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FINAL VERSION

Holistic research for holistic practice: making sense of qualitative research data

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Abstract

Prevalent models of research advocate technical methods to guarantee ‘truth’. They suggest the discovery of a single ‘effective’ way to develop learning and skills through the isolation of particular categories and variables. We argue, by contrast, that holistic research is needed to inform the holistic practice that is pursued by many professionals in Further Education. In order to support the development of research capacity in FE (a key aim of the project on Transforming Learning Cultures in Further Education), this paper considers how holistic data analyses and interpretations were effected in two different qualitative research projects: one on secondary school pupils’ responses to Shakespeare in the National Curriculum, and one on mentoring relationships with ‘disaffected’ young people in post-16 pre-vocational training. We discuss how standard coding techniques fragmented highly personal stories, distorted or obscured key issues and over-simplified complex processes and contexts. In conclusion, we offer arguments for alternative methods of data analysis which may prove supportive of FE practitioner research, as well as providing evidence relevant throughout FE.

Introduction

The Learning and Skills Sector may have been comparatively under-researched in the past, but this is changing rapidly, with a government-backed call for the creation of a strong evidence base for the development of policy and practice. In Further Education (FE) there is an expectation from both government and research funding councils that practitioners themselves will be instrumental in creating such evidence. This has prompted a lively debate in the recent pages of *College Research* (see, for example, Culham, 2001, Davey, 2001, Webb *et al*, 2001).

Much of this debate has focused on the culture of FE, and whether that culture is amenable or resistant to the development of research from within (see Scaife, Colley and Davies, 2001, also Bates *et al*, 1997, Brotherton, 1998). We propose to take a different approach in this paper, starting from a recognition that some FE professionals and institutions **are** increasingly involved in research. We will argue that, if research is to become embedded in FE and the wider learning and skills sector, the transformation of culture required is not one-way. The Higher Education (HE) research community also needs to ensure that it plays a partnership role in enhancing research capacity in FE, in part by promoting research methods and approaches that are relevant to practitioners.

We should include in these introductory remarks our own interests in these issues. We are both university-based researchers in the project *Transforming Learning Cultures in Further Education* (TLC-FE), funded for over 4 years by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) as part of its major Teaching and Learning Research Programme (TLRP). Dissemination support is being provided by the Learning and Skills Development Agency and its Research Network (LSDA and LSRN). An important aspiration of the TLC-FE project is the enhancement of research capacity among practitioners in the sector. TLC-FE is the largest ever research project conducted in FE, and it is also unique in the HE-FE partnership it is constructing. Four universities are involved, each one in partnership with a local FE college. Each local team comprises a senior academic as Director, one university-based research fellow and one research fellow seconded from the FE college. In addition, four tutors at each college are participating in the research, providing access to their students and learning sites, and collaborating with the research team in introducing and evaluating innovations in their practice.

Building strong partnerships with our colleagues in FE is of prime importance for us. This involves a reciprocal process whereby we learn **from** as well as **in** FE, and we hope to help our FE partners learn about doing research. The ideal towards which we are working is to create a project that conducts research **in**, not 'on', FE (Bloomer and James, 2001).

At the same time, both of us are doctoral research students, approaching completion of our PhD studies in other areas of interest. Both of us have encountered difficulties in our research, particularly in making sense of our qualitative data using methods of analysis which dominate educational research and are advocated in the majority of research training courses and textbooks. Whether in the study of secondary school pupils' responses to Shakespeare in the National Curriculum (Diment), or of mentoring relationships between volunteer mentors and 'disaffected' 16-18 year-olds in pre-vocational training (Colley), such standard procedures brought us, in different ways, into conflict with the dominant research culture, resulting in a re-thinking of textbook approaches to data analysis and a consideration of alternative approaches (which we shall each be discussing in accounts of our own data analyses later in the paper).

How do these two aspects of our experience as researchers – our own doctoral research studies and our present research in the TLC-FE project – come together? In order to make the links more explicit we need to begin by reflecting on what we feel to be an important aspect of the culture of FE – that of professionalisation. This is a vital element of that community of practice, and central to our commitment to enhance research capacity.

FE: a culture of reprofessionalisation?

Discussion of FE since incorporation has focused a great deal on the new managerialist agenda, the consequences of target-driven funding and inspection régime, and the creation of an audit culture in which bureaucracy has proliferated (e.g. Ainley and Bailey, 1996, Avis, 1996, Gleeson, 1996). This has been perceived to result in a process of de-professionalisation, through the increasing prescription and a surveillance of practice, a reification of students as abstract 'units', and a marketisation of the sector in which competition became far more important than collaboration. The notion of colleges as businesses has at times seemed to overwhelm their role as educational institutions.

It would be wrong, however, to assume that these developments have dominated professional practice entirely. Unsurprisingly, the culture of FE is far more complex than that. Recent research evidence demonstrates that many FE practitioners have found ways to reassert their own professional ethos in ways that resist or subvert the more negative effects of incorporation. Shain and Gleeson's (1999) investigation of FE lecturers' working practices and identities showed that many had responded to the new régime by adopting a form of 'strategic compliance'. Through a process of professional reconstruction, such lecturers had found ways to engage in 'creative accounting' which ensured that numerical targets for funding were met, at the same time preserving and promoting certain core values.

These...include the commitment to student learning agendas with an emphasis on a particular model of quality that is defined though process rather than outcome, and a genuine commitment to widening participation that also recognises the need for collaborative modes of work...[T]hese values are not merely a reactive response to wider official policy agendas. Rather they have emerged via a complex process that involves the mediation of educational reform through existing professional ideologies and commitments (Shain and Gleeson, 1999: 460).

Examples of such a strategy evidenced by that study included moral and practical challenges to some of the sharper practices whereby colleges have sought to recruit students without proper consideration for the suitability of the course, reinforced by the integration of college guidance units into their own marketing departments. Lecturers had also run otherwise unfeasible community education courses by recording them under the aegis of Adult Basic Education, though they may in fact be a forum for parents of children excluded from school, rather than delivering literacy or numeracy. Early evidence from the TLC-FE project already suggests to us, in a similar vein, that some lecturers are allowing young people to remain on vocational courses although these students are clearly unable to meet the written coursework requirements. Despite threatening course 'achievement' targets, lecturers may allow some students to continue because they perceive the course to be the only stable factor in a disadvantaged young person's life, or because the work experience placements provided through the college may prove vital for the student's employment prospects in the future.

Such resistance to reductive policy approaches, and the strategic pursuit of practices which genuinely focus on young people in the context of their wider lives and experiences, is evident not only within teaching in FE, but also in the related field of support and guidance for young people in transition. Careers services were privatised in the mid-1990s, and their funding had become dependent on meeting targets for blanket interviewing and action planning of 'mainstream' youngsters (Ford, 1999). Many practitioners had perceived this as a process of deprofessionalisation for themselves and of further exclusion for those young people most in need of support. Some services and practitioners seized the opportunity offered by European funding through the Youthstart Initiative to create possibilities for continuing or expanding their work with disadvantaged young people. Here, holistic practice was seen explicitly as being at the heart of these responses:

Holism is integral to all high quality career guidance because career choice can never be wholly dissociated from the other factors (values, circumstances,

responsibilities etc.) which make up each person's life. However, resource and time constraints normally mean that in practice careers advisers have to discipline the adoption of holistic approaches [to those factors] which appear most directly related to career choice. For disengaged young people, the adoption of such disciplined approaches to guidance can mean that advisers are unable to touch the root causes of the individual's inability to progress (Ford, 1999: 11).

We would argue that actions like these are indicative of a form of professionalism which resists the reduction of students to numbers and the over-simplification of their experiences in FE through abstract benchmarks of retention and achievement. We would also suggest that they represent a form of **holistic practice**.

There is evidence, then, that many practitioners in the learning and skills sector pursue values which focus on students' needs, resist their generalisation as 'customers', and insist on a response to individual and collective needs that also take into account much wider contextual factors than can be accounted for by simplistic targets. These values could be summarised by the terms 'holism' or 'holistic approach', and appear to lie at the heart of relatively common practitioner reassertions of their professional identity. It is for this reason that we argue that research engaged with such a form of practice, seeking to integrate FE practitioners in the research process itself and to disseminate it more widely throughout the sector, may be more effective if it also adopts an holistic approach. Before going on to explore what such an approach might involve through our own experiences of research, let us first define more clearly what we mean by 'holism'.

Holism

The *Concise Oxford English Dictionary* defines holism as a philosophical theory 'that certain wholes are greater than the sum of their parts', and as a medical approach that treats 'the whole person, rather than just the symptoms of a disease'. The entry notes that the word did not enter the English language until the 1920s. Strathern (1997) has argued that it is necessary to examine the origins and subsequent 'borrowing and crossing of domains' of a concept in order to achieve clarity about its meaning, including covert meanings it may have acquired along the way. Just such a genealogy of 'holism' may also be helpful here.

While the roots of holism may indeed be traced back to the field of philosophy, and to Hegel's revolution in introducing the dialectical method, the concept itself emerged early in the 20th century in the field of biological science, particularly in relation to the study of evolution and reproductive cellular biology (Phillips, 1976). Revolutions in scientific method almost always occur when dominant established methods find themselves in an impasse, unable to process or explain new developments or information that have come to light (Kuhn, 1970), and mechanistic science had found itself increasingly unable to account for the knowledge of evolution that Darwin's discoveries had produced some decades earlier.

The biological holists argued that microscopic detail or atomistic analysis may lead to precision, but they also lead to the loss of wider perspective. One of their main objections to traditional science was that it was based on identifying laws and predicting outcomes of processes, and was thus unable to deal with the unpredictable. These predictive goals, aimed at human domination and control of the natural world, tended to result in the reduction of a complex entity and its characteristics to a collection of separate properties and laws about their individual behaviour. Thus

they obscured interrelations between the integral parts of organic systems by treating them as a mechanistic conglomerate.

The holistic challenge was not restricted to the physical sciences. Durkheim had advocated the need for a science of sociology to go beyond the individual focus of psychology. In developing that social science, he argued that individuals had to be understood in their relationship to society as a whole, and that their actions had to be interpreted in relation to large-scale social phenomena, as well as in terms of the interplay of structure and agency. In the discipline of psychology itself, Gestalt theory challenged behaviouristic models, arguing that they failed to do justice to the full complexity of human behaviour. In the field of education, Dewey insisted on the importance of the relationship between the knower and the environment they know. The biological revolution had quickly spread across other intellectual domains.

Yet in these multiple domain crossings, the meaning of holism has itself been transformed in multiple ways. These meanings can be seen as having bifurcated in two opposite directions, which might be termed the ‘spiritual’ and the ‘managerialist’ (or technicist). On the one hand, the concept of an holistic approach has become suffused with the notion of spirituality (exemplified by Martin, 1997, and also evident in Ford, 1999, and Heron, 1996). Although such approaches argue that individuals’ educational experiences must be understood in the context of their entire life experience – a proposition which is fundamental to the TLC-FE project – spiritual definitions go beyond this position, seeming to argue for essential aspects of ‘human nature’ that ignore wider structural factors.

On the other hand, holism has also been absorbed and technicised within the discourse of Total Quality Management (TQM) that forms a major element of the managerialist agenda in FE and of the school effectiveness movement (e.g. Herman, 1993). The spiritual interpretation explicitly represents a reaction against instrumentalist notions that construct the purpose of education as subservient to the needs of employers and the economy. The technicist approach, by contrast, represents an attempt to co-opt the rhetoric of that reaction back into an instrumentalist framework. It turns the notion of holistic practice into its opposite by reinstating atomistic and reductive criteria for education, by claiming predictive power for educational research, and by legitimating prescriptive control of educational processes.

In contrast to both these interpretations, we will argue for holism in FE practice and educational research in its original sense – as an approach that regards any human and social subject as a totally integrated system rather than as a sum of articulated parts, and which seeks to ensure that analysis illuminates rather than obscures the wider perspective that is so essential to making sense of educational processes.

We have shown how holistic practice is at the heart of key debates about the nature of the culture of FE, and the cultural practices in which FE professionals engage. But as we stated in our introduction, this paper is primarily concerned with ways in which **research culture** can make itself relevant to those practitioners, since without doing so, the project of enhancing research capacity among those practitioners may be far less likely to succeed. Let us turn, then, to consider the field of educational research itself, and to locate our own experiences of research in relation to holistic ways of understanding. We want to look in particular at one aspect of research which is not frequently discussed when authors outline the methods by which they conducted their research. Yet it has enormous bearing upon the findings of research: the manner by which data is analysed.

We believe this is an important research issue for practitioners, because analysis is the means by which we make sense of data. While quantitative data – the statistical evidence provided by surveys, questionnaires and numerical information – reveals important overall patterns and trends, it requires expert knowledge to make sense of such data. There are technical rules and methods for analysing such data, which also allow the results to be validated. However, qualitative data – interviews with individuals, observations of teaching and learning situations and so on – appears more accessible. Anyone can sit down and read the transcripts of a series of interviews, or an observer’s account of a lecture. Yet when confronted with a large amount of such discursive data, it can be extremely difficult to make sense of that whole, and arrive at a coherent interpretation. How, then, can we make sense of qualitative data? Before we discuss that question from our experiences, we need to consider the traditional methods of data analysis that research training usually encompasses.

Traditional methods of data analysis

Whether qualitative or quantitative, most social and educational research is dominated by an approach to data analysis that has been termed ‘paradigmatic’ (Polkinghorne, 1995). The basic technique is to identify key categories relating to the original research questions, and then to code portions of the data according to these categories. The use of the ‘cut-and-paste’ wordprocessing facility is often recommended as way to extract and group data (Mason, 1996, Ritchie and Spencer, 1994). Software programmes such as QSR NUD*IST allow similar but more technically sophisticated facilities. Fundamentally, however, the process of data analysis is described as one of identifying similarities and differences between different extracts from the data (Dey, 1993, May, 1997). The process then moves on to the elaboration of more abstract concepts, and the interconnections that can be drawn between categories, with recommendations for the drawing up of matrices, typologies and spectra. Huberman and Miles (1998) advocate that this should be pursued with an ‘audit trail’ approach that would allow other researchers to trace each step in the process, and arrive at the same resultant findings.

A refinement of this approach is ‘grounded theory’ (e.g. Glaser and Strauss, 1967, Strauss and Corbin, 1998a), which Kim Diment discusses in relation to her own research below. Although this approach insists on the strict formation and distillation of categories to which the data will be assigned, it avoids prejudgements about what those categories might be. Grounded theory seeks to allow the categories to emerge from the data itself through a repeated process of analysis to ‘saturate’ the categories, followed by further testing in ensuing fieldwork, the collection of new data, and subsequent adaptation of the categories if necessary.

The etymological roots of the word ‘analysis’ mean ‘taking apart’, and we can see how apt a description this is for traditional methods of data analysis. It is literally a process of taking apart different portions of our data, and regrouping them according to categories in what is essentially a reductive process (Wolcott, 1994). It is ‘atomistic’, which itself derives from the Greek verb ‘to cut up’. The reader may already have discerned the potentially mechanistic tendencies of the techniques recommended in the research method textbooks cited above. The key characteristics of such research methods show striking similarities with the scientific methods which blocked scientific understanding over a century ago, and which could only be resolved through the adoption of radically different, holistic methods, as we have seen. As research students, we both experienced (albeit in different ways) pressures,

some internal, some external, to conform to paradigmatic methods of data analysis. Both of us found such methods frustrating to our efforts to make sense of our qualitative data, and we will briefly recount our own individual experiences as illustrations of our argument. Although one of these projects was based in secondary education and one in post-16 vocational training, both dealt with issues of concern to the learning and skills sector as a whole, as well as highlighting issues of data analysis. Kim Diment begins with an account of her need to adapt grounded theory in order to represent her findings.

***Pupil responses to Shakespeare in the National Curriculum
(Kim Diment)***

The topic of my research was concerned with Pupils' responses to Shakespeare at Key Stage 3. The study focussed on Year 9 pupils aged 13-14 years, because at this stage in many pupils' school careers they will encounter Shakespeare formally for the first time by sitting a public examination on a Shakespeare play (an obligatory part of the National Curriculum in England). In the light of the continuing debates and controversies about testing, at all levels, within the education system, I wanted to look more carefully at how such a 'testing' regime might affect the responses of pupils from a range of academic and social backgrounds in different schools from both the public and private sectors. Results from my earlier exploratory studies (in a suburban state secondary school and a City Technology College) had shown that pupil-responses were more wide-ranging than what I had expected from most teenagers having to study Shakespeare, i.e. "It's boring!" and "We don't understand the language". They did say things like that, of course, but in doing so hinted at other feelings, concerns, exasperations and hopes. These suggested ways in which they viewed themselves as learners and participants - or not - in an educational system predicated on passing examinations, and the consequences of success or failure in that system for them later on in their lives (Indeed, such issues of diversity and disaffection may well be important aspects of student identities in FE.) The complexity and subtlety of the range of responses was becoming clear to me, and I knew that in analysing the subsequent data from the main research study, I would need an equally responsive method of data analysis to support that range.

The data itself comprised of two sets of interviews with focus groups of about six or seven mixed-gender and mixed ability pupils from each of the three different schools, (an inner-city school, a suburban school and in independent school) supplemented by interviews with each class teacher and departmental head, classrooms observations and school documentation.

Having 'captured' the data, I was now presented with problem of how to analyse it. Since my research study was concerned with Shakespeare, a Shakespearean metaphor seems apt to describe my feelings when faced with a Polonius-like taxonomy of the different research methodologies on offer:

*...tragedy, comedy, history, pastoral, pastoral-comical, historical-pastoral,
tragic-comical-historical ...*

(Hamlet, Act II, ii)

To begin with, a choice had to be made between using qualitative or quantitative data analysis, or a synthesis of both. For my part, I had made the decision, with supervisory advice, to follow the qualitative route at an early stage in my research

design. But once this decision was reached, the sheer range of qualitative approaches that were on offer, ranging from language-based to experiential approaches, seemed overwhelming. However, again with supervisory advice, I began a reading of grounded theory methods (Glaser and Strauss, 1967, Glaser, 1978, 1992, Strauss, 1987, Strauss and Corbin, 1997, 1998b).

Since its ‘discovery’ in 1967 by Glaser and Strauss, grounded theory has become increasingly widespread as a qualitative research methodology. Even critics of grounded theory have described it as ‘currently the most comprehensive qualitative research methodology available’ (Haig, 1995: 281) and ‘as one of the most sophisticated and developed approaches to rigorous qualitative research’ (Reason and Rowan, 1981). Despite its popularity it has been subject to an increasing number of critiques in the intervening years (e.g. Bryman and Burgess, 1994a,b, Denzin, 1988, Haig, 1995, Layder, 1993, Reason and Rowan, 1981, Silverman, 1993, Thomas and James, 2001). Whilst it arose out of a reaction to the dominant positivist mode of the 1950s and 60s (Kinach, 1995) it should nevertheless ‘be understood within the predominantly scientific context in which it was created’ (Seale, 1999:100). Even the founders followed divergent routes, with Glaser (1992) himself criticising over-technical and rule-following behaviours that he felt Strauss and Corbin were espousing.

For me, the emphasis on allowing concepts and theories to emerge **from** the data, rather than subjecting the data to *a priori* analysis, was what I found most useful about grounded theory. However, it was only in the course of actually doing it that I realised how difficult a process it was. Nor was I alone:

Grounded theory research requires certain qualities of the researcher. In particular, confidence, creativity and experience (both of doing research and of the context (s) being researched) are of great benefit. Accordingly, the research does not favour the novice researcher who may just be beginning to develop these qualities (Pandit, 1996: 12).

Caveat emptor indeed...

Before committing myself to grounded theory, I had also considered other qualitative research accounts using methods ranging from language-based approaches to narrative and experiential approaches. At this stage, knowing that I would probably be using grounded theory, but still not sure if this would prove to be the right decision, another literary metaphor surfaced. I now felt as if I had embarked upon an *Alice in Wonderland* journey, chasing an increasingly elusive White Rabbit through endless corridors where all the doors are locked: ‘and when Alice has been all the way down one side and up the other, trying every door, she walked sadly down the middle, wondering how she was ever to get out again’ (Lewis Carroll).

Finding and then managing to keep hold of the ‘golden key’ that leads out of locked rooms is a challenge, and one which does not necessarily lessen during the process of the research enquiry. For having eventually seized upon one methodological key - in my case, grounded theory - to make sense of all the unwieldy data that I was amassing, it soon became apparent that here in ‘Data Analysis Wonderland’ my solid, golden key had metamorphosed into something else. It had become a kaleidoscope. Familiar as we all are with the way that a kaleidoscopic image dissolves and changes in shape and form when the instrument is fractionally revolved, it can nevertheless be a disconcerting experience to discover that both the data and the methods you are using to analyse it are also dissolving and changing.

The difficulty is to hold the shape steady enough for a composite picture to emerge and my specific difficulty with applying the tenets of grounded theory to the data analysis meant that I could no longer see the data as **fixedly** as I believed I needed to in order to arrive at a ‘definitive’ analysis.

This somewhat startling mixture of literary and visual metaphors that I have used does not reflect an ill-assorted rag-bag of methodological assumptions that I have grabbed hold of in my descent down the rabbit hole, but rather it tries to reflect the complex and multi-faceted nature of the methodological journey that I had embarked upon at the beginning of the research process. In using the words ‘journey’ and ‘process’, I also want to make explicit the link with the fictional and literal tropes of Polonius, Alice, the White Rabbit and the kaleidoscope. Stitched together in this way, they illustrate what I have come to think of as the transformative and propulsive nature of methodological enquiry. By this I mean that the methodological process is one that is not in fact fixed, as I had thought it to be, but is often beset by stops and starts. The painful lesson to be learnt from this is that, nevertheless, a momentum **does** develop which propels the enquiry towards resolution.

In my case, to get the momentum going again, I needed to understand two things much more fully about how I was engaging with the data analysis. The first was that I had to accept that it was indeed **my** data and that it would be **my** analysis. This sounds simple enough but in claiming such ownership I also had to accept the responsibility that went alongside such a claim. In particular this meant the responsibility that I had as an outsider to tell the truth about those people I had been fortunate enough to be able to study. ‘To thine own self be true’ exhorts that arch-dissembler Polonius, but what did it really entail to be true not just to oneself but also to others? The underlying question to be asked was ‘How can truthfulness exist in educational research which takes place in a post-modern context where certainties of any sort no longer exist, and one person’s truth can so easily be another person’s untruth?’ In the worst case this can lead to a paralysis of the research investigation, where it becomes almost impossible to present one’s own research-truth because in a relativistic context, that truth is inherently unstable, liable to be pushed aside and toppled by other truths. It becomes, in a sense, frightening to tell the truth and there is even a term ‘veriphobia’, coined by the American epistemologist Alan Goodman, to describe the phenomenon (Bailey, 2001). In his article, *Overcoming Veriphobia* Bailey (2001) tries to reclaim truth in educational research whilst acknowledging that uncertainties regarding one’s own position, beliefs, and theories can still exist:

Educational research, in this light, depends upon a conception of objectivity that is defined in terms of honest inquiry, openness to criticism and an unapologetic pursuit of the truth... Without a strong and ever-present sense of truth-seeking, along with a recognition that truth is very hard to find, inquiry becomes impossible, and academia becomes little more than a forum for political whim and fancy (Bailey, 2001: 169-170).

In answer to the question, ‘Am I going to be telling the truth?’ I needed not only to examine my own position closely, as an actor situated in the social world looking at other actors situated in their social worlds, I also had to acknowledge the range of biases that all the performers are likely to bring to their roles. As a researcher I needed to be aware of **whose** truth was being told as well as **how** it was being told. Secondly, in looking beyond the horizon of my own research study at the range and heterogeneity of other educational research studies and the methodologies used to

support them, I realised that if I was successfully to consider methodology as a hermeneutic aid, it was not until I learned to trust my own interpretative voice that I began to see how I could use methodology, instead of methodology using me. Indeed, I would say in looking back at my attempts, my perspective has been a continually evolving one, and somewhat different to the one that I started out with. I do not consider this to be a bad thing, for if the research process is to be properly reflexive, then the researcher is necessarily going to be evaluating methodology and its application not just to the current study but also to future research studies.

Methodological decisions entail coming to terms not only with one's personal situation, values and beliefs, but also with the whole intellectual ethos which pervades research ... one aspect of this involves standing up inwardly to conventional research assumptions and ceasing to be intimidated by 'big name' researchers (Salmon, 1992: 84).

Coming to terms with methodology involves the growth of confidence, something that is not always easy for the novice researcher. For me, this was realised when I could become confident enough to accept that I could use the methodological approach I had chosen in the way that best fitted the research questions that I was asking, whilst being aware that other researchers would have also drawn different conclusions.

I realised that I had to settle upon a methodology whose 'precepts' (to quote Polonius again) I could follow and develop in relation to my own research study in order to produce an interpretative truthfulness derived from a systematic and rigorous analysis of the data. In using a model derived from grounded theory I hoped that these apparently dichotomous demands would be met. After much effort and perhaps 'thinking too precisely upon the event' (Hamlet this time!), I was finally able to work within my own hermeneutic paradigm to analyse the data, using what might be called a 'ventriloqual' voice that would allow the educational stories that I was attempting to re-tell to unfold as freely and truthfully as possible.

Finally, I would just like to conclude this brief account of some aspects of my own methodological struggle with an observation about just what it is that I have done with the data analysis. It would be easier to say what it is that I have **not** done, which is to use grounded theory in a pure or classical sense, but I do not think I am alone in this respect. In using an **adapted** model of grounded theory which avoided what I felt to be the supra-refining of emergent categories, I wanted to allow the eventual core category arising from the data analysis as much dynamism and fluidity as possible so as to reflect and engage with the many and varied pupil responses to Shakespeare at Key Stage 3 in an holistic a way as possible.

Understanding mentoring relationships with disaffected young people (Helen Colley)

My research project (Colley, 2001a) investigated mentoring relationships between 'disaffected' 16 and 17 year olds on a pre-vocational training scheme, and volunteer mentors who were all university undergraduates. Most of the volunteers were student teachers or following a degree in applied social sciences. I was particularly interested in the power dynamics of those relationships. Most research on such mentoring consists either of anecdotal accounts that have been criticised for their favourable accounts despite a lack of substantial evidence; or of quantitative psychological studies which use questionnaire surveys measuring before-and-after outcomes, focus on individuals to the exclusion of context, and fail to explore the

process of mentoring. Issues of power have almost exclusively been considered in terms of the mentors' superior power over the mentee. Moreover, few studies of youth mentoring actually gave any voice to the views of the young people themselves.

I wanted to conduct a qualitative study that might generate new insights into the development of mentoring relationships with socially excluded young people, reveal some of the processes that took place over time, and placed these relationships within their wider context, including power dynamics that might affect both members of the mentoring partnership and the practice of mentoring itself. From my own socialist feminist perspective, I felt there were three neglected questions about mentoring which I wanted to try and answer:

- Do young people exercise agentic power within mentoring relationships, and if so, how?
- Are mentors subject to external sources of power through control and surveillance, including self-surveillance?
- How are mentoring dyads situated in relation to wider power relations, through their overt institutional setting as well as more covert aspects of power such as dominant discourse and structural forms of oppression?

Because I wanted to make sense of the way the young people and their student mentors experienced mentoring and the meanings it had for them, recognising that these are inevitably mediated by contextual factors, my main method for generating data was to carry out in-depth, semi-structured one-to-one interviews with mentors and mentees. I selected members of matched pairs who had established an on-going relationship, and carried out follow-up interviews towards or after the ending of the relationship, in most cases six months to a year later. This resulted in the generation of data from nine mentoring relationships.

The interviews produced a large quantity of very rich data, and when the generation stage was complete, I faced the daunting task of analysing it and making sense of what I had found. (A more detailed account of this process is given in Colley, 2001b.) I turned to some of the research method textbooks reviewed above for guidance, and accordingly set about constructing categories from mind-maps I made from each interview transcript. I knew I was not genuinely using grounded data theory as Kim Diment has outlined it above, because the relationship between my analysis and data generation was not premised on the evolving alternation of the formation of hypotheses and their verification in the field (Strauss and Corbin, 1998a). But like many other researchers I drew on its ethos, trying to ensure that the analysis emerged from the data, that I had 'saturated' all my categories and that I had not glossed over relevant data (Bryman and Burgess, 1994a,b). I hoped that I would be able to discern relationships of similarity and difference, both within each group of interviewees, and between them, and I worked extremely hard at the laborious task of trawling the data. I was pleased that the categories which emerged both reflected my original research questions, but also raised some surprises – I had not expected the mentors' very strongly-felt sense of being under surveillance, nor their self-censorship of discussions with their mentee. I then began to code the data in order to produce a written account of the findings.

It was during this process that I began to encounter a number of problems. Firstly, no matter how hard I tried to concentrate as I cut-and-pasted passages from the interviews into the various categories, and despite the assurances of the textbooks authors that with care this would not happen, I found myself constantly drifting into

an automatic mode. My very familiarity with the data was decontextualising it – an error which was particularly disappointing given the way I wanted to locate mentoring through my research.

Secondly, the coding process led me into an unintentional prioritisation of the data from the mentors over that generated with the young people. The students were highly articulate, and gave much more theoretically constructed accounts that often linked their mentoring experiences with their academic studies. Although some of the young people were extremely talkative, their accounts were often intuitive, and the data from those who were extremely shy, or had learning disabilities, was simpler far smaller in volume. There was so much more to cut-and-paste from the mentors, and this data was far easier to categorise. The voices of the young people were becoming overwhelmed.

Thirdly, my written accounts of the findings appeared increasingly embarrassing. My attempts to come up with a typology or spectrum of mentors' understandings of mentoring seemed absurd when it was only drawing on the views of 9 mentors. I was missing the point of in-depth but small-scale case study research, which cannot produce comparisons or generalisations, but has value because it considers each case as singular in its own particularities, revealing deeper insights that large-scale generalisations obscure.

Finally, the technique of 'slicing' data according to categories fragmented my representations of the mentoring relationships themselves – although to create insights into such relationships was one of the main purposes of my research. Categorising the data led to considering the respondents in groups (mentors, mentees and scheme staff). All my efforts seemed to be propelling me away from the very ambitions I had for my research.

Instead of pursuing adaptations of this paradigmatic approach to data analysis, I turned to an alternative method often used in life history research – narrative analysis. In a sense, this is not analysis at all, but rather a process of synthesis:

Finally, the heuristic researcher develops a **creative synthesis**, and original integration of the material that reflects the researcher's intuition, imagination, and personal knowledge of meaning and essences of the experience...In this way the experience as a whole is presented, and, unlike most research studies, the individual persons remain intact (Moustakas, 1990: 50-51, original emphasis).

One of the major shifts that distinguishes narrative analysis from paradigmatic analysis is in its abandonment of the quest to catalogue similarities and differences:

The search is for data that will reveal uniqueness of the individual case or bounded system and provide an understanding of its idiosyncrasy and particular complexity (Polkinghorne, 1995: 15).

I used this approach to carry out my final analysis of the data, employing the method of 'emplotment' (Polkinghorne, 1995). This meant working backwards chronologically, framing the outcome of each mentoring relationship, then selecting data, including contextual material, according to its contribution to the 'plot'. I made a point of always beginning with the data from the young person (rather than the mentor) at each stage of the plot, and soon I had constructed case studies of two mentoring relationships which I felt were far more satisfactory. I thought I had found

my 'golden key' to data analysis, and that the account of the next relationship I wanted to describe would be quickly produced. However, I found myself once again frustrated.

Lisa, the mentee, had been bereaved of her mother three years previously, and felt that she had had to hold her family together emotionally since then. She had a repeated pattern of starting well in the work placements on her pre-vocational training course, then quitting them a few weeks later. Yvonne, her mentor, had long experience of working with disabled children and adults. She helped her mother look after her learning disabled brother at home, and she had been employed full-time and part-time in a respite home for severely disabled children. Yvonne was becoming increasingly frustrated and disappointed by Lisa's cycle of repeated failure, and it was undermining her own confidence. Both of them spoke about how their relationship was 'going round in circles', but how neither of them felt able to progress or bring their relationship to an end, and both were finding it increasingly difficult to communicate in their meetings.

My problem was that, as I tried to use the **linear** method of emplotment to create a narrative from this **circular** data, I found myself going round in circles. On the one hand, the description of repetitious incidents seemed boring. On the other hand, it was producing a reductive diminishment of a story which was far more complex than I can represent in the remit of this paper. The interpretations it produced suggested that Yvonne was bullying Lisa to 'stick with it', and was unable to reflect on her own practice sufficiently to break the cycle of repeated failure in Lisa's placements and in her own role as mentor. It was returning me again to typical representations of the individual power of the mentor over the mentee. In the end, I found myself with a serious and worrying bout of writer's block.

My supervisors suggested using creative writing to break the block at least (cf. Nelson, 1993), and a senior colleague recommended a further alternative to try as a means of analysing the data: the use of 'radial narration'. While linear narrative derives from the tradition of Aristotelian logic, radial narration derives from a Celtic tradition which circles about, repeats, and elaborates a central theme (Le Guin, 1981). Using this idea, I engaged in some free writing about Lisa and Yvonne's relationship. Instead of focusing on the opposition between the two young women, and the tussle in their relationship, something else emerged much more clearly.

I came to see how both Lisa and Yvonne's identities were closely bound up with a gendered notion of caring for others – a feminine stereotype which oppresses women in a deeply internalised way, through expectations of self-sacrifice, the repression of their own feelings, and the attempt to absorb and neutralise the emotional burden of others. The process of mentoring and being mentored was producing and reproducing this ideological construction of care in both Lisa and Yvonne, and the longer it went on, the less able they were to escape the idealised images each brought to the process, or to admit that truth to each other. These were not opposite or opposing experiences, but parallel. And their parallel nature revealed the way in which mentoring was influenced by wider power dynamics that are so deeply ingrained in our patriarchal society that they have become almost invisible.

The lesson I have drawn from this experience is that there are **no** techniques, whether conventional or radically non-conventional, to which we can turn with certainty that they will resolve our problems in making sense of qualitative data. If deployed unthinkingly, research techniques may drive our enquiry off course rather than help us gain in understanding. The use of 'radial narrative' is no more a guarantee of success than any other method, but each method must be chosen to fit

not only the data, but also the interests and values we pursue in any research study, as Kim Diment has so powerfully argued above.

Conclusions

Prevalent models of research advocate technical methods supposed to guarantee ‘truth’, and ensure that all draw the same conclusions from a set of data. They suggest the discovery of a single ‘effective’ way to develop learning and skills through isolating categories and variables. In practice, when researching issues of considerable complexity, that required individual experiences to be located in much wider social and economic structures, we found that standard coding techniques fragmented highly personal stories, distorted key issues, and over-simplified complex processes. These failings parallel the weaknesses of managerialist approaches to FE, and the way in which current policy constructs the processes of teaching and learning.

Our experiences of research challenge the notion that there is one ‘right’ way to do research or to analyse data. Our concern with regard to the development of an ‘R&D Toolkit’ for practitioners within the learning and skills sector (cf. Norman, 2001) is that such a kit needs to incorporate a range of alternative tools that can facilitate making sense of different kinds of data. Anyone who has ever tried to tighten a slot-headed screw with a Phillips screwdriver will surely agree. The enhancement of research capacity should also include the ability to recognise the need for the appropriate item from a well-stocked toolkit according to the task in hand, as well as to recognise (and make informed judgements about) the tools that others have used in their research. That in turn means acquiring some of the more tricky and time-consuming philosophical tools which have underpinned the divergence of holism from more mechanistic approaches to understanding. If colleges should champion ‘a spirit of enquiry, an experimental culture and support for diversity’ (Norman, 2001: 25), this experimentalism and diversity has to apply also to the research methods that are made available to practitioners within the learning and skills community, and that are welcomed and promoted by the research community itself in both FE and HE (Hodkinson, 2001).

The TLCFE project sets out to investigate the complexities of teaching and learning processes for those that work and learn in FE colleges, given their social backgrounds, cultural communities and life experiences. It brings into account factors such as the pay and working conditions of lecturers, funding régimes and policy shifts, professional practice and identity; as well as student support arrangements (including financial support), life transitions often associated with participation in FE, and multiple and fragmented learner identities. In short, it represents an holistic approach to understanding learning cultures in FE and how they may be transformatory or transformed. This holistic understanding of the subject of the TLCFE project seems to demand a correspondingly holistic methodology for making sense of the data it generates. Such an approach may prove supportive of professionals in the community of FE practice, who wish to enter the community of educational research practice, and serve to draw the two communities together. Our belief is that holistic research is at the very least likely to be more accessible for practitioners, to resonate with their experiences, and so to have relevance for the sector as a whole. Moreover, we hope that it will also provide the kind of evidence that practitioners will be able to relate to, and find useful in their own professional reconstructions of FE.

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