

Getting the facts: a report on the Getting Started with Educational Research days

"Now what I want is Facts. Teach these boys and girls nothing back Facts. Facts alone are what are wanted in life. Plant nothing else, and root out everything else." So opens *Hard Times*, the only novel by Charles Dickens set outside London. The words are spoken by a Yorkshireman, Thomas Gradgrind, a man of realities and holder of clear educational philosophies. But how modern all this seems. Only last week a student approached me waving an essay saying "I hope I got all the facts in". I, of course, was hoping that they hadn't, but had instead written an essay where knowledge and understanding of physiology was illustrated. This student wasn't the exception in holding this adherence to facts. I regularly have students holding essays in front of me asking such questions as 'have I included everything' or 'is there anything else *you'd* like me to write'. I'm surprised they don't finish the sentence with a chirpy 'Mr Chips'. Where do these students perception of what is required in an essay come from? I'm not sure, but having attended both 'Getting Started with Educational Research' days organised by the Centre for Bioscience I certainly have a much better idea of how I can find out, and once I have the 'facts' I know more about where to publish them.

For me the key parts of both days were the 'swapshop' sessions where examples of interesting educational research was presented and discussed. Here is a flavour from both days:

Janice Harland from Liverpool John Moores University spoke about the tricky topic of designing and using questionnaires in data collection. Helpfully Janice guided us to spend plenty of time considering the planning stage of research and provided usable tips such as, rigorously exclude off-the-point questions in questionnaire design.

Ruth Bevan from University of Leicester was undertaking a project aimed to optimise feedback within School of Biological Sciences by identifying any gaps between expectations of staff and students regarding the format of, and engagement with feedback. What was interesting about this presentation was that Ruth helpfully alerted us to her 'lessons learnt' in carrying out the research

Alison Kelly from Kingston University research started, as so much good pedagogic research does, by asking questions about 'what is the student experience of...? In Alison's case 'what are student's perceptions of their progression from year two to year three. Using a short questionnaire Alison has obtained a neat snapshot of a cohort's perceptions.

Susan Robbins from the Oxford Brookes University was aware that students who do not settle into a good study regime early in the first semester are in danger of failing modules and entering into a downward spiral leading to loss of confidence and performance. So was there anything that could be done. Susan showed there was, and that personal contact with failing students was vital to improving their self-esteem.

Frances Tracy from University of Cambridge showed how evidence-based approaches could enhance the effectiveness of small group teaching in second year plant and microbial sciences. What Frances, who isn't a tutor, also demonstrated was

how important it is to have subject knowledge when working with tutors and students in exploring beliefs about learning

Debbie Bevitt from Newcastle University was interested in finding ways to support student learning through attendance monitoring which has led to the development of a student support system which is triggered by poor attendance in the early stage of studies

More details of these presentations can be found on the Centre's web site. And while some of the work is in an embryonic form, it does show the range and potential that exist for this type of research in all universities.

The days were also designed to give guidance on a range of issues related to pedagogic research. Both days were opened by the ex-Director of the Centre Ian Hughes, who was in a typically confident and bullish mood. Ian in his presentation set up an array of relevant questions and then energetically answered them. It was a helpful way to start the day, it instilled confidence in the participants that pedagogic research was doable.

Mike Joy from the University of Warwick gave a thoughtful and balanced introduction to research methods and methodologies and managed to show how both quantitative and qualitative methodologies could be used to give breadth and depth to research studies.

Finally Chris Willmott from the University of Leicester gave a most informative presentation on getting work published. An ideal speaker on this topic Chris, former editor of [Bioscience Education](#), took us carefully along the path to successful publication. Everything from 'What to publish' to 'where to publish' was covered, and, for those who have published in mainstreams educational journals, this talk held some interesting advice and guidance. I never knew for example, that the journal *Science* had a monthly education section.

For me there were three key messages from the day:

- Before undertaking some new pieces of teaching or interventions think of how you could write up a piece of research from what you are already doing;
- Don't be put off by having to work with new research methods which you may be unfamiliar with; and
- Familiarise yourself with different types of publications where you might wish to submit your work.

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