued in the field ('capital')

The workshop, by now, is approaching its end. Participants are asked to consider how they might make time to write, and who they might call on for support. (Locally, we recommend our own Centre for Academic Writing, as well as careful time management, prioritizing writing, and joining writing groups and writing retreats). Ideas are shared, and the importance of developing an influential network of contacts is highlighted. We offer an article written by a newer academic which reports advice from professors on how teaching staff might develop into researchers (DOUGLAS, 2013) and which uses a Bourdieusian theoretical framework. This article exemplifies educational research 'capital', that is, what is valued in our field. It shows how academic prestige can arise from small contributions based on well-designed and theorized research.

We conclude the workshop by suggesting that capital is accumulated from the public recognition of the work we publish, and hence that self-promotion is a necessary evil. Participants are also guided to recognize that their own status may be judged by that of their associates since capital creates capital.

3 Discussion and Conclusion

This workshop, while highly satisfactory in its own context may well not suit needs elsewhere. The heterogeneity of our participants, their almost complete ignorance of educational research, and the local emphasis on interactive pedagogies, have led to this particular delivery model. The underlying strategy of using Bourdieu to demystify the academic workplace is, nonetheless, transferable. For example, it could underpin workshops which help those new to teaching, disciplinary research or academic management gain a more professional habitus. This workshop stands as an exemplar of staff development for academics in a new role, and a means of assisting their socialization into university culture. Participant responses have been enthusiastic, suggesting that while the content has been helpful, the Bourdieusian framework has been revelatory.

Our own research identifies that when academics encounter workplace tensions and contradictions, they may experience a lack of engagement with departmental and/or institutional culture (BILLOT & KING, 2015). By encouraging participants to see themselves and their work as others see them through the triple reflexivity of I, you, s/he, we promote a conscious process of self-construction (GUICHARD, 2004). By revealing the world of academic research as a competitive game (BOURDIEU, 1984/1988; LUCAS, 2006), we empower participants who may previously have felt that world to be unfamiliar and impenetrable.

However, *précarité* and *Unsicherheit* demand flexible responses. Research into virtual learning suggests that the constantly changing conditions recognized by BAUMAN (2000) as ‘liquid modernity’ could be addressed through individualized ‘liquid curricula’ (STEILS et al., 2014). This may be the basis on which to build future academic staff development initiatives, where virtual social networks can provide personal and collaborative support and mentoring. It is our own chosen direction to enhance the socialization of new academics.

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