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### **HE teachers researching their own practice: the possibilities for hybrid methodologies in practitioner research.**

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**HE teachers researching their own practice:  
The possibilities for hybrid methodologies in practitioner research**

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## **HE teachers researching their own practice: The possibilities for hybrid methodologies in practitioner research**

### **Introduction and background**

This paper reports on our recent research into the experiences of three HE lecturers, who are specialists in areas other than Education and who have recently completed pedagogic research in HE settings for an MA Academic Practice (MAAP) at the University of Brighton<sup>1</sup>. During semi-structured interviews with the lecturers, we invited them to reflect on their experiences of carrying out pedagogic research, and in particular to discuss their efforts to reconcile the research paradigms associated with their own disciplines (in these cases Management, Counselling/Psychotherapy and Physiotherapy) and those in educational research. Our conference paper presents our analysis of these interviews – alongside our analyses of the participants' MA dissertations – in an attempt to explore whether practitioner researchers in HE are creating 'hybrid' methodologies, in which they blend conventional educational research methodologies with their own discipline-based methodological understandings. We aim to describe these three practitioners' individual journeys across what we identify as 'methodological borderlands', and to identify implications for supporting HE practitioners wishing to engage in pedagogic research.

In an earlier paper (Antoniou & Stierer, 2002), we explored the question of whether there are distinctive methodologies for pedagogic research in higher education<sup>2</sup>, compared with research in other educational settings. We observed that the volume and range of pedagogic research in UK HE are increasing. Its status is growing too. We therefore expected that the literature on educational research methodology would include material that addresses the needs and circumstances of the colleagues we advise and support in our work in the Centre for Learning and Teaching at the University of Brighton – HE practitioners from backgrounds other than Education, who wish to develop their expertise in pedagogic

research. We discovered, in fact, that the literature on educational research methodology devotes virtually *no* attention to pedagogic research in HE, and that published articles reporting on pedagogic research (another potential source of guidance for aspiring pedagogic researchers) tend to pay little attention to methodological matters. In our paper, we speculated that one possible reason for this gap in the literature could be that methodologies for pedagogic research in HE are in fact no different from methodologies for research in other educational settings. Therefore, the ‘problem’ may be essentially one of ‘face validity’ rather than one of substance: HE lecturers may be reluctant to read research carried out in other educational settings, even though it may provide methodological guidance for their own projects. However, we suspected – and continue to suspect – that methodologies for pedagogic research in HE *are* distinctive in certain vital respects. One of the factors which might most strongly give pedagogic research in HE its distinctiveness is the strong disciplinary culture in higher education. HE lecturers are strongly rooted in their subjects – which naturally include an academic component, but in many fields also include a professional/vocational element whereby strong ties exist to practice settings beyond the educational institution, each with their own particular philosophies and value systems. Because of these strong disciplinary cultures and identities in HE, we might expect (and indeed we might encourage) practitioner-researchers to fashion ‘hybrid methodologies’ as their research develops. This ‘hybridity’ would emerge as practitioner-researchers borrow features from educational research traditions as well as from the research principles and practices prevalent within their own ‘academic tribes’ (Becher & Trowler, 2002), and possibly from their personal and professional backgrounds as well. We wondered, in our previous paper, if it might be here that some of the *distinctiveness* of methodologies for pedagogic research in HE might be located.

We suggested that if there are distinctive methodologies for pedagogic research in HE, this distinctiveness might not comprise a single, stable set of methodologies for all pedagogic research, which can be contrasted with methodologies in other educational settings, but

might instead constitute a *range* of distinctive methodological orientations and approaches, informed by and 'filtered through' the disciplinary experiences of individual practitioners:

Our inclination is to encourage our colleagues to consider that part of the distinctiveness of pedagogic research in HE derives from the diverse disciplinary (and personal, and professional) backgrounds of practitioner-researchers. In conducting pedagogic research, we can support our colleagues in drawing on their already-rich stores of knowledge and expertise, instead of approaching the task with the kind of diffidence we typically encounter. We can also support our colleagues in their contribution to a broader project – that of creating new and distinctive *hybrid methodologies*, which represent syntheses of educational research traditions and traditions from their own disciplines (Antoniou & Stierer, 2002, p 16).

### **The research**

In order to investigate these issues more closely, we decided to examine the experiences of three lecturers working at our own institution. These three lecturers are specialists in areas other than Education and have recently completed pedagogic research studies in HE settings in order to fulfill the requirements for the dissertation element of the MA in Academic Practice at the University of Brighton. The MAAP is a modular programme designed for experienced HE lecturers wishing to develop professional knowledge and expertise in relation to their teaching role. As they developed their ideas for their dissertations, and carried out their research and wrote up their dissertations, they were able to draw on the support of a supervisor as well as from members of their 'action learning set'<sup>3</sup>. The three lecturers who participated in our research were amongst the first to complete dissertations for the MA since its inception in 1999: all three completed their dissertations in the summer/autumn of 2002, and all three passed this element of the course and were awarded MAs in Academic Practice later that year.

The three lecturers were<sup>4</sup>:

**Mary**, a Lecturer in Physiotherapy, is a former clinical physiotherapist with experience of working in a number of NHS trusts. In addition to her work in the training of physiotherapists, she convenes a course in Clinical Education for clinical practitioners

responsible for students' work-based education and training. For her MA dissertation research she investigated issues raised by the change from one-to-one clinical supervision to an arrangement involving two students/trainees to each clinical educator.

**Paul** is a Lecturer in Education. However, his professional background was in Youth and Community work and in Counselling and Psychotherapy, rather than in Education, and most of his work at the university is concerned with the professional development of youth and community workers. His dissertation was a study of certain aspects of his approach to working with youth and community workers, which he termed 'transformative learning'.

**Bernard** lectures in Business Studies, and his background is in business and industrial management and consultancy for a range of high-profile national and international organisations. He has extensive experience in business research and has headed a national research centre. Bernard has several post-graduate qualifications, including a PhD. His dissertation research was an investigation of issues raised by a new approach to teaching statistics to Business Studies students which he developed, aimed at increasing motivation and attendance.

The two of us interviewed the three lecturers individually for 60-90 minutes (one of us interviewed two lecturers; the other interviewed one). We invited them to reflect on their experiences of carrying out pedagogic research. In particular, we discussed with them their efforts to reconcile the research paradigms and traditions associated with their own disciplines (academic and professional) with those in educational research. The interviews were semi-structured, guided by a list of topics and prompts which we sent to the three participants in advance of the interviews. We asked them to describe the ways in which they developed the methodologies for their MAAP dissertation projects. We were interested in aspects such as:

- The choice and development of their research topic
- Their research aims and objectives
- The literature(s) they considered to be important and influential to their research
- The theoretical ideas that underpinned their research
- The way they identified the setting(s) in which to conduct their research
- Their approach to sampling for the research
- Their methods of data-collection and analysis
- Whether they encountered any ethical dilemmas during the research
- The way they chose to write up their research for their dissertations, including: writing styles and formats; the kinds of audiences they felt they were writing for; and the ways they represented themselves in the text
- Whether they considered their research projects to be examples of 'educational' research, or 'disciplinary' research, or a combination of the two
- The way they understood the relationship between themselves as 'the researcher' and other people who participated in the research
- Whether they felt any tensions between their roles as lecturers and their roles as researchers.

We also asked the interviewees about their previous experiences of conducting research, and of undertaking research training, and we prompted them to discuss their professional backgrounds and their routes into their present academic roles. Interviews were taped and transcribed with the interviewees' permission. Permission was also gained to analyse each of their MA dissertations for our research.

### **Emerging themes**

We have distilled the following themes for analysis and discussion from our close reading of the three interview transcripts and the three MA dissertations:

### *'Comfort zones'*

The methodological decisions made by the three MAAP researchers when designing their dissertation projects were strongly influenced by their conceptions of their own 'comfort zones', which were in turn directly related to their professional and disciplinary backgrounds and identities. These decisions related not only to their choice of methods in general (e.g. interviews, surveys, questionnaires, observation), but also to:

- project design issues (e.g. sampling)
- the research 'persona' they themselves adopted within the study
- the specific approach to using the chosen methods (e.g. questionnaires designed to enable quantifiable coding as opposed to more open-ended narrative responses)
- the role of 'the literature' in relation to the development of theory and methodology, and more specifically the kinds of 'literature' that are deemed appropriate and useful
- the style and format of the dissertation
- the relative importance to the researcher personally of such issues as generalisability, objectivity, theoretical underpinning, ethical probity, wider professional contribution etc.
- relationships to research participants and consideration of research ethics

In discussing all these aspects of methodology, the three interviewees often used words and phrases relating to *comfort and discomfort*, indicating their clear understanding of how the range of possible methodological choices available to them did or did not correspond to their existing knowledge, previous experience, and sense of themselves. For example, the lecturers stated that certain theories, literatures, methods or approaches felt 'familiar' to them (Bernard), whilst other methodological choices they encountered were 'alien' (Paul), and caused them to feel like 'a fish out of water' (Paul).



Our interpretation of their references to *comfort and discomfort* is that they were representing a set of ideas that went well beyond mere personal preferences (as in an aversion towards, or distrust of, statistics, for example) or even personal values. The three lecturers were instead representing subtle and complex understandings of the kinds of approaches that were appropriate for their purposes and for the particular settings in which they worked. They were representing their attempts to reconcile their professional and disciplinary identities with what they perceived to be the expected approach to educational research. And they were representing their disappointment with the available literature on educational research methodology as a source of ideas for pursuing their particular research questions. For example, Mary accounted for the initial development of her methodological approach in these terms:

Because my interest [in the topic] was linked to previous work I'd done, it felt like a continuation. I felt I was building on experience I'd gained through doing previous projects. But it also felt quite new, so I started to explore the educational research literature. But I didn't feel there was much there for me, actually. So I then put those books down and went back to some of the research areas that I knew – not an *awful* lot about – but felt a bit more comfortable working in.

That said, Mary also indicated towards the end of the interview that she regretted somewhat her reluctance to venture out of her comfort zone, and wondered in retrospect whether the project might have achieved more desirable results had she done this (or at least been able to broaden the range of methods with which she felt comfortable):

Barry: Looking back on it, would you have done it very differently?

Mary: I think I would have chosen different methods, and certainly have kept...the actual numbers of participants much smaller. The actual topic area I still feel comfortable with...but it would have been useful perhaps to feel a bit more comfortable in exploring different methods. I think for a first-time hands-on researcher my choice of methods might have been governed, in a way, by a fear of perhaps choosing something that was wrong, or fear of not being comfortable in the actual methods of the collection.

More specific examples of this determination to work within the 'comfort zone' are:

- In keeping with his background in Counselling and Psychotherapy, **Paul** approached his interviews with students – which were the principal method of collecting evidence for his dissertation research – as opportunities in themselves for 'creating understanding', for mutual learning, development and change, for both interviewer and interviewee, as much as an opportunity to capture research data. He was unperturbed by the complex multiple roles at play in these interviews; indeed he positively thrived on this aspect, and considered it a natural part of the research process, which he described as a vehicle for his own learning and professional development. Indeed, he adopted a fairly experimental approach to the writing of his dissertation, in which he interspersed his discussions of the research with boxed commentaries on his own personal and professional reflections on the process of change he underwent as a result of conducting the research.
- In developing an approach to interviewing Physiotherapy students/trainees and clinical educators for her dissertation research, **Mary** began by devising a schedule of prompts and issues. However, she quickly abandoned the schedule, preferring instead to treat the interview more as 'a conversation', since this enabled her to probe issues that arose within the interview rather than to persevere with a pre-determined agenda. When prompted in her interview with us [BS] to consider whether this more open-ended approach to interviewing built on previous patterns of experience, Mary readily linked this to her approach to interviewing new Physiotherapy clients as a practitioner, and to interviewing prospective Physiotherapy students – about both of which she was very confident and experienced: 'I felt reasonably comfortable in that [interview] situation'.
- When asked about the overall purpose of his dissertation research, **Bernard** drew explicitly on his experience in business: his research was, as far as he was concerned, the kind of regular practical evaluation of one's own performance that is standard practice for managers in business and industry:

A good manager does that as a matter of course. You're always looking for ways to improve things. You're always planning, implementing, you monitor it, you evaluate it ... It's just an integral part of a lecturer's role as I see it ... there should be some sort of criteria that all lecturers should, systematically, collect data that will enable them to monitor and test their own performance and the actual output...

Bernard was also clear that the methodologies he used in his MA research were strongly influenced by those he had previously used in his business career:

you're familiar with certain things... you feel comfortable with those. And you will follow similar sorts of patterns...one tends to stick with what one knows one's best at.

### *Membership of 'communities of practice'*

The three MAAP researchers positioned themselves and the research they had done in relation to various communities of colleagues – notably their own departmental colleagues, but also their professional reference groups and their MAAP action learning sets. These communities of practice served different functions: they ranged from actual colleagues who provided specific forms of advice, support and practical assistance at various stages of the research, to a synthesis of real and imagined potential audiences for the research. These potential audiences were not necessarily potential readers of the dissertation, but were more often described as the colleagues they hoped might benefit from the professional outcomes of the research. Apart from the action learning sets, which were drawn from across subjects, these actual and potential communities of practice were exclusively disciplinary: they were fellow practitioners – either in their academic subjects, or in their professional fields.

I do see myself, particularly in terms of here at the university, I'm part of a group, an area which involves...where we're looking at...it's not initial teacher education but it's post-experience for people who are practitioners, often in quite distinct fields. I'm working with people who facilitate that process somehow [Paul]

*Pedagogic research as a form of professional development in relation to the teaching role*

The three MAAP researchers described their experience of conducting pedagogic research mainly as a way of developing knowledge, expertise and confidence in relation to their teaching role, rather than primarily as a way of developing the research element of their role:

...what I've got to is a reasonably comfortable position now of what being a teacher in higher education...what I don't have is a construct, a picture, an image of a researcher, so still whenever we look at research I go a bit wobbly. I go into that 'I'm not quite sure where I am'. But I have a much, much clearer professional concept of what teaching in higher education is about. And that was created primarily through that research. [Paul]

...I think that the very fact I was able to step back and reflect on my stance within the research helped me to expose areas of my practice that I previously had felt quite uncomfortable with. So, that was a very useful exercise. [Mary]

Although the main benefit of completing a pedagogic research project was expressed in relation to the teaching role, the enhancement of the teaching role achieved through pedagogic research included in at least one case an improved ability to direct and support their students' research activities, which is often cited as one of the vital links between the two elements of the academic's role in discussions and debates about the relationship between research and teaching (e.g. Jenkins & Zetter, 2003):

Barry: Would you be any more inclined now to describe yourself as a researcher than you were before you started?

Mary: I think I would be, because I think I've hopefully gained more confidence from the process, and I feel more comfortable, certainly, in supporting students, albeit on a very basic level.

Barry: When they do research themselves?

Mary: Yes, I feel more comfortable and informed, having gone through the process myself and very much it's about exposure of oneself as well to the process.

These findings echo those of Kember (2000), reporting on a network of practitioner-focused action research projects in Hong Kong universities, where many participants reported that they 'had acquired a deeper understanding of innovative teaching, or had changed the way

they conceptualised teaching' (p 133), or had 'actually brought about significant changes to the way they taught' (p 134).

#### *Role conflicts between that of 'teacher' and that of 'researcher'*

Some MAAP researchers described conflicts between their role as lecturer/tutor and their role as researcher. Mary, for example, recognised early on in the design of her project that it would be inadvisable for her to ask students taking part in the research to keep reflective diaries in which they recorded their thoughts about the clinical supervision processes she was studying. She felt that this would have constituted an unacceptable intrusion on the students' privacy, and ultimately compromised the teacher-student relationship, despite the fact that in other respects they might have yielded extremely valuable insights into the very processes under investigation:

If it had been an external researcher, there wouldn't have been a problem with that, because I think I was fairly close to the students and to get them to do something additionally, because their logs are personal, their personal property, so to speak, it would be intruding.

Mary went further, and wondered more generally whether the objectivity and rigour of the research had been compromised by the fact that she was an integral part of the professional setting being investigated: 'I feel that I still have quite a lot of my practice hat on, undertaking research'.

#### *The inadequacy of available research 'training'*

The three MAAP researchers expressed varying degrees of ambivalence towards existing resources and training opportunities for educational research – partly because they were too focused on educational settings other than HE, but also because it was too 'generic'. Both Paul and Mary had taken modules on research methods outside the MAAP programme in order to fill what they perceived to be a gap in their knowledge and expertise, since at that stage there was no research methods module within the MAAP programme. In Paul's case, he took a research methods module in the MA in Education programme, and in Mary's case,

she sat in on an intensive one-week module on research methods in the social sciences. In neither case did they feel their experience of 'research training' prepared them for the work they carried out for their MAAP dissertations, though this was perhaps not so surprising in view of the fact that neither module was designed to support HE practitioners wishing to develop their expertise in pedagogic research. All three discussed the kind of training they would have liked before undertaking her MA research. They, and indeed other MAAP course participants working on dissertations, were disappointed that they were not able to access many existing examples of pedagogic research in HE settings – especially dissertations completed for this and other similar courses. This disappointment partly resulted from the fact that they were amongst the first lecturers to complete their MAAP dissertation at the university, and so they did not have previous successful examples to examine.

Nevertheless, all three lecturers made honest efforts to seek out appropriate resources and training opportunities, and were frustrated and alienated by what they found. Ultimately the sources of advice they found most relevant to their needs and circumstances were colleagues – either departmental colleagues or their dissertation supervisors.

## **Discussion**

In several important respects, the three HE teachers featured in this research exemplify a recognisable category of lecturing staff in today's higher education – perhaps especially in 'new' post-1992 universities, the former polytechnics. Each of them had had successful and sustained experience in their respective professional fields before moving into higher education. They were recruited to their jobs as HE lecturers on the strength of this professional experience and expertise, rather than necessarily because of their academic qualifications or their record of research productivity, on the principle that they would be able to make an especially effective contribution to the initial preparation and continuing development of members of their respective professional groups. Indeed, in some cases they did not have postgraduate degrees when they were appointed; instead, they had

professional qualifications which were deemed to be at least equivalent in level and status, and highly desirable in terms of credibility and relevance to the role they were expected to fulfil. In this sense, they began their new careers as university lecturers doubly disadvantaged. Like many new lecturers, they were to varying degrees unprepared for their teaching role. But, in most cases, neither did they have the kind of grounding in disciplinary research that characterises new lecturers appointed on the basis of their academic and research backgrounds.

Viewed in this light, their decision to embark upon and complete the MA in Academic Practice can be seen as a response to three distinct expectations (both self-imposed, and externally-imposed) arising from their mid-career change of professional culture and identity: the expectation that they should develop their knowledge and expertise in relation to their teaching role; the expectation that they should become active and productive in research; and the expectation that they should acquire a postgraduate degree if they did not have one before. These factors also help to explain why the methodological orientation and approach for their dissertation research were influenced by both 'academic' and 'professional' aspects of their disciplinary backgrounds. In this sense their development of methodologies for their pedagogic research projects can be seen as a specific site in which they attempted to reconcile a number of wider and sometimes conflicting pressures upon them as they developed their identities as academics and their membership of key communities of practice.

The degree to which these researchers' methodologies comprised distinctive 'borrowings' from both educational research and their own disciplines was remarkable. In each case, crucial aspects of design and execution exhibited features of both domains, and in their interviews the practitioner-researchers' accounts of the decision-making process invoked discourses and concepts from both domains. We naturally accept that most, if not all, practitioner research in educational settings other than HE will display elements of hybridity.<sup>5</sup>

For example, BS has experience of working with practitioners in school settings who have adopted particular approaches to classroom research on the basis of their personal preferences and backgrounds. However, we observe that the particular quality of individualised hybridity displayed by the HE practitioner-researchers featured in this small study is different in several important respects – not least because it draws so clearly upon more than one *disciplinary* tradition.

As mentioned above, Kember (2000) discusses a number of methodological and professional issues that arose for HE practitioners contributing to a network of linked action research projects in Hong Kong universities. The overriding objectives, and the principal positive outcomes, related to the enhancement of teaching quality and the improved status of teaching as a scholarly activity. The action research model developed for these linked projects, and evaluated by Kember and his colleagues, is presented as essentially context-free, despite the wide range of disciplines and pedagogic settings represented across the projects. Indeed one impression conveyed by Kember's report is that the action research model represents the most appropriate and effective approach to pedagogic research in HE, that it is distinctive in its emphasis upon practitioner learning and development through research, and that its context-independent quality further adds to its distinctiveness. One possibility within the MA in Academic Practice would have been to adopt this model as the preferred approach, to have inducted dissertation candidates into the theory and practice of action research in the way that Kember's collaborators were. This might have safeguarded a degree of consistency and methodological 'purity', and thereby protected dissertation projects from the influences of possibly inappropriate methodological hybridities. However, we feel that this would have been both undesirable and impracticable. We believe that these three pedagogic research projects were more rewarding for the individual lecturers concerned, and more effective in their professional impact, because the practitioner-researchers developed distinctive methodologies which accommodated the context in which the research was undertaken as well as their own particular professional circumstances and



locations. Indeed we suspect that these kinds of hybridising processes are features of all practitioner research in HE, and that the methodologies actually adopted by the practitioners contributing to Kember's network almost certainly displayed some of the qualities of hybridity we have observed in the work of our colleagues.

## **Conclusion**

Our hypothesis when we began this study was that HE lecturers, when developing methodology for pedagogic research, would borrow features from their own disciplinary and professional backgrounds as well as from educational research traditions, and that this quality of hybridity imparted a distinctive character to such methodologies. The tentative findings from our small exploratory study suggest that this is the case, but perhaps not as systematically or overtly as we might have imagined. It has been difficult to make distinctions between the influence of disciplinary and professional backgrounds and other kinds of influences. For example, the fact that all three lecturers in our study were not merely conducting pedagogic research projects, but also aiming to fulfil the requirements for a postgraduate degree, will have shaped their decisions and their actions. Nevertheless, we strongly suspect that this kind of 'borrowing' from different disciplinary traditions is a feature of most pedagogic research carried out by HE practitioners from backgrounds other than Education.

This process of methodological hybridisation is understandable, and is also perhaps inevitable, in view of the complexities of the professional identities of university academics, and the complexities of the communities of practice of which they seek membership and from which they seek affirmation, support and reward. Whether it is desirable is another question. In general, our conclusion is that it is desirable, though we are also aware that the 'comfort zones' of practitioners are not necessarily the most effective spaces from which to research their own practice, and that they might need to be encouraged to step outside the

security of the familiar and to take risks in order to achieve new professional knowledge for themselves and for their colleagues.

As we have said earlier, we believe that these three pedagogic research projects were more rewarding for the individual lecturers concerned, and more effective in their professional impact, because the practitioner-researchers developed distinctive methodologies which accommodated the context in which the research was undertaken as well as their own particular professional circumstances and locations. As a consequence, we are now inclined to reassure our academic colleagues who wish to develop their knowledge and expertise in pedagogic research that they should not treat research into their teaching practice and their teaching role as alien terrain, but instead to use their backgrounds as disciplinary specialists as powerful resources as they consider issues of methodology in pedagogic research. We would now be inclined to encourage such colleagues standing in the 'methodological borderlands' between educational research methodologies and those drawn from other disciplinary and professional traditions to seek methodological hybrids. One desirable consequence might be a blurring of the boundary between pedagogic research and disciplinary research, and a greater recognition that research into the learning and teaching of subjects contributes significantly to our understanding of the subjects themselves.

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<sup>1</sup> BS is course leader for the MA in Academic Practice, and MA is the Research Officer in the Centre for Learning and Teaching, the MAAP's departmental home.

<sup>2</sup> By 'pedagogic research', we are mainly referring to investigations undertaken by HE teachers in the context of their own teaching and learning environments, aimed at studying the processes and relationships comprising pedagogy. Such investigations are generally carried out either individually or in small teams, sometimes conducted under the auspices of accredited courses of training, CPD, or advanced study. They tend to be small-scale, locally-focused and generally discipline-specific. They are generally motivated more by a commitment to enhance the quality of their own teaching, and that of their immediate colleagues, than by a desire to contribute to a wider research agenda.

<sup>3</sup> 'Action learning sets' refers to a specific approach to learning and professional development, whereby groups of students or trainees provide active mutual support, often facilitated by a designated adviser (cf McGill & Beaty, 1995).

<sup>4</sup> Pseudonyms have been used. We have tried to strike a balance, in these brief introductions, between our wish to describe fully their backgrounds and MAAP research, and the need to safeguard anonymity.

<sup>5</sup> Indeed we would go further and suggest that methodologies for *all* research display elements of hybridity, incorporating aspects of context, setting, values, interests etc.