

A journey in research, from research assistant to Doctor of Philosophy

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There is emerging a considerable literature on the development of higher degree research and supervision. This literature deals with issues of quality, standards of supervision and many of the common problems experienced by novice researchers in their pursuit of a higher degree. Within this literature, however, there is little that addresses the specific and often quite different issues presented by funded Projects. For example, the relationship between such projects and the higher degree proposals that often run in parallel the intention of this paper is to consider the impact, both positive and negative, of the institutional and funding context on the shape and planning of research, the value of doing funded research for career and personal development, and potential conflicts of interest. The aim is to use my own experience of working on a funded project in parallel with a higher degree registration to explore some of the problems as well as the benefits of being paid to do research.

Introduction

CURRENT TRENDS in higher education show a steady increase in the number of research degree registrations in UK universities, and consequently a greater interest in higher degree research as a subject of discussion, and indeed research in its own right. Particular areas of concern include quality (Burgess 1994; EPSRC 1995), approaches to, and standards of supervision (Hockey 1995 & 1995a; Phillips and Pugh 1994; Salmon 1992), the experience of being a research student (Hetrick and Trafford 1995; Hockey 1994; Skuse 1995), and the nature of higher degree

research itself (Hockey 1995b; Newbury 1996). In this emerging body of literature there is a recognition that doing a research degree is far from an easy passage for many students, and that there is considerable room for improvement in the training that is available to research students, and in the amount and quality of supervision. Much of the research in this area has had a very direct relationship with supervisory practice, and in particular has led to a revision of approaches to supervision, particularly in the new universities.

However, despite the scope of current work and its relevance to the practice of higher degree research and supervision, there are still a number of significant gaps in the knowledge of the PhD process. There are relatively few studies, for example, that address the specific problems faced by research assistants on funded projects; problems that may be quite different from those encountered by other research students. Given that universities, both in the United Kingdom and abroad (Wood 1992), are increasingly offering their services as commercial research institutions, this is an important area of investigation. In this paper I want to suggest that, far from being incidental in relation to the logic of intellectual inquiry, the institutional and funding context has a very real impact on the shape and planning of research. Furthermore, I intend to argue that the funders of research, and the universities that play host to externally sponsored projects, have a responsibility to the researchers they employ. Whilst research often has an instrumental value for the funders, as applicable knowledge, and the universities, as source of income and status, it is the researchers who are being asked to invest a significant proportion of their lives and identities in the day to day work of research. The opportunities for personal and career development are a significant factor in the structure of research. To work in parallel on a funded research project and a higher degree research proposal is to confront these issues head-on: the instrumental value of knowledge versus the logic of intellectual inquiry;

personal versus career development; the needs of the funder versus the needs of the researcher. Clearly, there is potential for conflicts of interest, some of which I shall explore in this paper. The broad intention is to explore the way in which these issues are experienced in the day to day work of research.

Recent research in graduate education places considerable emphasis on the relationship between student and supervisor. Whilst this is understandable, the tendency has been to discuss research in isolation from any broader institutional or social context. I intend to place research within a broader setting, examining through my own experience as a research worker some of the institutional and personal factors which influence the shape and direction of a project. Whilst I recognise that my experience of doing research is very specific (my own project involved qualitative research in education), a number of themes emerge that are of significance to those taking on, and those setting up, funded research projects across the humanities and social sciences. I begin with a broad look at the determining influence of the research context, and then examine in more detail three particular issues: the significance of networks of support; the conflicts involved in planning a funded project in parallel with a higher degree proposal, and the status and career implications of being a researcher.

Three contexts for research

The context often determines what is counted as knowledge and how it is valued. For the concerns of this paper I want to discuss three contexts in which research is situated — the personal context, the funding context, and the institutional context — and the importance of their interrelation. My own experience provides a source of illustration.

In order for the reader to be able to make sense of my comments, it is necessary for me to provide a brief outline of the research project I worked on during the period 1992-95.¹ The project was set up by what was then the Arts Council of Great Britain, and the University of Central England.

¹ For a more detailed account of the project and its outcomes see Newbury 1993, 1993a, 1993b, 1994 & 1995.

The project was given the title 'Styles and Sites of Photographic Education' and was intended to provide a broad survey of educational practice in photography across a number of contexts: community, education, media and arts; and, within education, at a number of levels: secondary education, professional qualifications and undergraduate courses. It was only at the point when the initial project was in place that I became involved. I applied for the one-year research assistant post that was advertised nationally, turned up an hour late for the interview, and was promptly offered the job. The decision to register for MPhil, and later to transfer to PhD seemed a logical, if somewhat less than natural, progression, the significance of which I shall return to later.

The personal context of the research was my own experience of photographic education. I had studied photography at professional diploma level, as an undergraduate on a practically based photography degree course, and from a theoretical perspective as part of my masters degree. This I presume was part of the reason I was given the job. Beyond this, the personal context gave the research a subjective motivation allowing me to relive my own experiences at one remove. Not all of my experiences of photographic education were entirely satisfactory, and for me the research was very much about revisiting these frustrations, and coming to a better understanding regarding my own experience of different 'styles' and 'sites'. This is what might be referred to as the 'felt need' for research. Although popular conceptions of scientific methodology suggest that subjective feelings are antithetical to the research process, I would argue that they are in fact crucial to a comprehensive understanding of how research is experienced by those doing it.

The funding context was that of the Arts Council's history of funding photography education work since the 1970's. The project was part of a broader strategy to move away from funding individuals or small initiatives in photography in education, and towards the formation of a national approach. It was clear in this context that the project was set up with the intention of supporting a higher national profile for photography in education. In choosing me, the project had someone who in general terms, if not always in specific detail, supported these objectives. However, the test of funded research of this kind must be the degree of autonomy given

to the researcher to pursue lines of inquiry independently of the funder's agenda. Although in this instance there was space for me as a researcher to pursue my investigation freely, it is certainly possible to envisage circumstances in which this may not be the case.

The question of researcher autonomy is absolutely crucial, and provides the basis for the interrelationship between the funding and institutional contexts. It is only within a framework of researcher autonomy, in relation to which the university must take seriously its role as guarantor, that the contracting of research services can maintain an intellectual integrity and independence from pure market relations. The role of the university is not simply to guarantee academic standards, but to facilitate open debate of the value of knowledge, the interests it serves, and the ethics of its production. In the context of any one project it is important that possible intellectual constraints are openly appraised at the outset of a project in order, at the very least, to avoid conflict at a later stage.

The university setting also has a more general significance for research work. The project I worked on represented an inter-departmental collaboration, and was part of a program of developing an institutional research profile. Although intellectually this seems the least significant context, it is important to remember that it is within institutions that researchers are based for much of their time, and the particular research ethos that is present undoubtedly has an affect on what is counted as a valuable outcome, as it certainly did for this researcher. All three contexts play an important part in shaping a research project, and in the way in which doing research is experienced.

Supervision and Advice: Networks of Support

Although it is often noted (Hockey 1994; Skuse 1995) that research appears to be situated in a social and intellectual vacuum, this is rarely the case with funded projects, the outcomes of which are often intended to be directly applicable in the world outside of academia. This should not be viewed as a distortion of research, but rather an opportunity to explore and negotiate the value of the work in relation to real interests. From my point of view as a research student it is ironic that

the two most disheartening aspects of doing a PhD, funding and intellectual and social isolation (Skuse 1995: 36), had already, at least in part, been solved prior to my becoming involved in the particular project on which I worked and which developed into my doctoral thesis.

Even by the standards of best practice in research degree supervision the amount of supervisory and advisory support available for me during the first period of the project was impressive. In addition to the project director, who was effectively my director of studies from the beginning (officially so once I registered for a higher degree), there was a management committee composed of the project director and three heads of department, and an advisory group of five, which included a media education advisor, a photographer and regional arts officer, a worker in a photography education community group, and two independent photography and arts workers. The supervisory and advisory structure was organised in three tiers: project director for daily or weekly contact; management committee meetings fortnightly to start, then monthly; and full advisory group meetings four or five times during the year. Advisors were also consulted on a one-to-one basis, as needed during the project. On top of this once I registered for a higher degree there also existed a separate supervisory structure for that, though obviously with some overlap.

There are benefits and deficits to such an extensive supervisory and advisory structure, as I was to discover. On the positive side, the network already in place when I began the project held two principal benefits. Firstly, it represented an impressive resource of knowledge and expertise in the field I was undertaking to study. Taken as a whole the group had many years experience of photography and education work, and indeed provided a kind of map of current practice. In addition the individuals had already signalled their interest in the project, and their preparedness to share ideas and knowledge about the field. One of the most valuable aspects of the network was the diversity of interests it represented. In this respect the project represented a bridge between academic research and non-academic practice in photography and education. This underlies the second of its benefits. The advisory network mitigated many of the problems of negotiating access to individuals and situations that accompany qualitative research. Not only was I able to identify relatively

quickly those individuals who I needed to interview, but in addition a certain level of receptiveness to my research, in most instances, was also guaranteed. Even when dealing with contacts not directly provided by the advisory group, the ability to introduce myself as working on an Arts Council funded project often seemed to carry greater weight than describing myself as a research student. However, it should be noted that this is not always an unqualified good; the way in which a researcher frames their identity when entering any research field is worthy of careful consideration. Different aspects of one's identity as a researcher are things to be deployed strategically and with care. I can remember at least one instance where my mentioning the institutional backing of the project had precisely the opposite effect to the one I intended.

As might be expected the benefits of this system also harboured potentially negative side effects. Such a large and diverse group needs actively managing in some way if it is going to be most beneficial to the project. Unfortunately, the novice researcher is unlikely to have the skills and confidence to do this to best effect. To maintain what is often, in the early stages, a fragile sense of what the project is about in the face of individuals who already have many years experience in the field is a daunting task. My experience of some of the early project meetings was of being spun round unsure of which way I or the project would end up pointing. This is reinforced by the fragility of one's sense of self as a researcher, what Hockey refers to as the intellectual self (Hockey 1994: 182). It is also important for the advice given to be seen to be valued. Relationships, personal and professional, developed during the process of research have value beyond their immediate contribution to a particular project.

The number of people who had an interest in the project, alongside the fact that I had taken the project on as a full-time paid job, meant that it was difficult for me to develop the sense that the project was fully my own. For the first few months of the project I worked with the uneasy sense that someone was going to tell me exactly what they wanted from the project. They never did, or at least by the time they did I had developed sufficient confidence to maintain the integrity and direction for the project that I wanted. In research, as in all forms of learning, the question of ownership is crucial, though far from unproblematic.

Endpoints: Closing and Re-opening the Research, or Doing Methodology Backwards

Time constraints and anticipated outcomes are particularly significant in determining the shape of a research project. Small funded projects of one year in length, sometimes less, are quite common. When such a project is conducted in parallel with a research degree registration there is potential for a conflict of interests, and a negative effect on the planning of the research. A glance at some of the literature on how to do a research project gives the impression of a neat linearity to the process of research — literature review, research design, data collection, data analysis, writing up. However, even in the most straightforward of proposals research often moves in more of a circular motion — a helix perhaps — rather than a straight line. One circles around the same questions from different angles, and at different levels of sophistication.

My experience of working on a funded project in parallel with my registration for a higher degree reinforced this dynamic. Although I noted that funding was in place for the project prior to my involvement, it is important to realise that the project as conceived and funded by the Arts Council was one year long, whereas the PhD took three years. The need to work simultaneously to different time-scales on what was experienced as a single project was one of the biggest difficulties that the parallel tracking of the funded project and my PhD registration presented. In practice what this meant was that the project had several endpoints, three in fact, rather than one. The three endpoints represented three different audiences, or stakeholders, for the research: funders, practicing teachers, and academics. The main output of the research came in three different forms: a full research report at the end of the funded part of the project (Newbury 1993b); a publication for photography teachers in secondary and further education (this was dependent on further funding, but was a logical outcome of the nature of the project, actively seeking to develop work in the field rather than simply understanding it) (Newbury 1994); and the final PhD thesis that was assessed as a contribution to academic knowledge (Newbury 1995). One of the results of this structure was the need to effect a closure to the

research at specific points, and then to reopen the research to move the project on to the next stage. As a consequence there is a marked development in the ideas at each of the three stages as well as a difference in form. Some points of closure could be judged to have been premature; others avenues of enquiry would perhaps not have been kept open so long. In some respects revisiting the empirical material, for example interview transcripts, proved extremely rewarding for the research, and supported the use of a qualitative methodology. The richness and significance of the data collected at some of the early stages was not realised until an appropriate theoretical framework was acquired later on. This reinforced the sense I sometimes had of doing methodology backwards. No doubt because of the need to view the project initially as having a one-year timescale, I began the field research part of the project earlier than I would have done had I been planning a three-year PhD programme. Some elements of the early data collection were therefore relatively untheorised and unfocussed. As a consequence I worked harder, and with a greater degree of anxiety, to achieve the same level of rigour, than I would have otherwise needed. The aim to extensively survey photographic education practice, for example, generated much material which was jettisoned at the PhD stage of the work. Another disadvantage of the parallel tracking was that I seemed to be perpetually writing the project up in one form or another from the end of the first year onwards.

In view of my experience, I would argue that issues of the time-scale and the possible endpoints and outcomes of any project need a considerable degree of consideration at the beginning of any such project, particularly where this may significantly alter its shape. If a funded project is also intended as a potential research degree registration, then those funding and directing the project should consider carefully the interrelation between the different outcomes, and its effect on project planning. If the project is not to be funded through to final completion, then perhaps the outcome of the funded part of the project should be coordinated as a milestone in the longer plan. Awareness of this would help to avoid contradiction between the short and long-term aims. This is particularly an issue for those setting up such projects, as those undertaking the research work are often, as I was, simply glad to have the funding and the opportunity.

Researcher: Career Opportunity or Temporary Identity?

It seems to me that one of the central problems of being a researcher on a funded project is having to negotiate a sense of identity as a researcher against conflicting backgrounds of permanence and temporality. As I have indicated, my own attachment to the research project on which I worked involved a high degree of personal commitment and investment of self. Although this is certainly not the case with all research (and nor should it be), there is a considerable amount of work in the humanities and social sciences, influenced particularly by debates in feminism and cultural studies around the nature and purpose of research, that adopts a similar perspective. Long (1994) argues that research provides a form of learning that is continuous with other modes of education, and should not be institutionally separated. Research may be seen as the logical extension of previous work and experience, or as part of a life project. This is certainly the case with some educational action research, and is a theme often present in art and design research (Newbury 1996). Salmon, for example, makes a cogent argument for such an approach to research supervision (Salmon 1992). She suggests the importance of situating research within personal, social and institutional contexts, and recognising that ultimately, if it is to be both successful and personally rewarding, research must be responsive to these contexts. For me the personal involvement in the subject matter of the research, and indeed my empathy with the subjects I researched, provided a strong element of continuity between the project and my life experience prior to being a researcher. My commitment to the area of interest was not bounded by the confines of the project; it has been, and will continue to be, an area of permanent interest.

In contrast to this sense of continuity, being a researcher on a funded project is played out against a background of impermanence. Reflecting on the time I have spent working on funded projects I am struck by the sense of being temporary that surrounded, and continues to surround, my identity as a researcher. The transition from contract researcher on a funded project, to research student, during the course of what was in many ways one continuous project, highlighted further my status and identity as a

researcher as something problematic and to be negotiated, rather than fixed and dependable.

Issues of funding and career possibilities as often as not move from being the background to research to occupying the foreground in the experience and day to day work of doing research (Major 1994). As I have suggested above the very shape of the research project, and its public outcomes are determined as much by seemingly contextual matter as by any independent intellectual trajectory or logic. Although there is little research on the experience of contract researchers, what evidence there is suggests that this experience is not uncommon, as Youngman reports from his research on contract researchers in education:

“generally there is a predominance of negative attitudes towards career possibilities, but a positive view of the personal development aspects of the work, especially the autonomy, the innovativeness, using experience and learning new skills. Over 60 percent consider the pay inadequate and the work inducing personal strain.” (Youngman 1994: 369)

It also seems likely that in a slightly different form this is a problem shared by research students in general. Hockey (1994) reports on the effects of the ESRC sanctions policy on submission rates as it is experienced by students: “Time, intellectual productivity and anxiety can become inextricably bound together” (p. 182). The three year funding limit, and the fact that a large proportion of these are not submitted within three years, suggests that many doctorates are completed after the student’s official status as a researcher has ended.

Concluding Comments

Common sense conceptions of the nature of doing research tend to fall into opposing camps, or paradigms. The first, the individualist paradigm, is as Hockey argues a “predominantly accepted form by which intellectual excellence is achieved” (Hockey 1994: 179). The vision it offers is a romantic one. The researcher is a lone individual working at the frontiers of knowledge. The intellectual and social isolation often experienced is tacitly supported by this perspective, representing a liminal state for the novice researcher in an elaborate rite of passage. The second, the instrumentalist paradigm, recognises the contingency of one’s identity as a researcher, and views the project in hand as simply a task to be completed. The researcher, like any other

worker, has a set of skills to bargain with in the labour market. Phillips and Pugh (1994) is probably the clearest statement of this as a philosophy of research and supervision. Such an approach recognises the career value of the PhD, as greater than its importance as an intellectual journey; though to complete a PhD solely for career reasons is perhaps questionable (Pearson 1993).

Although these perspectives have their value, in isolation they provide an inadequate explanation of the significance of research, and how it is experienced. What I want to move towards is a position from which their respective emphases can be brought together and debated, not as separate positions, but as elements of the research process that are, in the reality of doing research, inevitably intertwined. An understanding of the day to day work of research, and the way in which this articulates with a broader understanding of the place of knowledge in society is absolutely crucial, both to universities and individual researchers. I have tried to stress the importance of an open awareness and negotiation of the identity and status of the researcher, the aims of the various stakeholders in any one project, and the way in which this can effect the shape and outcome of research. Similarly, an appreciation of the way in which research projects are experienced by those who work on them is crucial to their success. It is not enough simply to recognise that doing research involves embarking on a long and sometimes hazardous journey. Those who are involved in funding and coordinating research have a responsibility to understand how the process of research is experienced by project researchers and students alike, and to act on this understanding to create the best possible environment for the production of useful knowledge.

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