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Teaching online research methods online with asynchronous international distance learning students during Covid-19

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Challenges in asynchronous international distance learning pre-Covid

Working on an international distance learning teacher training programme brings multiple challenges, the biggest of which had previously been the asynchronous pattern of teaching and learning for the academic elements. Teaching is based on a systematic instructional design approach adopted by our university and broken down into weekly thematic units to support acquisition, discussion, investigation, collaboration, practice and production to meet learning outcomes. Recorded micro-lectures, learning activities and discussion boards are accessed asynchronously, with face-to-face online group sessions for further consolidation. The assessed teaching practice element of the programme had always been carried out in the host international schools, facilitated by school-based mentors and in-country professional practice tutors.

Developing research-informed practitioners

The importance of developing research capacity in trainee teachers stems from the expectation that they will become research-informed practitioners who can use evidence to inform decision-making (Siddiqui and Wardle, 2020). Being consumers of research is not enough, however: teachers need to also develop the tools to carry out their own research in school settings. The first MA-level module that our trainees encounter requires a case study approach to explore specific interventions that their schools implement to address targeted pupils' learning needs. Typically, our trainee teachers undertake observations, conduct interviews and collect a range of data in their settings to understand how and why this additional support is provided and discuss it in relation to 'what works' in education, using initial sources such as the Education Endowment Foundation (<https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/>) and the What Works Clearinghouse (<https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/>) portals.

Establishing the heritage of research methods and methodology

Good teaching is good teaching, and it follows therefore that good research practice is still good research practice, irrespective of a global pandemic. Early rapid evidence assessments concluded that teaching quality was more important for remote teaching and learning than how it was delivered (Education Endowment Foundation, 2020), which had also been our starting point when considering our own research methods pedagogy. The initial teaching of research methods starts on our programme with key concepts and expectations: conceptualisation, literature, developing research questions, justification of research methods, consideration of ethics, all designed to ensure that the student teacher can apply theory to practice. We start with a formative proposal assignment to ensure early engagement with methodology and methods.

Our face-to-face online group sessions, themed as weekly 'coffee shop' meetings, provide a collaborative forum for knowledge exchange and trouble-shooting. Trainee teachers join to listen, to share ideas, to pose questions and problems and the module leaders respond with a dialogic teaching approach, helping to contextualise research methods in school settings and develop knowledge and understanding in a supportive online space.

The 'hybrid' assignment and hybrid research methods

As teaching practice became hybrid for trainee teachers, so did research and assessment. Schooling around the world moved in and out of face-to-face, hybrid and fully online modes over the course of 2020, with the realities of the pandemic hitting earliest in the far east, where half of our students are based. As physical access to schools and participants fluctuated with local restrictions and impacted on students' research plans, our alternative assignment pathways opened out to include hybrid and hypothetical assignments designed to act as a safety net for completion.

A key feature of the hybrid assignment was the shift to online and alternative research methods, building on the core research methods pedagogy we had established. Where face-to-face interviews were not an option, we promoted video calling and desktop-sharing (Hidson, 2020), but maintaining the spirit of semi-structured or artefact-based interviewing. Where classroom observations were no longer possible, we promoted fieldnotes captured from hybrid or online teaching sessions, urging a re-think of ethics and collection of additional secondary data in various forms to attempt triangulation.

The outcomes in terms of the final case studies produced have been pleasing: creative and thoughtful academic discussions that responded to the unique challenges of each setting. We regularly quoted Hamilton and Corbett-Whittier (2013) to our trainees, where they advised thinking of a case study as a living thing and ensuring that it made "as much sense to the reader as it did to the researcher" (p.179). The act of thinking in detail about the research methods seemed to have been beneficial to the understanding of research methods and real-world research.

Developing resilient research capability as a factor of resilient teaching

Although our programme continues to respond to the global challenges of Covid-19, we are keen to retain what has worked into the future. The ability for trainee teachers to embrace the need for resilience in teaching as well as in research is a benefit. Their capacity to see research as a live and responsive part of their practice has always been our intention; we believe that the response to research during Covid will itself be a case study for future cohorts.

References

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Images



Elizabeth Hidson promoting the weekly 'coffee shop' meeting