Lost in translation: some methodological reflections on working on a pan-European research project

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Three issues in doing comparative research

This paper is offering autoethnographical insights (Chang, 2008, Meneley and Young, 2005) through a recent experience of working on a European-funded research project, focusing on ‘access’, ‘retention’, ‘completion’ and ‘drop out’ (RANLHE). Several papers referring to this project have been presented at previous SCUTREA conferences including two symposia (Johnston, et al., 2009; Field et al., 2010). In the 2009 symposium, our attention was drawn to the fact that ‘Working transnationally highlights methodological issues particularly in relation to comparing research findings when research traditions and approaches and cultural contexts are different. These have to be worked through and discussed at team meetings.’ (Johnston et al. 2009; p, 282). Originally the abstract for this paper was intending to focus on a relatively well-rehearsed debate in doing comparative education research, which now is the first of three methodological issues to be discussed in this paper: ‘are we talking the same language?’ The issues of language have not been substantially discussed at SCUTREA since the 33rd annual conference in Bangor in 2003. Even then, though the conference – entitled Speaking in Tongues (Davidson et al., 2003) – focused on the power and significance of language in lifelong learning, through a ‘global conversation’, research issues were not offered as a topic for discussion. But it was accepted that ‘we were speaking in many tongues’.

Shared meanings of key concepts?

As the RANLHE project drew to an end, I realised that we may not have been ‘speaking in many tongues’ nor yet talking the same language. In the call for papers for the international dissemination conference of RANLHE in Seville, April 2011, the following were among the key issues identified as areas which the conference was interested in addressing:

- Access
- Retention
- Drop-out
- Institutional and cultural contexts and perspectives
- Theoretical and conceptual approaches
• Issues of inequality (class, gender, race, age, disability, location etc)
• Methodological research approaches
• Policy, practice and managerial issues and perspectives

The three original key concepts that gave focus to the project were: access, retention and dropout, and later ‘completion’ was added. Each of these concepts are problematic even in English language, let alone finding equivalence in other European languages represented across the project (German, Italian, Polish, Spanish, Swedish). ‘Drop out’, for example, has negative connotations. ‘Access’, by contrast, is almost universally considered to have positive connotations. The value of accessing higher education is rarely considered negatively; higher education is a universal good to which everyone should have equal access. In the USA, the policy practices are around ‘persistence’, putting the responsibility very much on the students to take the decision to leave or stay. It is a deficiency model that leads to compensatory strategies to keep students in the university. The focus is then on what is ‘wrong’ with the student who decides to leave. One factor that came across very strongly in the student surveys was that for many of those who made the decision to leave, this was a solution, not the cause of ‘the problem’. The notion of ‘retention’ invites an examination of the systems put in place to keep students (sometimes the data suggest, ‘at all costs’) by the institution. An element of this which facilitated making sense of data was the use of metaphors, which if not explanatory were certainly illuminative, as I myself discussed at the dissemination conference (Armstrong, 2011).

Another key concept being used within the project was the assumption of a shared understanding that the focus of the project being on ‘non-traditional’ students. Access is a familiar concept in the UK, although it has become more familiar through being linked to ‘widening participation’ strategies. It was important to specify in this context, which socio-economic and cultural groups were being targeted for widening participation. In the UK, there is a recognisable, if not continuously contested, idea of a class structure. Labelling of social classes often reflect the socio-economic status of the individuals and their families. In the UK, use is made of the Registrar-General’s classification. The categories for this have been modified over the past 150 years or so, especially in more recent years to ensure that the socio-economic categories are inclusive and reflect the diversity of the UK population. The European partner countries will also have been able to identify and categorise their populations by socio-economic status. However, less tangible dimensions of stratification and classification would make cross-national comparisons difficult. Much of the literature on retention stems from research in the USA, where their conceptual framework for classifying their populations are framed in terms of social status rather than social class, and differentiation is based on a much wider range of socio-economic and socio-cultural variables, including family origins (indigenous/immigrant, languages spoken, ethnicity, religion, and so on). To focus the issue, the project agreed to refer to ‘non-traditional students’; that is, students who were entering higher education as the first in their family, from socio-economic groups who had not previously
considered going to university, living in what the Higher Educational Funding Council in the UK (HEFCE) called ‘low participation areas’. In its project brief, in appealing for student volunteers to be interviewed for the project, it was stated that

‘We are interested in listening to a range of learners, such as:

- the first in your family to go to university
- adult learners and those from the local area
- those caring for children or others while studying
- students from a minority background
- students from another country
- those who have done an Access programme
- students with a disability
- learners who have dropped out
- learners who may have dropped out but have now returned to study.’

‘Non-traditional students’ is a phrase that originated from the United States. The National Center for Education Statistics did not have a precise definition for non-traditional student, but suggests that part-time status and age are common elements in most definitions. In a 1996 study the NCES included anyone who satisfies at least one of the following as a non-traditional student:

- defers enrolment (does not enter postsecondary education in the same calendar year that he or she finished high school);
- attends part time for at least part of the academic year;
- works full time (35 hours or more per week) while enrolled;
- is considered financially independent for purposes of determining eligibility for financial aid;
- has dependents other than a spouse (usually children, but sometimes others);
- is a single parent (either not married or married but separated and has dependents); or
- does not have a high school diploma (completed high school with a GED or other high school completion certificate or did not finish high school).

By this standard, the NCES determined that 73% of all undergraduates in 1999–2000 could be considered non-traditional, therefore comprising the vast majority of total undergraduate students in the United States, and representing the newly ‘typical’ undergraduate. If we compare this with a UK list, derived from the Harris Report (2001) which identified the relative under-use of careers services by students from ‘non-traditional’ backgrounds including:

- mature students;
- those from lower socio-economic backgrounds;
- first generation undergraduates;
- students from ethnic minorities; and
- students with disabilities.

Indicative of the complexities of making such definitions is a report of a research study conducted for the Sutton Trust and Birkbeck, University of London (MORI,
The typical student at this higher education institution is part-time, in full-time employment, aged between 25 and 45. For them, a 'non-traditional student' would be an 18 year old studying full-time. Indeed, the need to commission the report was felt necessary to correct the widely held (and erroneous) perception that this college of the University of London does not offer undergraduate courses to 'conventional' higher educational applicants.

A more thorough comparative analysis of 'non-traditional students' was undertaken by Schuetze and Slowey (2000, 2002). Although the political and economic context was a little different when they were considering who were to be categorised as 'non-traditional', even then they concluded that the term 'non-traditional student' was not meaningful, on the grounds that higher education in the USA and Europe was undergoing a process of transformation, and was no longer elitist and was being subject to the processes of massification. Using ten case studies from across Europe (UK, Austria, Germany, Sweden, Ireland) as well as from Australia, New Zealand, Japan, Canada and the USA, they noted the growing consensus around the focusing on the concept of lifelong learning rather than higher education. It is also worth noting their limitation to OECD countries and did not offer the diversity of developing nations in their sample when coming to the conclusion that there was now 'a different, more heterogeneous, composition of students in terms of previous education, social and family background, gender, age, life-situation, motivation to study, current and future occupational profiles.' (Schuetze and Slowey, 2002, p.311). They conclude:

From an internationally comparative perspective, differences between national educational systems and other facts (not least the demographic composition of the population) means that the term 'non-traditional' covers both different populations and different models of participation. Moreover, the meaning of 'non-traditional' students and the associated image of an underrepresented, marginal group varies with the general participation level in higher education. In countries reaching or exceeding a participation rate of – say – fifty percent of the age group, it might be expected that the distinction between traditional and non-traditional students might inevitably become blurred. (Schuetze and Slowey, 2002, p. 313)

**Disciplinary discourse**

The second and third 'threats to validity' relate to the data analysis. The research teams in the European partners agreed that the research would be qualitative and based around biographical data. In process, the project generated a series of key sensitising concepts to be used in the analysis of the data: habitus (Bourdieu), transitional space (Winnicott) and social recognition and respect (Honneth). On the face of it, these concepts are strange bedfellows, coming from sociology (Marxist), psychology (psychoanalytic) and social psychology (Frankfurt critical theory). Whilst the process of generating key sensitising concepts was itself problematic, once
agreed there appeared to be few difficulties in applying those concepts in interpreting
data in Ireland, Scotland, Germany, Poland, Sweden and Spain and the UK. This
suggests that academic discourse is more easily transferable to different cultural
settings in which language is not a barrier, because the meanings of these
sociological, psychological and social psychological concepts have been negotiated
within a range of different linguistic but academic communities. The themes to
emerge from the data were largely generative, emerging from the research
experience. However, the consensus over the sensitising concepts was a little more
restrictive. Certainly, each of the three concepts was generated through the work of
project partners, all of whom were encouraged to consider the application of each of
these 'sensitising concepts' to the data that were being collected in each partner
country. This consensus was not straightforward, and to some extent felt like an
imposed series of analytic frameworks that did not necessarily fit easily together, and
data were possibly being forced to fit the framework.

Data analysis and the problem of language
The third threat to validity of the project findings relates to the reporting of the
analysis. The project - drawing on European funding – was contracted to produce a
series of 'work packages', including reports on both the student and staff experience
of widening participation strategies, and the factors identified that contributed to
staying or leaving their programme or university. Between the Warwick partners, a
framework for the reporting of their experiences had been agreed in terms of a series
of subheadings. For me, this was an autoethnographic issue, because I came into
the project late, after much of the data had already been collected, and my
responsibility was to produce the reports on the staff and student experiences for the
Warwickshire Partnership (Warwick, Kingston and Southampton Solent). This
required me to make sense of someone else’s data collection, and to make the
important data fit the report headings. On the whole, this was not too problematic.
But, with one of the partner institutions, the agreed question on student support had
not only no evidence of the effectiveness of the personal supervision system, but I
could find no reference in the recorded evidence that this university had one at all.
Fortunately, my predecessor was able to shed light on this matter, but it made me
realise that using other researchers’ qualitative data, and using other researchers’
analytic frameworks is problematic, and worth reflecting upon.

The data collected were a series of in-depth interviews with staff and students at the
three universities over a three-year period. The transcripts of the interviews were
produced by a professional transcriber, not the researcher who collected the data. It
became clear very quickly that this transcriber had little background in higher
education or lifelong learning. Nor was the transcriber familiar with government
policies on access and retention. There were many errors apparent in the transcripts
suggesting that the transcriber did not necessarily understand everything that had
been recorded. This was my first ever experience of rigorously analysing someone
else’s data from transcripts. The closest I had come to this before was working with
graduate students to help them begin to make sense of their data that they had collected. In this situation, I was not expecting, nor expected, to undertake the definitive analysis, but merely suggest strategies for undertaking the task. Now, I was faced with a large amount of interview data from which I had to produce research reports.

**Working with other people’s data**
The distinctive nature of using qualitative research strategies has been well discussed. As with any methodologies as social scientists we have to be content with something less than proof, and talk instead of interpretation and understanding, or verstehen. One of the commonly perceived advantages of qualitative research is that the stages of research are not treated as sequential nor linear, and feels more like a process of ‘going around in circles’, though a more accurate metaphor might be that of a helix, given that offers a sense of development, and ‘getting further on’. In qualitative research, data analysis often takes place alongside data collection to allow questions to be refined and new avenues of inquiry to develop. Indeed, this often cited as one of the key advantages of taking a qualitative approach to data collection/analysis. This is quite a complex process of attempting to make sense of data, not merely be identifying themes in the data, but recognising the processes of inter-subjectivity as part of the interpretative processes. In short, data collection, analysis and interpretation are simultaneous processes, and reflecting on how this is happening during the research processes is essential for constructing methodological discussions. There are a range of strategies available to the qualitative researcher. For example, textual data are typically explored inductively using content analysis to generate categories and explanations, and now there are software packages available for help with analysis. But these can only offer suggestions to consider and reflect upon, and are not to be viewed as short cuts to rigorous and systematic analysis.

In using statistical data, the critically reflective researcher know the necessity for challenging assumptions about how the quantitative data has been constructed. The data used is often the result of a transparent system of categorisation, classification and enumeration. It can be explored and have its reliability and validity challenged. Treating qualitative data in the same way is problematic. Meta-research procedures requiring interviewing the qualitative researchers about their assumptions, decisions they made during the process, and the iterative processes through which data is constructed and meanings made is far more complex. And that complexity is compounded when not only is different academic discourse in use, but different languages are being used to communicate those constructed interpretations and meanings.

High quality analysis of qualitative data depends on the skill, vision, and integrity of the researcher. In this situation where there are at least two researchers involved, artificially separating data collection and data analysis, a more dialogical process is
necessary to get behind the construction of the data and the interpretations of its meanings. The process is always complex, but the complexity is compounded by the fact that the data has been collected through a process of recording the spoken words, and typically this is not simply a series of questions and answers but a dialogue between the researcher and - in this example – the student or member of the staff who have been selected through a sampling process to offer ‘expert’ insights into issues around ‘access’, ‘retention’ and ‘completion’. The secondary researcher is required to work not with the audio recordings, but the transcriptions, which is yet another process transforming the nature of the data. The professional transcriber has had to learn a way of communicating through coding systems to represent talk as a series of words and symbols. At this point we are getting to the heart of our third ‘threat’ to the validity of communication and meaning construction in the research process. An essential strategy that is employed in interviewing is, of course listening skills. In qualitative research, the researcher ‘listens’ to the data, and is not only making sense, but making decisions as how to make sense of the data. The voice of the person being interviewed is in the head of the researcher. In reading the transcript, the researcher can ‘hear’ the voice of the person being interviewed, and though this can ignore the transcript codes, and humanise the discourse. However, in this case, the voice of the person being interviewed is coded, and cannot easily be humanised. I could not decode the signs and symbols of the processional coding. I tried reading the transcript aloud, but all I could hear was my voice, my interpretation, and was witnessing my reconstruction of the interviewee’s meanings.

My purpose is not to argue that this invalidates the data that has been collected, constructed and deconstructed, but merely is a hollow echo of the richness of qualitative data. One further point is worth making. Not only does this suggest the necessity of the researcher working with their own data, but where professional transcription are used, they are often full of language ‘errors’, words that are unfamiliar to the transcribe who is having to guess the word or concept, which can sometimes be amusing, but also worrying about the transcription as an accurate record of the conversations that had taken place between the researcher and the student or staff being interviewed.

We are told in the methodological literature (Davies, 2008; Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007; Pope et al.; Silverman, 2005; Silverman, 2006; West et al. 2007) that there are no ‘hard and fast rules’ concerning transcription. We know that it is quite time-consuming to have a verbatim transcript of an entire set of interviews from beginning to end, particularly if literally every word is transcribed for every interview. Typically, the researcher will have an eye on how the data is to be reported. Inevitably, only a small percentage is likely to be directly reported in the published reports and articles, as the very weight of evidence is more than sufficient, and that which is sufficient is more than is necessary. And how detailed need the transcription be? If discourse analysis is being employed, then the detail will need to
be far greater than if a few ‘typical’ quotes are to be used to support a particular argument.

Epilogue

This paper has only just begun to point to the need to unravel some of the complexities of engaging in comparative research, which requires engagement in the negotiation, if not the construction of, shared meanings across many languages. It has noted that the comparative issues are not so great where there is shared disciplinary frameworks, using distinctive key concepts that are more often shared. There are a whole range of ethical issues that need consideration, especially around the student experience for those, maybe from ‘non-traditional students’, who gain access to higher education, but due to a wide range of reasons, not least the unfamiliar culture of higher education into which they are expected to assimilate increasingly diverse cohorts, whilst the institution takes on its responsibilities for putting in place strategies to accommodate students in what may be for them ‘unfamiliar cultures’ of higher education. ‘Taster days’, partnership arrangements with schools and further education, and many other strategies used to attract students into higher education, whilst at the same time shifting the financial burden – the debts – to the students will continue to raise questions about the purposes of higher education and/or lifelong learning, as well the ethics of so-called ‘widening participation’.

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