



Negotiating Methods and Theories: 26.1.05 (part one)

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The conference I attended last Wednesday (19.1.05) called 'What is Research?', raised 4 key questions for me about how I was to approach my research/PhD.

- Question 1 came directly out of a session at the conference.
- Questions 2 & 3 were kicking around my head for a while and the conference made them more apparent.
- Question 4 came from a conversation I had with another delegate.

Respectively, these were;

1. What method(s) am I going to employ?
2. What theoretical approaches was I going to adopt? If any.
3. How does theory relate to Method?
4. Do community media activities all have to have an impact on the participant group?

Contrary to logical order, I'll choose number question 2 first to explore.

Thinking about Theory

As a previous student of anthropology, (Anthropology of Media: Theoretical approaches to social anthropology. SOAS), I am/was used to grappling with different theoretical approaches. Once I got to grips with the overarching concepts, actually enjoyed that area of discourse as it inspires and challenges you to see the world in a different way.

What I'm not quite sure is how constructed theories will play a part in my approach to the research. I know I could attempt to produce an anthropology of the community media sector, examined through the perspective of functionalism, post-Marxism, structuralism or some other such theoretical approach, but I can't really see how that will benefit the outcome of the research, which I hope is more pragmatic than theoretical.

I guess it's how one interprets the work 'theory', and which is implied when talking about research. Do 'they' mean theories such as approaches and concepts, (e.g. Marxism, Post Modernism) etc, or do they mean it in the way you have a theory about something, like a good old hunch, hypothesis, assumption or presupposition, that can possibly be proved through rigorous application of method. (e.g. "How a child's development is affected by the month of their birthday and the structures of the school intake."). One of my central "theories" (hunches) for my own research is that at present, community media education activities are not as culturally sustainable as they could be, and I would analyse why this may be so, and to find ways impact and

sustainability could be enhanced. Is that a valid starting point? I guess so. But is that my theory, or just my presupposition?

If that is my theory, (or for that matter, even if it just my presupposition), my thesis would have to continually reflect that argument, working towards a conclusion which either finds that assumption correct and finds strategies for improvement in the sector, or concludes that it already does have adequate impact and sustainability, or that it can never have impact, or maybe even doesn't need to have an impact and is best left to continue as it is. To me, any of those findings seems suitably and usefully pragmatic and relevant. Unless a particular theoretical approach had a significant understanding or relevance to a certain aspect of my field of research, then I can't see how bringing in Marx, Levi-Strauss, Foucault or whoever would help and enhance my findings. (*Note to self: Do I really believe that? Now writing it out "loud", I'm not so sure!*) I can see how that would work and be interesting in a standard essay, but as a PhD thesis is about analysing data, to stick narrowly to one conceptual framework to understand 'how' and 'what' that data might mean, seems to be a false and inappropriate method to employ. Which neatly leads me to exploring question number 1, (and, also by default, question 3).

- What method(s) am I going to employ?
- How does theory relate to Method?

Exploring the method of Method

At the conference one of the people giving a paper was passionate in his argument that all research should follow a positivist approach. This is a view that I strongly disagree with, and did at the time. Since the conference I have also read on a website giving advice to students, that all PhD research needs to adopt the *scientific method*, but I can't fully accept that to be the case.

The one theorist which I can see being useful to re-read (and maybe adopt, in spite of everything I have just said above), is Paul Feyerabend and his book, '*Against Method: Outline of an Anarchistic Theory of Knowledge*'. In that book Feyerabend challenges and the notion that all research need be positivist in approach, and adopts a 'methodological pluralism' and famously said, "Anything goes!" In his latter works, such as 'Science in a Free Society', he goes even further and moves much closer to adopting relativism.

I am not saying that I am a relativist, (but sometimes I admit I struggle not to be one!), but I am mistrustful of a 100% positivist approach, especially in the social sciences. It is the domain of the natural and physical sciences to be confidently positivist, and to undertake research to unearth truths, laws and predictions, and it doesn't analyse anything that can't be measured or understood through mathematics. Even though they do this very well, most scientists would admit that many of their findings are based establishing probabilities rather than Truths, and that not everything can be predicted, (especially those working in quantum physics).

Despite this, there has been a tendency by leading some social sciences to move disciplines such as sociology and anthropology away from Humanities, and towards Science, and want research into the structures of society predict. I believe this agenda

is a flawed one, and I don't want to fall into that trap. Whilst many social theorists have unearthed some very convincing arguments about how society is constructed, with theoretical models that could be viewed as accurate and universal, they are never-the-less still abstract assumptions, as are much of the findings in the natural and physical sciences.

I feel it is a limitation of social research if it is mimicking methods employed by traditional science, as the methods are narrower. I know there is a danger of research becoming too exploratory and mere opinion, but if it is pitched right then it can still rigorously analyse, understand and explain, without having to try and mathematically predict.

So how does all this relate to my own research? According to '*How to get a PhD*' by Estelle Phillips and Derek Pugh, a '*What*' question is primarily "intelligence gathering", and '*How*' questions are primarily *research*. It also depends on what you do with the findings. To ask the question, "What is the ph level of the water in the pool?", on first inspection, would be intelligence gathering. To use the information to find out if the water was safe would also be intelligence gathering, but to use the findings to develop a theory of the various factors that contribute to causing acidity in water, would be valid Research.

In my case then, to ask the question, "How culturally sustainable is community media educational activity?" I presume would be classed as mere intelligence gathering, but to ask, "How can community media educational activity become more sustainable?" would be accepted as research. (I think!)

It is based on the massive assumption that it is not already sustainable. For me that may cause a slight problem, in that I think I would like the research to explore whether it is or it isn't sustainable in the first instance, but without it being just *intelligence gathering*. That is why at present, agreed with my supervisor, my research statement stands as:

"An enquiry into the sustainability of knowledge, skills and productions from community media education projects."

I still like this statement, but one of the pitfalls is that it is exploratory in nature, which, according to *Phillips, Pugh* is a more daring approach to gaining a PhD. According to them, broadly speaking there are three basic types of research:

1. Testing-out research – e.g. testing an existing theory in different circumstances.
2. Exploratory research – tackling a new issue/problem/topic about which little is known.
3. Problem solving research – finding a solution for a 'real world' problem.

Out of the three basic types mine seems to fit more comfortably as exploratory, even though a case could be made to say that it is problem solving. I am not denying that there has been lots of other work in this area in the past, but as far as I know, never before has the sector itself been analysed and notions of sustainability explored in-

depth. Even though *Phillips, Pugh* say they understand the appeal of exploratory research, they advise against it due to there being a far greater risk of failure at PhD level, and is also harder to support and supervise.

“There is no denying the attraction of tackling such [exploratory] topics, but you should be aware that the risks of failure are much greater. If you have a lot of confidence stemming, say, from a great deal of practical experience *and* very strong support from your supervisor, you might consider work in the exploratory or problem-solving approaches. But these are undoubtedly less structured and therefore professionally more advanced activities, and most students should be considering whether they (are trying to) run before they can walk.”

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They say the testing-out approach would be the most “appropriate” in that it would be more straightforward and easier to manage.

“It is a wise student who decides to postpone the pleasures of attempting to be totally original until after the PhD has been obtained.”

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I’m not sure then whether I’m being un-wise, stubborn, arrogant or blindly confident, but I still want to pursue the PhD with an exploratory approach. Obviously this needs a lot more careful consideration and my methods need to be watertight. I have always seen this research as being more exploratory than anything else, but it does make me slightly nervous I admit. I need to read some relevant PhD theses to see the standard and form.

END OF PART ONE

Part Two will deal with the 4th question I am currently thinking about, which may become a chapter of the final thesis, but which may dramatically alter the emphasis of the research.

“Do community media activities all have to have an impact on the participant group?”