Exam board research: issues regarding insider research

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Setting and maintaining standards in national examinations around the world

- **Joint project:** AQA, Oxford University Dept. of Education, UCL Institute of Education, Ofqual (qualifications regulator in England) + representatives of 12 countries/jurisdictions, mainly senior staff from exam boards.

- **Focus:** national, school-leaving or university entrance, curriculum-related exams.

- **Aim:** to describe the processes used to set or to maintain (or link over time) standards in these exams; to explore the concepts relating to standards behind them.

Insider researchers

- Wider politics, culture, media
- Our stakeholders
- My organisation
- Me
Leaning back into empty space?

If you have been abseiling you would know that feeling when you defy gravity, lean back into empty space parallel to the ground far below and step off down a cliff face. Researching from within can also be a little like abseiling, which is why we advise careful thought before starting out, going with others experienced in the process and having a main line and a safety line.

Smyth and Holian, 2008
Objectivity in educational research

Traditionally, the aim of the research enterprise, from a methodological perspective, is to use a procedurally objective set of methods in order to gain an ontologically objective understanding of the events and objects we study.

Eisner, 1992
Educational science – objectivity & rigour

- Positivism
  - Empirical, logical or mathematical verification
  - Uncovering causal mechanisms in the universe
  - Knowledge as cumulative

- Replicability
  - Clear description of method
  - Controlled processes and design
  - Hypothesis testing

- Generalisability
  - Formulation of scientific laws & prediction
  - Large sample sizes, random sampling
  - Significance testing

- Validity
  - Measures what is intended (and nothing else)
  - Reliability – does so consistently
20th century views of scientific method

Karl Popper:
- Science as over-simplification
- Falsification as scientific method
- Increasing “the truth content of our theories”

Thomas Kuhn:
- Normal science: “puzzle-solving”
- Paradigms: shared beliefs, values, instruments and techniques
- Extraordinary science/scientific revolutions – anomalies and crises
- “Kuhn-loss” – knowledge not cumulative – not getting closer to an ideal truth – more like an evolving organism
P values

- All social research sets out with specific purposes from a particular position and aims to persuade readers of the significance of its claims; these claims are always broadly political

Clough and Nutbrown 2002
Authorising authenticity

- Wider politics, culture, media
- Stakeholder relationships
- Organisational culture
- Sub-culture
People who influence exam board insider research: the theory

Adapted from Costley et al, 2010
People who influence exam board insider research: the feeling!

Society, the media, economy and culture
Candidates, parents, universities, employers
Customers, policy-makers, stakeholders
Organisational/ professional field
Investors, partners, networks
Executives/boards
Colleagues
Me
Insider researchers in public organisations

- Anonymity of participants – external & internal confidentiality

- Institutional anonymity

- Multiple identities – practitioner, researcher, policy-maker, stakeholder etc.

- Insider knowledge

- Personal & professional relationships

- Conflicting personal and professional roles
Issues for exam board insider researchers (1): who are the researchers?

In insider research projects, the researcher:

- May start as a researcher or as a practitioner, but for the purposes of the research project, often have to occupy both roles
- And is also his/her own research subject
- Anonymity cannot be guaranteed to research subjects (internally and sometimes externally) or organisations (externally)

How can insider researchers deal with these issues?
Issues for exam board insider researchers(2): what are the research aims?

- Need to be clear about research aims, and need to communicate these clearly to research partners, colleagues and superiors.

- May be to:
  - document
  - analyse
  - review
  - criticise
  - theorise
  - other?

- Colleagues may assume an aim which is not the intended one.
Issues for exam board insider researchers (3): data and methods

- What are the research methods/activities?

- What data back up the claims?

- What counts as solid evidence?

- How do we distinguish solid evidence from assertion, marketing or political window-dressing (in a time of ‘post-truth’)?

- How do we avoid getting trapped inside the lens of our own data?
Another metaphor

The ethical engagement iceberg (Floyd and Arthur)
More positive metaphors?

Building bridges or laying pipelines (Jones)
Some suggested solutions (1): Principles

- Approach the topic with an open mind
- Consider alternative positions and explanations
- Triangulate sources of data
- Scrutinise the data in depth
- Include an explicit account of the process of data gathering and analysis
- Include enough detail to allow readers to judge transferability of the findings
- Make your own position, and your organisational position, clear
- Do some of: reveal underlying rules and structures, expose the workings of power, provide accounts of the construction of social meanings, explain the meaning and cultural significance of practices, develop concepts or theories

Adapted from Denscombe, 2010
Some suggested solutions (2): Procedures

- Establish working rules
- Observe protocol
- Involve participants
- Negotiate with those affected
- Report progress
- Obtain explicit authorisation before you observe
- Negotiate descriptions of people’s work and accounts of others’ points of view
- Negotiate reports for various levels of release
- Accept responsibility for maintaining confidentiality
- Retain the right to report your work
- Make your principles of procedure binding and known

Headings from Resource 4, in Kemmis, McTaggart & Nixon, 2014
Example guidelines (1): the issue of authenticity

Think about the authenticity of your contribution:

- Will this study evaluate your own effectiveness or a method to which you are committed? Is there protection for your interpretations and critical analysis?

- How will you access multiple perspectives? What data will be contributed by others? How will you deal with issues arising from power relationships?

- Consider why you choose to report some data to a wider audience and why you choose to keep some for your colleagues or yourself

- Consider whether and how some anonymity can be achieved (for you, your colleagues, your organisation)
Example guidelines (2): Closing the research

- Make sure that colleagues know when you are no longer gathering data on the topic

- Think carefully about what you can and cannot say ethically, considering any likely damage to the organisation through lack of transparency or over-sharing

- Agree who is responsible for the final report: who will review? who gets final say?

- Consider a meeting or series of meetings in which you share your findings and conclusions with colleagues
Points for reflection

1. How conscious are we of these conflicting forces on our insider research?

2. Do we feel that our research is authentic, and if so, how do we achieve that?

3. What barriers do we encounter?

4. What strategies have each of us found successful in overcoming barriers to carrying out, completing and communicating our insider research?
References

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