DiSA Methodology Paper

Consensus Oriented Research Approach: Reflexive co-inquiry with students

Dr Debra Cureton
Professor Glynis Cousin
University of Wolverhampton

Methods for pedagogic research

Pedagogic research into higher education often draws on a limited repertoire of methods. Characteristically, research projects will rely on semi-structured interviews or focus group either to supplement surveys or as the key method. Even where case study or action research frameworks are proposed, data tends to be gathered primarily through interviews.   In defending a more creative and generative method, we will first set out some of the methodological issues that attend interviewing but which are often overlooked; we will then offer a contrasted rationale for and describe how we used a form of co-inquiry with students through a 'consensus conference'. Our argument is that this research perspective provides an ethical third space in which lecturers and students are empowered to generate understandings and insights. We ground our argument in research we have undertaken on degree disparity.

Interviews

Although we are landing on a discussion of interviews, it is to make broader points to defend forms of co-inquiry.. A popular concept of the research interview centres on what Holstein and Gabrium (1997) call a 'search and discovery' approach. The purpose is to *extract* information from a respondent as if this were akin to an inert piece of gold, fools or real. This extractive conception is insensitive to the fact that the interview is a social event in which meanings are negotiated in quite complicated ways. Firstly, as Fontana and Frey, 2000:645) put it, 'asking questions and getting answers is a much harder task than it may seem at first. The spoken or written word has always a residue of ambiguity, no matter how carefully we word the questions and how carefully we code and report the answers'. Interviewing cannot be regarded as simply a matter of technique (which is not to say that technique is unimportant) because language does not always communicate stable meanings. While questions like 'how old are you?' can be communicated in stable ways (unless the respondent is lying), others, like 'what does aging mean to you' are more difficult to bring to light unambiguously. We will return to this question later.

Secondly, the interview constitutes what sociologists call an 'interaction order', that is things happen between the parties to shape the conduct and consequences of the interview in explicit and implicit ways. For instance, some respondents sense what you want to hear and obligingly provide it – in which case you create an echo effect that plays back the researcher's agenda. John Shostack aptly writes: (2006:1) 'the

interview is not a simple tool with which to mine information. It is a place where views may clash, deceive, seduce, enchant'. In short, interview results derive from a relationship. Again to quote Holstein and Gabrium (1997:14) 'meaning is not merely elicited by apt questioning nor simply transported through respondent replies; it is actively and communicatively assembled in the interview encounter'.

This idea that meanings are *assembled* is critical; it takes account of a developmental or even destructive dynamic in the interview. In Cousin (2009) there is an example of Davies'account (1999: 96, 97) of the former in which she draws on her research with British parents of a young man with learning difficulties. At the beginning of the interview the parents declare that their son has '*got no value of money*'. Thirteen responses later, the father concedes: *yes probably he would value a bit of money, if he was having it in a pay packet every week.* Davies' interview allowed a dialogic, reflective journey to take place between interviewer and interviewee.

Research in a third space
We would argue that research often operates in a third space in that whatever is yielded from, say, the interview is a result of a developmental dynamic. This notion is simply expressed by Pawson and Tilley (1997) who advise an interview approach in which interviewers and interviewees alternate as teachers and learners throughout the interview process (Pawson and Tilley (1997). Sometimes the interviewers need to suggest explanations as teachers and sometimes they need to listen and to hear explanations as students. Through adopting these principles within the Consensus Oriented Research Approach, we produce an ethical approach to exploring sensitive issues; not only are the students educated about the issue, through empowering them to generate stakeholder informed solutions, they educate us about the nuances and impacts of the research topic. What we now describe operated this kind of principle through a novel and playful form of consensus conference.

This research approach was implemented in the study of disparities in student attainment, where two universities are investigating the national occurrence of BME student underrepresentation in gaining 'good degrees'. In this technique we integrated the philosophy of consensus conferencing, which promotes the voice of lay people and stakeholders in the process of decision making, with naturalistic and interpretive data collection methods. By adapting the consensus conferencing approach in this way, we facilitate the generation of research data, as well as proposed solutions to the research problem. This also allows us to approach a sensitive research area in a way that engages and empowers students, through valuing their voice, their thoughts and their perspective whilst they work towards providing a solution to the issue.

This approach is educative, engaging and empowering (Cureton, Soocoomarne, Adefila, 2011), as we educate the conference attendees about the research problem and encourage them to explore the personal complexities that the problem generates. Through this process the conference attendees develop opinions about the research area and apply those opinions to the development of solutions. As a result of this process, attitudinal and perspective data are generated, which are

collected as research data along with any queries, challenges and solutions that the students generate.

However, is this research trustworthy? Any chosen path of inquiry leaves behind others so that what is assembled is always a kind of fiction perhaps best conceptualised as faction. A member of our research team offers the image of the painting by Magritte (1964) 'The Son of Man' (the one with the apple concealing a man's face) which conveys the view that: *everything we see hides another thing*. Inescapably, there is always erasure in what we present.

Knowledge is always perspectival. This is why objectivity is always unreachable. This does not mean that we do not pay attention to the quality of the research by licensing a runaway pluralism in which we claim equal validity to any kind of research, regardless of content. Rather we would return to our image of research as a third space. This is by definition a developmental space and the key to making it trustworthy is to attend to the quality of the ways in which developmental data is generated. We have tried to show how our attention to this quality centred on three important factors, namely: safety, serious play and an 'educative dynamic' in which expertise and experience are dynamically linked. We have also described how this dynamic comes from a research partnership which is formed through five clear stages, namely: introducing, exploring, identifying key areas, providing a solution to the research problem.

The research approach is developed around the main principles of Consensus Oriented Decision Making (Hartnet, 2011); this is a seven stage model that frames a problem, opens discussion around the topic, identifies the underlying concerns, generates a collaborative proposal, encourages participant to identify a way forward, generates a final proposal for action before debriefing the conference attendees. We retained the consensus generating aspect of the process but adapted this in two ways. Firstly we adapted the process to create a safe research space that is empowering and thus encourages the attendees' autonomy, so that meaningful research data is generated in ways that alleviate tensions that could arise through the exploration of sensitive issues. Secondly, we adapted the process so that ethical dilemmas that arise through working with sensitive issues could be resolved. As a result, we implemented a five stage process. These stages, related processes and research dynamics are outlined below.

Figure One: Diagram showing the stages, processes and dynamics of the Conesus Oriented Research Approach (CORA)

Consensus-Oriented Decision-Making	Consensus Oriented Research Approach (CORA)	Process	Research Dynamics			
1. Framing the Topic 2. Open Discussion	Introducing the research problem Exploring the research problem	Educating	Informing participants of the research	Creating a safe space for students to feel confident listened to and trusts the team		Collecting opinion and attitude & perceptions data about the topic
3. Identifying Underlying Concerns	Identify the key areas of the problem	Engages	Engaging students with issue in a playful manner and encouraging students to reflect			Collecting information about student concerns
4. Collaborative Proposal Building 5. Choosing a Direction 6. Synthesizing a Final Proposal	Provide solutions Winding up and moving on	Empowers		Allowing students to take control of the research space		Collecting consensus data about solutions
7. Closure			Winding up the event: by consolidating the discussion of the day. Moving on from the day: by encouraging participants support in the implementations of propsed changes.			

Stage One: Introducing the research problem
Unlike traditional consensus conferencing, where conference attendees are provided with information and materials about the conference topic before the event, thus arrive at the conference in a fully informed state (Nielsen, et al, 2006), we chose to provide information about the research problem at the event. This decision was made because, on an ethical level, we felt that it was unfair to inform students of the disparities in student attainment without providing the opportunity for further information, debate and support. Without this interaction we felt that the information could, for some students, prove damaging to their self concept and negatively impact on their self believe, possibly causing a sense of hopelessness (Beck, 1988) or generating learned helplessness (Seligman, 1975). The latter two of these can be mediated through engaging assertively with the issue (Cureton, 2001). Therefore, we felt that the consensus oriented research approach provides the opportunity for students to explore the issue of degree disparities in a safe, informed and empowering setting.

During this stage of the process the 'expert panel', comprised of the member of the research team and experts in the area, inform the conference attendees of the nature of the research problem. Detail is provided to ensure that the conference attendees are fully informed of all aspects of the research problem. The educating process should be approached in an honest and open way. Time should be allowed to encourage conference attendees to reflect on the issues presented and to be able to ask for further information and clarification where required.

Stage Two – Exploring the research problem

Attendees are encouraged to explore the research problem through discussion and debate of the issue with the panel and other conference attendees. The aim of this stage is to encourage the conference attendees to develop an understanding of all aspects of the research problem and its affects. These affects might be personal, professional, societal or cultural. The panel should encourage the conference attendees to express their opinions, attitudes and beliefs about the issue in hand; these should be collected as research data. A number of data collection techniques could be used here; however we designed two 'fun' data collection techniques specifically for working with students and sensitive issues. These are described below.

A further aim of the first two stages of this technique is to create a safe research environment, in which the conference attendees feel comfortable and confident to discuss the research problem and their thoughts about it. It is also important to encourage a sense of trust between the conference attendees and the researchers. Without a safe research environment, the conference attendees are unlikely to provide truthful information, which in turn will not provide useful solutions. Creating trust will also encourage the conference attendees to provide useful and consequential solutions because they believe the panel will take the suggestions seriously. Moreover, without creating this type of research environment the conference attendees are unlike to feel confident and empowered enough to take control of the research environment, when it is necessary, in later stages of the approach.

Stage Three – Identify the key areas of the problem

This stage of the approach relates directly to stage three of the Consensus Oriented Decision Making (Harnett, 2011). The aim of this stage is to encourage the conference attendees to discuss and agree on the key areas of the problem from their perspective. This might be their main concerns about the research area, its affects or other issues it impacts upon. Again these should be collected as research data. It is also necessary to pay attention to dynamics of the process, as this is the point at which the conference attendees should be encouraged to take charge of the research space. As the aim of the technique is to generate a full and honest picture of the research problem from the attendee's perspective, the attendees are now the experts.

Stage Four – Provide solutions

The penultimate stage of the process is to empower the conference attendees through providing them with the space to identify useful solutions to the issues they have identified. The solutions can be encouraged through the research team providing prompts either in the form of questions, areas for consideration or through the completion of specific tasks. In our case we provided the conference attendees with a task to encourage the provision of solutions. Again this is described below. As mentioned before, it is essential that the conference attendees are confidence that these solutions will be implemented in an attempt to make changes to the original problem, or useful solutions will not be created. The conference

attendees may wish to develop a number of possible solutions and then decide which of the solutions are the most important to implement. The latter part of this stage can be achieved though using of voting systems.

Stage Five: Winding up and moving on
The wrapping up stage allows for the research team to sum up the proceedings of the event and set direction for what happens in the future. As this approach encourages conference attendees to participate in, and evaluate, the implementation of the solutions they provide; this time can be used to inform the conference participants how they can be further involved in this. Further engagement in the research process could be encouraged through blogging updates that participant might comment on or through further 'update events' where updates of the solution implementations are presented to the conference attendees.

Tools used with this technique
The tools used in this process were carefully designed to encourage the conference attendees to feel safe and confident in the research environment. We hoped to encourage the sense of safety by making their engagement with the research problem a playful affair. It was anticipated that this would reduce the tension that the attendees might experience and promote their engagement with the research problem so that they explore the research problem fully. The two tools designed were implemented during stages two to four. These were a twist on the Snakes and Ladders game and a curriculum design exercise. These were aimed specifically at collecting data relating to disparity in student attainment, however, these could be adapted for used in other research environments.

Snakes and ladders – Based on the traditional Snakes and ladders game, the board is separated into three coloured blocks to represent the three years of undergraduate study: squares 1-40 relate to the first year, 41 – 70 relate to the second year and 70-100 relate to the third year. Snake related to difficulties the students encountered or issues that held them back in gaining a good degree, while laddered represented aspect of university life that facilitated students in gaining good degrees. Both snakes and ladders ran within and between the year-bands, to provide information about what helps and hinders students' progression with each year, as well as from year to year. As student played the game, they wrote down the hurdles and facilitators to their progress on post-it notes.

Curriculum design exercise – Students were asked designed a module that facilitated them in gaining a good degree and one that hindered them in gaining a good degree. The students were provided with pointers to the areas that they might wish to consider, such as resources, facilities, learning and teaching factors, assessments and feedback. The students were also provided with space to add in anything they wishes to add that wasn't covered by the prompts. This exercise encouraged students to build on the issues they identified in the Snakes and Ladders exercise and formulate them into solutions.

Conclusion

Educational research and development cannot be carried out without interactions between researcher and students, thus it is crucial that this symbiotic relationship empowers both parties. Creating a safe research space through the consensus oriented research approach and engaging students in serious play, as outlined in this paper, is a, engaging, empowering and ethical approach to research in this area.

Beck A.T. (1988). "Beck Hopelessness Scale." <u>The Psychological Corporation</u>.

Cureton, D. (2001). <u>Depression and Assertiveness: The Nexus</u>, Unpublished PhD Thesis, University of Wolverhampton

Davies Aull, Charlotte (1999) *Reflexive ethnography: a guide to researching selves and others*, Routledge, London
Fontana, A. and Frey, J. H (2000) The interview: from structured questions to negotiated text in Denzin, N. K. and Lincoln, Y. S. *Handbook of Qualitative Research,* Sage, London

Hartnet, T. (2011). <u>Consensus Oriented Decision Making.</u> New Society Publishers

Holstein James A and Gubrium Jaber F (1995) *The Active Interview,* Thousand Oaks, Calif, London, Sage

Nielsen, A. P., Hansen, J., Skorupinski, B., Hans-Werner, I., Baranzke, H., Lassen, J., & Sandoe, P. (2006). <u>Consensus Conference Manual</u>, LEI: The Hague, accessed online http://www.ethicaltools.info/content/ET4%20Manual%20CC%20(Binnen werk%2040p).pdf, 30th May, 2011

Pawson Ray and Tilley Nick (1997) *Realistic Evaluation,* Sage, London
Schostak, J.F. (2006) *Interviewing and Representation in Qualitative Research Projects*, Open University press, Buckingham

Seligman, M.E.P. (1975). Helplessness: On Depression, Development, and Death. San Francisco: W.H. Freeman

Soocoomarnee, P., Adefila, A., Cureton, D., & Sekhon, J. (2011). Creating a Safe Environment for Disparity in Attainment Research to Take Place, Promoting Inclusive Change: addressing equity and success for BME students in higher education Conference - Monday 4 July, 2011, University of Greenwich