

Teaching Research Philosophy – A Game Changer

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Introduction to the teaching initiative

How do doctoral students learn and engage with subjects that are dense, sometimes obtuse and often considered boring? Add in the challenge of teaching a) when students are no longer compelled to learn by lecture timetables, many of whom juggle doctoral studies alongside nascent careers or families; and, b) alternatively, when students are young, inexperienced and fearful of treading into areas that even their supervisors are unfamiliar with. All this in an academic world where it has been asserted that social scientists regularly fail to examine their own assumptions (Tsoukas & Chia 2011). These questions and the challenges they pose are apposite for this case that is concerned with the teaching of Research Philosophy. During our doctoral journey we identified that existing teaching techniques did not appear to be working affording a demand for greater innovation, i.e. to bring ideas from elsewhere to improve the learning outcomes (Lewthwaite & Nind, 2016). Consequently, we designed an intervention using deep game design and gamification principles.

We began the development of this teaching initiative when struggling to make sense of the importance and impact of research philosophy as early-stage PhD students. In talking with peers at our own institution and elsewhere we found several sources of confusion, including 1) some scholars did not know they had a philosophical perspective: 'No idea abt [about] my philosophical...'¹; 2) others had an inkling that their perspective was at odds with that of their supervisor or the prevailing journals in their field: 'I think I'm a pragmatist...BUT...my research is

^{1 2} SMSs to first author during workshops

going to have to be post positivist..²; 3) many students said that the field was impenetrable with no clear way to navigate through the bewildering array of philosophical perspectives: ‘... it takes a lot of time to fully understand the full scope of a paradigm and then it might be difficult to understand the difference between some paradigms, and sometimes there is overlap’³ 4) supervisors guiding students to ignore the topic as unimportant to their field ‘[my supervisor] has always encouraged me to choose a paradigm and stick with this. In other research I have done I’ve never been encouraged to move beyond boundaries.’⁴ and 5) the move to submit a thesis by paper in many institutions, enables students to avoid the research philosophy question because the majority of highly-rated academic journal articles the style of which the thesis is aiming to copy, leave no room for a discussion of the author’s perspective ‘as I am completing my PhD through publication, no one is likely to ask about my research philosophy’⁵. As we have continued with our own learning journey, including the delivery of the gamified workshop described below - designed to help others learn about research philosophy - we have continued to find students describing these issues, as well as some early-stage academics quietly acknowledging the same concerns.

Our fellow students told us that they were not inclined to investigate their research philosophies because the topic (if raised at all) seemed distant, unrelated to their interests and, frankly, no fun! When faced, for example, with the need to read dozens of academic papers connected to their research question, all offering competing ideas, why bother? Especially when published academic papers generally offer no direct information as to the authors’ own philosophical leanings and these authors may not even recognise these leanings (Isaeva, Bachmann, Bristow, & Saunders, 2015). Many sought to resolve this conundrum by simply ignoring the Research Philosophy issue, believing it to be irrelevant to their field. Extant research has reported this issue (Netting & O’Connor, 2005;

^{3 4 5} Email feedback / personal correspondence to second author.

Pascal & Brown, 2009). Our wider conjecture is that if any reader finds the reported views of doctoral students surprising, then we suggest that you may be caught in a similar paradigmatic trap.

Doctoral students' ambivalence to Research Philosophy is in direct contrast to the principles promoted by the invitation for this Innovation in Teaching Award: 'To be a competent researcher it is necessary ... to have an understanding of the philosophical issues which underpin research'. In other words, understanding that all researchers have a philosophical perspective (acknowledged or unacknowledged), as well as knowing how to interrogate manuscripts and researchers to see how different perspectives influence research findings, is fundamental to the generation of effective research (Wisker, 2010).

Knowing that our own learning journeys would be positively affected by seeking to enable the journeys of others (McLachlan & Garcia, 2015) we set out to design a new teaching initiative.

In undertaking the design of this initiative, based on personal experience and the reported ambivalence of our peers, we set out to meet the following learning objectives:

- 1) Provide practical demonstrations of different research philosophies producing different research outcomes, even when the topic and subject of enquiry remains the same;
- 2) Provide an agnostic but basic framework encompassing a range of research philosophies, such that doctoral students could find themselves within that framework;
- 3) Ensure that participants understood Research Philosophy as relevant to their studies; and
- 4) Ensure that participants had fun thereby removing the stigma that Research Philosophy is dull, dense, and obtuse.

Our fundamental aim was to enable doctoral students to identify and associate with the need to find and understand their philosophical perspective in order for them to become successful in their studies.

By focusing on enablement of students in this domain we were considering how to activate their own future discovery of Research Philosophy. Enablement was not about providing a comprehensive review of different paradigmatic definitions or philosophies, nor to defend or attack paradigm incommensurability (Burrell & Morgan, 1979). Rather, we hoped to spark sufficient curiosity in participants to propel them to undertake their own future further investigations.

The Challenges

1) The Subject - Research Philosophy Can Be Dull, Dense and Obtuse

The field of Research Philosophy has a poor reputation. Scholars have suggested that for students the plethora of names and approaches can make the field of Research Philosophy feel vast (Netting & O'Connor, 2005; Pascal & Brown, 2009), irrelevant (Knoedler & Underwood, 2003) and intimidating (McLachlan & Garcia, 2015).

Thus, students come with some resistance to the subject and teachers too often have resistances which coalesce in the prevailing approaches to Research Philosophy. Mostly, geared to minimizing the investment that students are asked to make in getting to grips with Research Philosophy (Pascal & Brown, 2009).

Lewthwaite & Nind (2016) suggest that pedagogic hooks are needed to “get them for life” making the subject non-threatening. Further, they suggest that the most effective way to achieve this is through direct and immersive experiences.

2) Adults Approach Learning Already Burdened with Knowledge and Preferences

Adult learning has only limited similarities to children’s learning (Yoshimoto, Inenaga, & Yamada, 2007). In recognising these differences, we drew on the andragogical work of Knowles, Holton III, and Swanson (Knowles, Holton, & Swanson, 2015). Whilst acknowledging that critiques have been

offered, Knowles et al. (2015) model for the education of adults has been valued by management educators (Forrest III & Peterson, 2006) and is consistent with student-centred learning (Harju & Åkerblom, 2017).

According to Knowles et al (2015) transformation of learning is based on assumptions that adult learners have different and specific needs. This offered a theoretical underpinning for our teaching initiative provided we could find a trigger to initiate these behaviours: i) the need to understand, ii) self-direction, iii) a reservoir of experience that is a resource for learning, iv) an orientation to self-development, v) an orientation towards contextual problem resolution, and vi) an intrinsic motivation to learn.

In looking for this trigger we noted that the literature calls for innovative practices when teaching research philosophy (Lewthwaite & Nind, 2016) enabling researchers to achieve ‘creative, ambiguous, and boundary-defying research designs’ (Wolgemuth, 2016). Innovation is both a response to students’ attitudes and a commitment to activating their engagement, reducing didactic teaching (Knoedler & Underwood, 2003), and increasing interactivity (Pascal & Brown, 2009). Hence, we decided to use principles of deep game learning and gamification.

Overcoming the Challenges

Gamification is the use of elements of games (e.g., point systems, competition) designed into nongame contexts (Deterding, 2013). All manner of things are now gamified, from financial to fitness applications (apps) the dull and mundane are transformed to become fun and engaging. Gamification is an increasing trend in university teaching (Cassidy, Sullivan, & Radnor, 2019; Cho, Park, & Lee, 2019) because it ‘leverage[s] people’s natural desires for competition, achievement, status, self-expression, altruism, and closure’ (Park & Bae, 2014: 19). Gamification is a set of tools for

capturing people's attention and willingness to accept challenge, however, gamification is not the same as deep game design.

Deep games build upon ideas of gamification in which the whole spectrum of the human experience is made tangible through gameplay. The three features of deep games are: First, through games, participants have the opportunity to enter realms of experience that would not normally be available to them. These different realms do not have to be competitive, there are roles within deep games that accommodate all personal preferences including those of the introvert who may choose to be a bystander and learn through observation. In addition to providing different experiences for individuals, games make visible a number of intellectual challenges that need to be overcome to advance or progress through the game. Finally, to incentivise players/participants to overcome these challenges games are designed to be fun irrespective of the role a participant is choosing to take (Rusch, 2017).

Deep games are used in service of experiences for the participant that can provide potent insights into different views of reality. Deep games include transformative play in which play is more than an activity, but a state of mind (Bowman & Hugaas, 2019; Rusch 2020). The ability of deep games to ignite visceral shifts of perspective convinced us to use this approach in the development of a workshop called: 'What difference does your paradigm make?'.

The Infrastructure - A Workshop Called 'What difference does your paradigm make?'

Our approach used both gamification and deep game ideas which invited participants to explore new ideas and possibilities through play. The idea of being in a 'safe space', with supportive colleagues having fun together was encouraged. The goal or competition was with oneself, enabled by seeing and helping others to succeed in their personal competition, and focused on enabling a successful doctoral journey. The workshop we present here includes two games.

Game One

We commenced our workshop with play. The importance of play is not to be underestimated: playfulness generates an element of fun, but it also encourages new frames for interaction (Vygotsky, 1978), breaking conformity and increasing the cross-pollination of ideas and knowledge sharing (Jensen, 2017). Some researchers in the field of neuroscience consider that play is the fundamental way in which we learn (Hubermans Lab, ep 58, Feb 2022). Emotionally, play can provide participants positive associations with the activity and interactions, “as well as a safe context in which to take risks, to try on new roles, and to explore new potential forms of practice” (Holliday, Statler, & Flanders, 2007). As Brown (2010) illustrates, play is not trivial, rather it is a biological drive which is integral to our ability to learn through experience. Nature has designed humans to flourish through play and we sought to build on this.

In Game One we asked everyone to ‘be’ Donald Trump. (For more details, see Renshaw and Robinson (2020)). The character of Trump is used consciously to provoke participants to viscerally see how the world might look through someone else’s eyes and involves exploring alternative selves through role or behavioural modelling (Celestine & Yeo, 2021). Some participants have moral judgements about Trump, but it is these very judgements that help to bring the paradigmatic shift to life. Theoretically, this kinaesthetic experience – for example a reaction such as ‘yuk’ - activates nerves in the body which can stimulate a wider range of thoughts and emotions than would normally be the case for that individual (Celestine & Yeo, 2021). Choosing a global figure who holds polarising views was designed to present a fast and effective way to appreciate how the world can be perceived differently. In the language of Research Methods, being Donald Trump enables participants to recognise the impact of different ontologies. Whilst choosing Trump may invite one to anticipate negative reactions to this exercise, we have not received any feedback during or after

our workshops to suggest that this approach did not have the desired effect or that participants would rather not have taken part in this.

Game Two

The second game required participants to work in small groups of five to six. Participants are asked to discover whether, taking a different perspective on one's own research with the prompting and challenging of others, 'one simply 'sees' different things' (Gioia, Donnellon, & Sims, 1989).

Facilitators explain the constructs and emphasise that the purpose is not to debate the definitions, nor to defend or attack paradigm incommensurability (Burrell & Morgan, 1979).

A handout of a tabulated summary of the ten philosophical perspectives identified in Blaikie (2007) is used. The table uses categories such as ontology, epistemology, research strategy, methods used, desired outcomes and axiology. By using consistent categories – even though they are not universally relevant – the participants have an easy-to-view set of comparisons across different perspectives. Although any such summary is going to be partial and incomplete it is a tool that reduces the 'barrier to entry' for discussions on different philosophical perspectives. Participants use the handout as a way to jump from one perspective to another, they learn to re-language Research Questions and re-consider issues of data and analysis.

Having reviewed the handout, with high level guidance from the facilitators, each working group begins their game with a selection of cards placed face-down. On the hidden side is one philosophical perspective from Blaikie (2007). Each participant is asked to describe their current research project to the others and then to randomly select a card. Then the participant, supported by those at the table, plays a game – engaging their imagination to explore what impacts there might be on their current research project if they take this new perspective. Using the practices of multi-voicing, position and destabilising reflexivity (Alvesson, Hardy & Harley, 2008) the group also

become participants in the game through asking questions, supporting and challenging the speaker to explain or defend their new ideas based on their individual, and often different, understanding of the various philosophical perspectives.

After playing the game for an hour per group, there was a plenary conversation asking participants to share their findings and reactions.

How the initiative was received

This initiative started with a Professional Development Workshop (PDW) at the 2017 British Academy of Management Conference. Given that we were unpublished doctoral students at that time we were concerned that we may not attract participants as there were many esteemed academics delivering alternative PDWs at the same time. However, our workshop was not only oversubscribed, but we had to turn even more people away at the door as we had insufficient room within which to run the event. The majority of participants were doctoral students indicating an unmet demand to address this topic. Subsequent open and closed versions of this workshop have achieved good attendance levels.

In most cases participants have not met before and, even if they have, often they are researching very different fields. Nonetheless they have shown themselves to be willing to engage immediately in Game 1. As they hear the first participants express how they are seeing the world differently to their personal preferences or emphasising the most important perspectives of this new view, we found others willing to metaphorically step forward and share their ideas as well – whether consistent, conflicting or new. Again, this indicates a willingness to play the games and a corresponding desire to address their uncertainties regarding philosophical issues.

Participant reactions demonstrated that the style of the initiative was important to them. For example, the following comments were made to open questions asking about the overall experience:

'The game was a really effective way of understanding the different paradigms at play'

'Entertaining way to step out of your research paradigm and think about your work from a different perspective'

'"Playing" with the paradigms together helped us develop a deeper understanding of how they relate to our own work and that of others.'

'[You] brought Research Philosophies to life in a highly interactive way'

Providing our tabulated interpretation of Blaikie's (2007) ten research philosophies triggered useful challenges, for example, as to whether certain constructs are truly research philosophies (as argued by Blaikie) or theories. These queries helped to identify the potential for differences and to generate uncertainties during the game. Providing a game-space sets up the participants to collaborate and support each other so that these uncertainties can be addressed collegiately and without fear of failing. Game One brought energy and a sense of both intrigue and fun to the room – the uniqueness of the approach seemed to strike many: *'Love it. Blew my mind!'*. Whilst we did not collect demographic data in this way, comments from participants demonstrated that they ranged in age from their early twenties to those in retirement. No one provided any negative feedback with respect to the learning achieved from and the importance of playing at 'Being Donald Trump' in this way.

The learning outcomes that were achieved and how they were measured and evaluated

Data Collection

Since our first delivery of this initiative in 2017 we have delivered it on many occasions including closed events at specific universities and open events. In view of the COVID19 pandemic we have also delivered online versions with minor adjustments that we do not explore in this teaching case. Attendance has ranged from 4 to over 50 and included PhD students, DBA students, early-career academics and professors.

The impact of the workshops is identified through feedback forms and through notes taken during the facilitated plenary sessions or subsequent email correspondence. Taken individually and together, these quotes suggest the workshops achieve our learning objectives:

- 1) Provide practical demonstrations of different research philosophies producing different research outcomes, even when the topic and subject of enquiry remains the same.

'I discovered ... that my area/research question could be actually tackled by a different approach.'

'Love it. Blew my mind!'

'I didn't realise how easy it could be to yield different 'results' by changing your research paradigm.'

'Changing paradigm is in many aspects also changing the answers to the research question, it sheds light and focus in often very different direction'

- 2) Provide an agnostic but basic framework encompassing a range of research philosophies, such that doctoral students could find themselves within that framework.

'[I realised that] my positivist research proposal was not really in line with my constructivist ideology'

'The masterclass made me re-think my total attachment to a social constructivist perspective'

'the method used during the PDW of "picking" a paradigm and attempting to look at one's research through that paradigm is a useful method'

'I discovered that it might be valuable to consider and explore the influence of my presence, the questions I asked, and the concepts I introduced on participants' answers during the semi-structured interviews I conducted.'

- 3) Ensure that participants understood Research Philosophy as relevant to their studies.

'It also helped me to critically examine the theories I was proposing to use.'

'This understanding and awareness has allowed me to see the potential limitations of my current paradigm.'

'the workshop did help me understand that paradigms are not static'

'I am now redesigning my research. It has meant I have [to] consider using different methodologies that will provide richer data.'

- 4) Ensure that participants had fun thereby removing the stigma that Research Philosophy is dull, dense, and obtuse.

'You both made a difficult topic both enjoyable and enlightening!'

'Philosophical perspectives have always frightened me as I felt that I didn't understand them/didn't know enough to talk about them intelligently! This workshop has really helped me to feel more confident and able to defend the approach I'm taking.'

'Loved your story and your ways.'

'It really does help to talk about these things. Was amazing!'

We believe we met our goals in teaching research philosophy based on an underlying andragogy and deep game design. Nonetheless, we anticipate further advances will be possible and we continue to reflect upon and refine our delivery on every occasion as we continue to learn from participants.

Plans to further develop the initiative

In addition to the above, participant feedback strongly supported the need to continue with this teaching initiative to extend its impact to others. For example,

'This session should be compulsory for all members of academic staff and particularly supervisors!'

'in my first year ... No one raised any issues about philosophy'

In Game One, Donald Trump was an excellent choice. He was sufficiently 'globally famous' for everyone to be able to participate and have fun. However, as he is no longer President, we will be updating the game to use other equally well-known, global figures, possibly some of whom might be just as divisive, for example, Greta Thornburg or Vladimir Putin. The point is to provide a way of entering into the spirit of gaming, regardless of political or cultural affiliation.

Deep game design is usually computer-based and focused on individuals (Rusch, 2017). We are now working on a project with deep game academics to incorporate our physical group-played game into

this format where players will, for example, be presented with different ontological and epistemological journeys that will challenge them to re-envisage their planned research designs and to contemplate the consequences. We are still in the early stages of investigation and design, hoping to seek external funding. Metaphorical tools could include participants choosing doors to step through in which the world is seen or understood in specified ways, e.g. a requirement to predict future outcomes as a result of one's research. The choices belong to the participants with the potential for inconsistent ontologies arising or limited future options without metaphorically turning around.

We are passionate to enable others to open the wonderful doors of discovery into the game of philosophical perspectives. We truly believe it's a 'game changer' for researchers.

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