



## **The Relationship Between Pedagogical and Discipline-specific Research Methods: Critical Perspectives**

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Journal Title: Discourse

ISSN: 2040-3674

ISSN-L: 1741-4164

Volume: 7

Number: 2

Start page: 67

End page: 120

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This paper is adapted from the final report of a year-long Subject Centre for PRS project that conducted a full investigation into the current state of pedagogical research in theology and religious studies. The project also developed other resources, including an overview of pedagogical research methods in use in educational research, a full literature review of pedagogical research in theology and religious studies, and a review of other pedagogical research material that might be useful to academics working in our disciplines. These resources will be made available on our website in due course.

### **Suggested reasons for the lack of discipline-based pedagogical research in Theology and Religious Studies**

A literature review of higher education journals, conducted as part of this project, led to the conclusion that discipline-

based pedagogical research in theology and religious studies (TRS) has hitherto been limited. Whether this is due to a lack of interest or engagement in the pedagogical research arena on the part of TRS academics and departments, or a failure to obtain funding for such work for reasons internal or external to TRS disciplines, or a combination of these, is a matter for debate. There are a number of possible factors feeding into the situation:

- Pedagogical research in the arts and humanities has been underfunded, receiving less financial support than pedagogical research in science, technology, maths and the social sciences.
- TRS academics have shown a lack of awareness of (and/or interest in) funding opportunities.
- TRS academics have a lack of experience in writing funding applications.
- Small disciplines/departments may find it difficult to support a major project.
- There are already too many demands on staff. Mary Taylor Huber and Pat Hutchings write: 'Whatever its shape or approach, it [the scholarship of teaching and learning] is difficult work that tends to run against the ground of academic culture'. One reason for this is that staff are already overworked, under-resourced and under-paid.<sup>1</sup>
- TRS as disciplines have displayed limited engagement with the wider pedagogical literature/field, meaning that their projects are not sufficiently embedded in the field to be considered eligible for funding.
- TRS academics have experienced difficulties in engaging with the pedagogical research agenda because of the differing research paradigms: empirical (educational research) and theoretical/discursive (TRS). The field of pedagogy has been dominated by educational researchers, who tend to adopt social science research models. And so, the pedagogical research paradigm is one of empirical research, whereas research in theology and, to a lesser extent, religious studies, is typically (though not exclusively) theoretical/discursive. The existence of these differing research cultures presents a number of risks (mutual misunderstanding and/or suspicion of other disciplines' research methodologies; language barriers; and thus the perception of pedagogical research as an alien discipline that is 'not for us'). Mary Taylor Huber has said: 'The scholarship of teaching and learning is typically pursued as a kind of practitioner or action research by teachers in their own classrooms, not the circumstances or settings for which the investigative methods used in most disciplines?are we ll designed. Doing the scholarship of teaching and learning sits, therefore, at the edge of most disciplines?'<sup>2</sup> Connected to this are issues related to styles of referencing. If we apply the conclusions reached about philosophy by George MacDonald Ross, the Director of the Subject Centre for PRS, to TRS, (which were expressed to me in personal correspondence) we may say that TRS scholars feel similarly alienated by the style of referencing in pedagogical articles. It is reasonably safe to assume that theologians at least would prefer footnotes to the social science model of referencing in the text, which they may regard as disruptive and difficult to follow up. The quantity of references, and the length of bibliographies, in pedagogical articles as compared with theology ones, could also be regarded as problematic.
- There are different 'languages' of pedagogical research compared with TRS research. TRS academics and educationalists have traditionally been at cross purposes in dialogue. Social science research works with language, metaphors and epistemological assumptions not used in theology in particular, which means that they are not accessible to academics working within this discipline.<sup>3</sup> Pat Hutchings has drawn attention to the alienation experienced by academics who have attempted to get involved in pedagogical research but who have found a body of educational research (most of it not focused on their discipline) employing methodologies and languages? usually scientific?which they know nothing about.<sup>4</sup> Mantz Yorke has described pedagogical research as 'the research analogue of a second language' for non-educationalists. <sup>5</sup>
- There exists mutual suspicion of the methodologies inherent to other disciplines (for example, philosophical concerns regarding 'evidence-based' approaches). Even in science and social science (the latter being the locus classicus of pedagogical research), where discussions of teaching and learning are 'more robust' than in the humanities, the communities of engaged scholars are small, marginalised and viewed with disdain by both mainstream scholars and larger-scale academic researchers.<sup>6</sup>

- Educational research is dominated by evidence-based practice. Biesta has argued that educational research is directed by the 'what works?' question. In practice, this means that, in the US at least, the 'gold standard' of randomised controlled field trials is the preferred methodology for educational research. Biesta says: 'Although there is some indication of the emergence of a broader and more encompassing definition of what counts as scientific research in education, the call for causal analysis by means of experimental research in order to find out 'what works' remains dominant.'<sup>7</sup> The dominance of evidence-based practice marginalises academics working in non-scientific disciplines and undermines the notion of disciplinary difference. This focus may lead to the dismissal of the more discursive or reflective pedagogical research that takes place in TRS classrooms on the basis that it is 'unscientific' and therefore not worthy of funding or a place in the canon of pedagogical research.

## Potential ways forward

In seeking to address the factors above, with the aim of increasing engagement with, and participation in, pedagogical research in TRS, there are a variety of approaches that could be adopted, on their own or in combination. These are discussed in detail below. Pump-priming? giving funds to disciplines in which pedagogical research is underdeveloped or non-existent? could be used to level the playing field and encourage TRS academics to engage with these approaches. Agencies that could play a part in developing them, and perhaps provide more guidance for applying for funding and brokerage of interdisciplinary dialogue with educationalists, include:

- The Higher Education Academy
- Centres for Excellence in Teaching and Learning
- Subject Centres
- Subject Associations

### 1. Identify and exploit common methodological ground between pedagogical research and research in TRS

Wareing explains that, according to the taxonomy used by Kolb,<sup>8</sup> and adapted by Becher and Trowler,<sup>9</sup> the discipline of pedagogy is 'soft' and applied, being a functional subject with relatively low paradigm consensus (that is, there is usually more than one acceptable approach to tackling a given research question). Colbeck writes: 'In high paradigm consensus or "hard" disciplines, knowledge is perceived as cumulative and concerned with universals, quantification, and discovery. <sup>10</sup> Wareing continues: 'hard' disciplines are characterised by widespread agreement about curriculum content, research collaboration, competition for recognition and funding, clearly defined intellectual boundaries, and the gatekeeping of those boundaries by a powerful elite.<sup>11</sup> In contrast, low paradigm consensus, or 'soft', disciplines regard knowledge as recursive; scholars use new lenses to explore intellectual territory already mapped out by others. Knowledge is also concerned with particulars, qualities and understanding.<sup>12</sup> 'Soft' disciplines are characterised by idiosyncratic curricula, weak boundaries, independent research efforts and tolerance for unusual ideas or methods.'<sup>13</sup> The point to be made here with regard to TRS is that because pedagogical research is a 'soft' discipline, this will create an affinity with TRS to a greater extent than if it were 'hard'.

### 2. Adopt a more critical stance vis-à-vis evidence-based practice

Questions have been raised about the appropriateness of the evidence-based approach for the field of education. Some have queried the homology between education and medicine and pointed to the different meanings of evidence in these fields. Others have questioned the positivistic assumptions underlying the idea of evidence-based education and criticized the narrow conception of research entailed in evidence-based education. Still others have criticized the

managerial agenda of evidence-based education and its linear, top-down approach to educational improvement. Finally, many have objected to the lack of an acknowledgment of the crucial role of values in educational research and practice.<sup>14</sup>

Biesta is not convinced that evidence-based practice as it is currently being promoted provides the most appropriate matrix for educational research and is concerned about the tension between scientific and democratic control over educational practice and educational research. He explains: on the research side, evidence-based education favours a technocratic model in which it is assumed that the only relevant research questions are questions about the effectiveness of educational means and techniques, forgetting, among other things, that what counts as 'effective' depends on judgments about what is educationally desirable. On the practice side, evidence-based education seems to severely limit the opportunities for educational practitioners to make such judgments in a way that is sensitive to and relevant for their own contextualised settings. He feels that the focus on 'what works' makes it difficult, if not impossible, to ask the questions of what it should work for and who should have a say in determining the latter.<sup>15</sup>

Biesta believes that evidence-based practice provides a framework for understanding the role of research in educational practice that not only restricts the scope of decision making to questions about effectivity and effectiveness but that also restricts the opportunities for participation in educational decision making. He feels that this is why we need to expand our views about the interrelations among research, policy, and practice in order to keep in view the fact that education is a thoroughly moral and political practice, one that needs to be subject to continuous democratic contestation and deliberation. From this point of view an exclusive emphasis on 'what works' will simply not work.<sup>16</sup>

### **3. Focus on the growth of discipline-specific pedagogical research**

The generic focus of pedagogical research has been challenged in the last few years through the development of organisations for, or explicitly valuing, discipline-based academic development (hence the establishment of the Learning and Teaching Support Network and the Subject Centres in 2000).<sup>17</sup> Various arguments have been developed in defence of the development of discipline-specific methods.

#### **Discipline-specific pedagogical research encourages engagement of experienced academics within the disciplines**

A potential solution to the methodological and language-based isolation of academics who are not educational researchers (points VI, VII and VIII above) is to encourage them to realise and exploit the relevance of their own disciplinary backgrounds, and the tools and dispositions they use as academics working in particular subjects. Vaneetamarie D'Andrea has argued: 'If they [academics] are highly trained in the research methodologies of their substantive field, then it would seem that encouraging the use of these methodologies and methods, where appropriate, in the pedagogical arena would be one way forward and consistent with developments in the SoTL [the scholarship of teaching and learning].'<sup>18</sup>

Becher's pioneering work on how research is distinctively conceived and developed in the disciplines is now paralleled by a growing research literature on the particular pedagogies of the disciplines.<sup>19</sup> Mick Healey has said that 'the scholarship of teaching needs to be developed within the context of the culture of the disciplines in which it is applied'. Similarly, Warren Gilchrist has argued that 'There is little doubt that different subjects do raise quite distinct teaching issues? It is further evident that CPD [Continuing Professional Development] in educational issues, as distinct to subject development, would become more attractive to experienced staff if it could be directly related to their teaching problems in their own subject'.<sup>20</sup>

Many pedagogical issues cut across fields, but most academics think about teaching and learning inside the framework of their own fields. As Huber and Hutchings claim, 'For most faculty, the scholarship of teaching and learning flows from engagement with their own fields.'<sup>21</sup> This being so, in terms of pedagogical research, 'the best

place to start is where faculty already are'.<sup>22</sup> Hutchings elaborates:

the methods of the scholarship of teaching and learning are shaped by the methods of the disciplines; beginning with those methods is a right idea not only because they are familiar but because they're warranted by scholarly peers who might build on the work. At the same time, one sees in these cases a good deal of methodological borrowing and influence, across fields.

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For the purposes of this project, this means that theologians ask theologians' questions about teaching and learning.

Huber elaborates by remarking that, when designing classroom inquiry projects in the scholarship of teaching and learning, many academics choose methods that reflect or resonate with the traditions of investigation in their own fields. In the sciences and harder social sciences, the first choice is likely to be quasi-experimental design using instruments that yield numerical results about the efficacy of a teaching innovation. Scholars in the softer social sciences or harder humanities, more comfortable with qualitative data, have found discourse analysis and focus groups to be useful tools for pedagogical research. Others? often in fields centred on textual interpretation, where the word 'data' is not a professional term of art? have pursued systematic inquiry through strategically designed assignments and a close reading of student work.<sup>24</sup> Huber recognises, however, that the dominance of social science methods in traditional pedagogical research presents a challenge to new recruits from specialities where that approach is not much appreciated or used. She wonders, do we all have to be social scientists?! Her negative response to this question is based on her belief that a variety of approaches should flourish: 'The challenge here is to reconceptualize relationships between the disciplines, so that the lessons flow in all directions rather than demanding the diffusion of one privileged way of knowing'.<sup>25</sup>

### **Discipline-specific pedagogical research recognises actual disciplinary pedagogical differences**

Whilst she endorses a generic pedagogy, Wareing acknowledges that, based on the 'hard'/'soft' axis, disciplinary differences affect: concepts of evidence, argument and appropriate presentation, including writing style; community practices (rules of interaction; status; concepts of apprenticeship); how information is structured for learners; learning and teaching methods; and how reusable a reusable learning object is.<sup>26</sup>

She points out that a subject-specific model of pedagogical research can: a) be led by staff from that disciplinary background (status in the eyes of participants associated with a successful career in that disciplinary area; familiar language, metaphors and epistemological assumptions; shared background knowledge of people and events; fosters and works with a sense of community); b) address particular forms and styles of teaching specific to the discipline (for example, fieldtrips, practical sessions, laboratory sessions); c) address particular skills requirements which affect student progression and achievement (for example, maths, statistics, technical skills, well-developed reading and writing skills); d) address issues relating to recruitment profile; and e) acknowledge existing habits of teaching and assessment.<sup>27</sup>

### **Discipline-specific pedagogical research expands the scope of pedagogical research**

Huber says there are three reasons for taking the disciplines seriously:

- Most importantly, the disciplines offer a way in to the scholarship of teaching and learning, through faculty members' concern for what and how well students are learning in these fields.
- More controversially, the disciplines offer faculty a way to do the scholarship of teaching and learning through the intellectual skills and resources they have access to as members of their particular academic communities. The disciplines vary greatly with regard to which arts of intellectualising are most salient to their particular

agendas and styles. This variation means that members of the different disciplines are likely to encounter a different set of teaching problems.

- Because knowledge practices are changing in many disciplines today, this may be an opportune time for the development within the disciplines of a more reflective pedagogy that could reconfigure expectations for what and how people teach and learn in those fields.<sup>28</sup>

## **Discipline-specific pedagogical research acknowledges the importance of subject-specific issues in learning and teaching**

Mick Healey and Alan Jenkins, also advocates of discipline-based pedagogical research, point out that some disciplines are characterised by distinctive forms of teaching: laboratory practicals in science; studio critiques in art; work-based learning in teaching, social work and nursing; and fieldwork in geography and the earth sciences. They feel that staff in these disciplines need support in developing good practice, and that scholarship and research inform that practice: 'Yet too often, as in many of the Fund for the Development of Teaching and Learning (FDTL) projects in the UK, the focus of public scholarship and educational development has been on generic issues, such as assessment'.

Healey and Jenkins also point out that all disciplines have particular conceptions of knowledge and concerns with particular areas of 'content' and epistemology. They feel, in addition, that most forms of teaching need to be 'translated' into the culture and concerns of different disciplines: 'While the generic advice and scholarship/research on group work offers insights into this world, that scholarship needs "translating" into those contexts, and we also need primary research that explores these particular group work pedagogies.'<sup>29</sup>

## **4. Develop hybrid methodologies**

Particularly in the case of TRS, which lacks a universally agreed methodology (linguists, historians, sociologists, archaeologists, philosophers, and psychologists may all find themselves teaching in TRS departments),<sup>30</sup> what is perhaps required is a more pluralist attitude to pedagogical research which promotes a synthesis of pedagogical research methods and disciplinary methods. The benefits of methodological pluralism are numerous. Primarily, there is the enrichment that exposure to the traditions of other disciplines brings, but, more pragmatically, it is also true that cross-disciplinary endeavours on the part of academics working in particular disciplinary contexts may enhance the credibility of the disciplines in the eyes of educationalists, making methodological pluralism a political tactic.

In support of methodological pluralism, Healey and Jenkins agree 'that one starts with and should continue to value and even prioritize the research methodologies in the discipline per se', but they feel also that it is necessary:

to recognize that studies of pedagogy are by definition areas of the social sciences,'because it is an aspect of human behaviour that they are engaged in and are studying'. Thus to really understand and improve the pedagogies of the disciplines means adopting and, certainly as a 'baseline', understanding and recognizing the value of these social science disciplinary research methodologies.<sup>31</sup>

They urge discipline specialists and educational developers to work together in order to fully embed educational development within the disciplines, adding that this is a process which necessitates mutual esteem.<sup>32</sup>

Cross-fertilisation between the disciplines is increasingly likely in the academy.<sup>33</sup> Huber and Hutchings have observed that 'contemporary scholarship of all kinds is characterized by a growing permeability of disciplinary boundaries, and the scholarship of teaching and learning is no exception. In the [teaching] commons, people from different disciplines

come to find what their own discipline cannot or will not provide...'.<sup>34</sup> In her discussion of the tendency amongst academics to choose pedagogical methods that resonate with the traditions of investigation in their own fields, Huber says:

Pragmatism necessarily prevails in this enterprise, however, and people from all disciplinary backgrounds have responded to the exigencies of doing classroom research by going conceptually, methodologically, and collaboratively where they might not have gone before. In the end, for most who try it out, engaging in the scholarship of teaching and learning entails entering a cross-disciplinary 'trading zone' where one finds and experiments with what's on offer in other fields? Yet the transactions are not only between 'education' writ large and the disciplines. This is a zone in which mathematicians are enriching their own understanding of how to interpret student 'errors' by adapting the idea of difficulty in literary interpretation from people in English studies, where a chemist is trying out ethnographic observation, and where a microbiologist and a communications scholar are collaborating in a study of presence in online class environments. Indeed, so great are the pleasures of interacting with others engaged in serious pedagogical reflection and research that it can become something of a burden to return to one's disciplinary home to report on the journey and recruit others to join in.<sup>35</sup>

According to Huber and Hutchings, the trading zone:

- Embodies the fact that all fields have something to offer and to gain from trade? none has a monopoly on the teaching commons.
- Should make pedagogical researchers sensitive to the emergence of a common language for trade: 'Faculty have highly developed vocabularies, or jargons, for discussion of their disciplinary specialities. But when it comes to teaching, few disciplines have made what might best be called their "native pedagogies" fully explicit.'
- Proves that, although interdisciplinary trade enriches pedagogical research and practice, it does not lead to the loss of disciplinary identities: 'Yes, those who enter the trading zone may learn a new language that helps them think and speak more clearly about teaching and learning. They may encounter provocative new ideas? But this does not mean that the ideas they encounter will travel home unchanged.' The disciplines do masticate ideas and language from other disciplines.<sup>36</sup>

Pedagogical research is, then, disciplinary and interdisciplinary at once. The disciplines and the teaching commons both play an important role:

The situation of scholars of teaching and learning with regard to their own discipline is not unlike that of scholars in other cross-disciplinary endeavors who find new colleagues and new forums for sharing and building on each others' work. Yet even as the teaching commons grows and develops its own infrastructure of cross-disciplinary conferences, journals and the like, there is growing support for pedagogical discourse in the disciplines themselves?<sup>37</sup>

## **Is lack of discipline-based pedagogical research a problem?**

Existing concurrently with efforts to develop discipline-based pedagogical research is the belief within some areas of academia that the lack of discipline-based pedagogical research (in TRS and in other disciplines) is not a problem and therefore does not require a solution. The reasoning behind this claim is that methods from educational research should simply be adopted by those in the disciplines. In this section, I look at the three important expressions of this

view, and summarise the defence of discipline-specific research offered by a pioneer in this area, Ben Knights.

## **Wareing's arguments for generic models of educational development**

A key spokesperson for those who question the value of discipline-specific pedagogical research is Wareing, who believes that disciplinary differences in pedagogy are frequently overstated in two main ways: first of all, she argues, there are many aspects of pedagogy which apply across all disciplines; secondly, discipline boundaries are in many cases social and arbitrary rather than epistemological and essential. <sup>38</sup> Her views in support of this are summarised here.

### **Evidence based on a review of Subject Centre resources**

According to Wareing, in a review of Subject Centre websites and publications, there is no evidence of disciplinary differences in: principles of how students learn?models such as Bloom's taxonomy of learning appear frequently; principles of curriculum design (although she grants that discipline obviously affects the specifics); the most widely used learning and teaching methods (which are lectures, seminars, tutorials, problem classes; where activities are distinctive, such as lab work, fieldtrips or practicals, they often build on the same presumptions as the other activities); and principles of assessment.<sup>39</sup>

### **The potential of generic professional development programmes**

Wareing argues that, in order to take account of the specific circumstances in which participants teach, generic professional development programmes should and often do deliver the following: early acknowledgement of disciplinary differences (which will also produce evidence of disciplinary similarities); encouragement for colleagues to apply all theories in their own contexts; assessment tasks rooted in disciplines and personal practice; action research; information about discipline-based pedagogic scholarship (where it exists); case studies; choices in programme which include discipline-specific activity; awareness that staff from some disciplines may dominate class discussion and small group work. Subject Centre activities may also be counted in lieu of attendance on the accredited programme if learning outcomes match up.<sup>40</sup> That is, generic pedagogical research does not proceed as if the disciplines are all the same, which, in Wareing's view, points to the possibility that discipline-based pedagogical research is surplus to requirements.

### **The untidiness of discipline groupings**

Wareing uses what she perceives to be the untidiness of discipline groupings to make a case for generic pedagogical research. She argues that the sense staff have of a discipline community is based on (arbitrary) social configurations rather than epistemological common ground, and points out that it is not uncommon to have staff within a department undertaking research located on both sides of the 'pure/applied' and the 'soft/'hard' divides. She cites the example of geography, explaining that there are geography staff whose teaching and research has more in common in method and content with that of colleagues working in politics, sociology, drama or literature studies departments than with that of members of staff in the same department who work on fossils.<sup>41</sup>

### **Scholarly benefits of generic models of educational development**

There already exists a well-developed literature relating to learning and curriculum development, which has cross-disciplinary applicability. Logistic benefits of generic models of educational development Generic models of educational development can be led by a minimum of one educational developer (without the need for one for each department). By having an education focus rather than a discipline focus, this person may become a more experienced facilitator, more familiar with learning and teaching advancements, and more aware of institutional change issues. Generic pedagogical research can also attract sufficient numbers to be run within a higher education institution, so it can be locally and easily timetabled.

## **Pedagogic benefits of generic models of educational development**

Generic models of educational development address principles and theories underlying learning and teaching, and concerns like widening participation, arguably common to all students and disciplines. In Wareing's experience, feedback on sessions run by educational developers is better than that given on sessions run by subject experts.

## **Institutional management benefits of generic models of educational development**

Generic models of educational development can create an institutional culture/community of teachers, and foster institutional mission. Sector benefits of generic models of educational development Generic models of educational development can foster development of interdisciplinary communities with shared pedagogic values and reduce the sense of isolation for new staff who feel at odds with departmental culture.<sup>42</sup>

## **Graham Gibbs on the predominance of generic and social science based research models**

Graham Gibbs is also sceptical about the value of discipline-specific models of pedagogical research. Gibbs has made the following point:

It would be difficult to argue against the potential for richer and more varied methodologies that this approach [discipline-based pedagogical research] might offer. It might also be harsh to deny teachers from within disciplines the comfort they might feel working within familiar paradigms. However, it is not surprising that the social sciences have made most progress in making sense of student learning. These, after all, are the disciplines which have developed methodologies and theories specifically to study and explain human behaviour and performance. It would be odd, indeed, and an indictment of the social sciences, if methodologies from other disciplines proved more powerful or useful to make sense of pedagogy, whatever discipline it took place in.

He elaborates: 'Often the theories and methodologies developed by social scientists need adapting to make them even more appropriate to specific contexts, but that does not invalidate their applicability. The theory and methodology of sedimentology, in contrast, is unlikely to have much to offer to the understanding of the pedagogy of geology, however much it was adapted.' Gibbs' 'own view is that to study and improve teaching, teachers from all disciplines do have to become social scientists, to some extent, because it is an aspect of human behaviour that they are engaged in and are studying, not an aspect of, for example, sediments'.<sup>43</sup>

## **James Wisdom on the relationship between discipline-specific and generic pedagogical research**

In the UK, two voices are particularly prominent in the debate about generic and discipline-specific pedagogical research: that of Ben Knights, who advocates discipline-specific pedagogical research, and that of Shân Wareing, who advocates generic methods. James Wisdom has spoken in favour of Wareing's stance.<sup>44</sup> According to Wisdom, the danger of failing to acknowledge the value of some generic approaches to pedagogical research is that academics may remain entrenched in the teaching of a discipline, repeating familiar patterns and practices, which may become progressively less relevant as contexts and environments change.

Wisdom notes that this is a question about how we can get to the truth; that is, it is epistemological. If disciplinary methods were sufficient for discovering the truth about one's discipline, then it would be correct to pursue them, but in his opinion they are not. He thinks that the necessary research methods are simply not contained within each

discipline; in his words, discipline-specific pedagogical researchers 'need to see the bigger picture'. Wisdom does not believe that distinctive research methods drawn from each of the disciplines have yet emerged. He holds the view that academics from different disciplines customise educational research methods, using whichever tools they can access. The main difference is that some are comfortable with quantitative research while others prefer a qualitative approach. However, this is not a disciplinary difference. It is a distinction about what constitutes the uncovering of truth.

Wisdom is especially critical of what he sees as the uncontested position of the case study method in discipline-based pedagogical research. While he sees the exchange of good ideas as valuable, he posits that the implementation of such ideas is often far from simple, and advocates that more effort and research be invested in understanding change processes and evaluating the effectiveness of the case-study method.

Wisdom, himself a historian in terms of disciplinary background, challenges the widely accepted disciplinary view that educational researchers are totally separate from the disciplines. However, his view is that if you want to establish usable truth in educational research, you have to master that area. Dialogue between disciplines, and with educational developers, is likely to be a necessary part of disciplinary development.

Wisdom welcomes the Subject Centre network's attempts to encourage academics to work beyond their disciplines. In his opinion, the Subject Centres should serve as a platform to enable academics to move among the disciplines, acquiring pedagogical tools and methods in the process and producing desperately-needed high quality educational research. Unfortunately, though, in his view, educational research emerging from the disciplines at present is of limited applicability. He claims that very little of it is speaking to the wider community in the way the wider community can hear, although it may indeed be useful in a practical sense within the discipline.

## **Ben Knights on the epistemological value of discipline-based pedagogical research<sup>45</sup>**

Knights acknowledges that his view that 'pedagogic research in the Humanities is in the business of opening the doors of awareness as much as creating empirical knowledge' raises questions of the epistemological status of what is produced. By defending the right of disciplinary pedagogical research to lack an empirical basis, Knights does little to dispel Wisdom's concerns about the epistemological value of this kind of research. To the question 'What kind of truth claims can be made by pedagogic research derived from Humanities disciplines?', he responds:

Clearly we can generate or commission the gathering of evidence of the kind associated with quantitative as well as qualitative schools of social research. Equally we can write more or less theorised case studies of modules or initiatives. But the kind of research and writing suggested here is usually I think more of an appeal to praxis, with a lot in common with the 1980s enthusiasm for the 'reflective practitioner'. Perhaps what we can do through our own kinds of gathering of evidence, reading of situations, devising and applying explanatory theories is overtly offer them as heuristic materials which rely for any truth value they have on teachers trying them out in their own practice, or reading their own experience within a theoretical framework.

Knights grants that much of what has been written on pedagogy from within the disciplines has been expressly pragmatic, appealing to teachers' experience. He thus likens it to small-scale action research. Whilst academics in TRS departments may appreciate this approach, educational researchers would be likely to have serious reservations, which could potentially lead to an unhelpful polarisation of discipline-based and generic pedagogical research. The opinions of Wisdom as regards discipline-based pedagogical research portend the truth of this claim. However, to see the advantages offered by the disciplinary approach Knights has pioneered, it is necessary to look a little more closely at his methods.

# **A closer look at discipline-based pedagogical research: the experiences of other humanities subjects**

In this section, I will look more closely at experiences of pedagogical research in two humanities subjects which have relatively developed pedagogical research traditions: English and history. I have chosen to reflect on these disciplines because this will permit comparisons with TRS, since all are humanities subjects and all are text-based. The point is to identify methods and practices which have been developed and applied in pedagogical research in English and history and to determine whether the same or similar methods could be used to advance discipline-specific pedagogical research in TRS.

## **English**

More so than any other humanities subject, English has developed pedagogical research methods based on the practices and patterns of the discipline. This is due in large part to the efforts of the English Subject Centre, and in particular to the enthusiasm for discipline-based pedagogical research of Ben Knights, its director. In an email, Knights described the relationship between the research practices of disciplines and their pedagogy as 'an immensely important area, and one that we have done a lot of work on at the ESC [English Subject Centre]'.

## **An overview of discipline-specific pedagogical research in English**

English appears particularly well-situated to elicit and exploit pedagogical methods from its disciplinary research and practices. According to the English Subject Centre's website, English already contains a strong reflexive pedagogic element<sup>46</sup> and is rich with conceptual languages for the understanding and enhancement of learning.<sup>47</sup> As Knights says in a document written in the aftermath of a series of meetings about pedagogic research initiatives between the humanities Subject Centres a number of years ago,

Broadly speaking, the preoccupations of the community with the performative nature of text and discourse, and in reading and comprehension as active processes, provide starting places for forms of work which would in many ways blur the conventional distinction between subject and pedagogic research activity. Implicit in all this is that the English community could do more than it does at present to develop these as equipment for carrying out pedagogic research in ways that might perhaps be helpful to other disciplinary communities as well? A glance at the particular problems of English suggests fruitful areas of enquiry.<sup>48</sup>

English, to the extent that the discipline is represented by the Subject Centre, appears to be appreciative of the fact that academics are more likely to embark upon pedagogical research and approach it with the same level of seriousness as they would disciplinary research if they can be shown that there is a relation between the research practices of disciplines and their pedagogy. Of particular value to TRS is the fact that pedagogical research scholars from English have expressed a will to share their thoughts on pedagogical research with other disciplines.<sup>49</sup>

However, according to their website, the English Subject Centre is not arguing for an insular dismissal of work carried out by educational researchers within social science paradigms: 'That is a tradition of work which English lecturers should respect and from which we all have much to learn.' The website explains that 'We certainly don't want to collude in a sense of superiority towards all "generic" materials. There's some good stuff out there.' It continues: 'We believe it is important that research on learning and teaching should remain plural, and not dominated by any one school or tradition'; the idea is that the traffic between educational research and English can and should be two-way.<sup>50</sup>

To summarise, the English Subject Centre advocates methodological pluralism in pedagogical research, which is an approach that accommodates both empiricism and non-empirical methods. Knights feels that 'there is no reason why

humanities people should not sometimes seek empirical evidence either confirming or contesting our practices. It can be productive and sobering to set our conventional working knowledge alongside the understandings that derive from a tradition of empirical educational research.' Moreover, says Knights, 'in its curiosity about the inferencing work of readers and listeners, English does have much in common with the constructivist tradition in education.'

Knights' view is that 'a healthy and plural pedagogic research can be fed from Humanities as well as from Social Science streams', but that because the latter is so well developed, there needs to be more focus on the former. It is not a case of allowing discipline-based pedagogical models to monopolise pedagogical research but nor is it a case of academics in the humanities academics ceding 'the territory to vacuous technicist progressivism'.

## **Aspects of English discipline-specific pedagogical methods that are potentially transferable from English to TRS**

### **Textual analysis**

Pedagogical models from English are potentially transferable to TRS because both are text-based. As the website of the English Subject Centre points out, traditions of textual analysis on the one hand, or linguistic analysis on the other, provide powerful tools for the analysis of the group process.<sup>51</sup>

### **Historical analysis**

The historical focus of TRS also increases the likelihood of transferability of pedagogical methods from English to TRS. The English Subject Centre's website suggests that histories of the subject can be developed into accounts of the shaping of the identity of the learner.<sup>52</sup>

### **Drawing on methods from the speculative to the empirical**

The English Subject Centre's pedagogical research web pages bear out the point made by Knights that 'In English there is a spectrum which runs from the more speculative / theoretical through to empirical forms of research'.<sup>53</sup> An example of empirical pedagogical research in English is the videoing project being run at Keele University by the English Subject Centre. An early write up<sup>54</sup> outlines the methodology of this project: the video recording of seminars, followed by the close reading of discursive practices therein through the lens of theories about dialogue and communication. There is also a meta-methodology too, in that the person teaching the seminar is viewed as a rhetor, applying the rhetorical method to their teaching. The article explains: according to the Aristotelian definition, rhetoric is 'speech designed to persuade'; that is, to affect an audience and to effect particular actions. To do so, the rhetor (the teacher in the case of pedagogical research) has to discover available means of persuasion and link them to strategies appropriate to situation (in this case, the seminar) and purpose: 'Rhetoric thus stems first from the speaker's reading of the audience and the suasive challenge they present, and secondly from his/her ability to utilize communicational resources appropriately.'<sup>55</sup>

Both methods?the video-recording and the employment of rhetoric as a pedagogical tool?are potentially transferable to TRS, particularly since many TRS courses are also seminar-based. It is interesting? and presumably empowering for academics, regardless of their disciplinary affiliation?that a feature of this methodology is that the academics whose teaching provides the subject material become researchers. This is one way to forge relationships between pedagogical and disciplinary research, and as such would be more palatable to many TRS scholars than methods from the social sciences.

### **Research as 'reading'**

In the document written after the meetings between humanities Subject Centres, Knights writes that the idea of 'reading' is helpful in developing humanities-based pedagogical research models. He elaborates by way of a question:

'Given that alongside generating new knowledge a considerable part of what Humanities disciplines do is re-interpret or trace new significances in existing knowledges, how might we "read" the performances through which we model or demonstrate "doing" our subject in the classroom?' He goes on to explain that in English the idea that the group could in some ways be 'read' in the same way as a text was fundamental to the pedagogic action research project DUET (the Development of University English Teaching Project) at the University of East Anglia in 1979.<sup>56</sup> It is not difficult to envisage the use of similar methods in TRS.

## **Narrative research**

According to Knights, most varieties of English care vigorously about narrative. He explains: this could go well beyond questions of how English tutors 'tell the story' of their teaching day, to exploring modules or programmes as narrative: the structuring of their characteristic events in time, and their shaping into beginnings, middles and ends; hero, victim or helper roles, the teacher as realist narrator, and so on.<sup>57</sup> One way in which the narrative approach could be useful in TRS is by providing a way of analysing module handbooks and of conceptualising the teacher-student relationship (hero/victim/helper roles and so on). The 'Editor's Note' from a 2004 edition of *Teaching Theology and Religion* suggests also that there already exists among TRS academics the practice of reading one's own teaching career as a narrative. According to its author, telling one's story as a teacher has become a familiar and often profoundly moving ritual in many Wabash Center<sup>58</sup> consultations and workshops.<sup>59</sup>

## **Cultural materialist analysis**

Knights also claims that an approach which draws on the analytic repertoire of cultural studies would also be within the remit of the humanities (cultural studies being a domain which has to an even greater extent than English practised the art of creative pilfering from other disciplines). Such a cultural materialist approach would involve decoding the meanings inherent in pedagogic and institutional cultures.<sup>60</sup>

## **Discourse analysis**

According to Knights, from language studies could come critical discourse analysis, and the methods for recording and analysing the languages of the classroom?the negotiation and establishment of footing, of dominance and submission, turn-taking, the handling of questions and interruptions, the assignment of roles in terms of gender or age. Critical linguistics can, he writes, also be powerfully applied to institutional documents like module handbooks.<sup>61</sup> These methods may also apply in TRS, but it should be borne in mind that linguistics has not had a role in the history of these traditions which is comparable with the role it has played in English.

## **Analogical thinking**

All varieties of English draw on 'analogical thinking' and are deeply immersed in the study of metaphor, and the analysis of figurative language.<sup>62</sup> The metaphorical world of the classroom and of educational rhetoric would also be of interest to TRS scholars, though considerable work would have to be done before any firm associations could be made.

## **Novelist readings**

Knights believes that 'subject-inflected pedagogic research might be seen as bearing some correspondence with the novel itself: as so to speak a prosthesis that enables us to articulate and enter into dialogue over the meaning of the experience of learning?In weaving webs of pedagogic research, might we not be involved in the same kind of activity as the novelist?'<sup>63</sup>

## **Methodological borrowing**

Though it is not strictly a pedagogical method, the fact that English has, according to Knights, a 'piratical<sup>64</sup> tendency

to pillage other disciplines could be instructive for theology and religious studies.' Knights explains:

The literature community in particular has over the years created a magpie's nest of shiny intellectual objects snaffled from linguistics, anthropology, sociology, psychoanalysis, philosophy, and the more theoretically flamboyant (or less empiricist) enclaves of history. In the last few years the new cognitive neuro-science has given rise to the domain of cognitive poetics. Much of what English might care to deploy in creating forms of pedagogic research rests on borrowings to whose new use the original owners might reasonably object.<sup>65</sup>

There seems to be no reason why TRS could not likewise pillage from other disciplines (religious studies could look to anthropology, sociology, psychoanalysis; theology to English, history, philosophy), in the name of methodological pluralism, with a view to the advancement of pedagogical research.

## History<sup>66</sup>

Although pedagogical research in history is relatively well developed, there do not exist equivalent resources for developing a transferable model of pedagogical research from disciplinary research in history as there do for developing one from English research practices. There also seems to be less enthusiasm for such a model amongst historians. Alan Booth, the Co-Director of History in the Subject Centre for History, Classics and Archaeology from 2000-2007, does not believe that historians will in the future explore the possibility of developing pedagogical research methods unique to history. Notwithstanding this, he predicts that historians will point their attention to pedagogical research in particular ways, reflecting the skills they are trained in as historians?this may mean, for example, paying attention to the origins of educational artefacts, processes and events, and to cause and effect in an educational setting?and that they will proceed with the interpretative, qualitative methodologies already in use in history, whilst translating the language from educational research for use by historians.

Paul Hyland, the Co-Director, with Booth, of History in the Subject Centre for History, Classics and Archaeology from 2000-2007, believes that there does not yet exist a theory of learning in history or in fact in any subject. Echoing this, Booth states, reflecting on the English narrative approach, that all disciplines tell stories; the difference exists in the way the narrative is looked at. English scholars will look at narrative in one way (perhaps in terms of language structure) and historians will look at it in another (perhaps in terms of origins and lineage, asking questions like: where does this educational practice come from? What is its history?). And so, there may be different approaches to narrative within the disciplines, but all use the narrative method, meaning that this is not a distinctively English method of pedagogical research. Whilst he can see the appeal of citing a distinctive subject-specific method, he believes that history, with its eclectic approach to research and its methods, requires a pluralistic approach. He advises TRS to decide whether it wants to establish its own method or whether it is comfortable with an eclectic approach to pedagogical research, in the manner of history.

Notwithstanding the absence of a uniquely historical approach to pedagogical research, Booth does concur that historians utilise methods from historical research to conduct pedagogical research. He explains that pedagogical research in history in both the UK and the US uses the same standards of rigour as are expected of ordinary historical research, that it adopts 'the same sort of interpretative methodologies', <sup>67</sup> and that it uses a minimum of jargon. Both Booth and Hyland report that few historians are using undoctored social science methods to conduct pedagogical research. Booth claims that historians are reluctant to use these methods directly because they do not feel confident doing so. He notes the example of social and cultural historians, who are using social science methods but who are customising them by imposing the methods and language of history upon them in order to make them more accessible to historians. This development is potentially enlightening for theologians, who would likewise find social science research methods more intellectually palatable were they stripped of jargon and imbued with the characteristics of humanities research. Religious studies academics are something of a different case in this regard,

having more familiarity with social science methods than their theologian counterparts.<sup>68</sup> In his opinion, rather than fearing capitulation to social science methods, theologians should be awakened to the fact that these methods can be customised in order to allow the disciplines to ask and answer the kind of questions relevant to them. There are good reasons to believe that it would be more realistic and a better use of time for TRS academics to exploit resources from educational research and translate them for use by colleagues within their discipline than to invest resources in developing unique disciplinary methods of pedagogical research.

Similarly, and notwithstanding his view that history has not developed a distinctive method of pedagogical research based on methods and practices from within the discipline, Hyland does not know of any historians who are turning to traditional social scientific educational research methods to carry out pedagogical research. He describes historians as 'cherry pickers' who operate with pedagogical tools and methods from a variety of sources. The lack of recourse to social science methods means that pedagogical research in history is not considered sufficiently sophisticated by educationalists to warrant the title 'educational research'. Hyland describes the process of persuading historians to read pedagogical research before writing their own articles on pedagogy as 'an uphill struggle' and he identifies the language barrier as a major factor contributing to this. He agrees with educational researchers that in order to undertake pedagogical research, historians should develop some familiarity with educational research methods,<sup>69</sup> but he also thinks that generic educational theory acquires meaning only with disciplinary application. The problem as he sees it is that pedagogical researchers in the disciplines are 'stuck in the middle', looking for a way to relate the generic theory to the discipline. This same point could be applied across the subject board, and certainly to TRS.

## **Special issues unique to TRS**

In this section, I will outline the special issues and particular problems unique to the study of TRS. I will do so with a view to using this information and that gleaned from the overview of pedagogical research methodologies and pedagogical research in English and history, in order to reach conclusions in the next and final section of this report as regards the methodologies which may prove useful to those conducting pedagogical research in the context of TRS.

### **Insider/outsider issues**

The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) Benchmark Statement identifies an 'ability to understand how people have thought and acted in contexts other than?[their] own' as one of the qualities of mind that a TRS student should acquire in the course of their studies.<sup>70</sup> This portends the insider/outsider problem, which, as Kim Knott explains, revolves around the question of who can reliably understand and present a religion. That is, can we ever fully understand someone else's experience?<sup>71</sup> According to Russell T. McCutcheon, the insider/outsider problem 'is perhaps the most crucial theoretical and methodological issue that confronts the student of human behaviour and culture today'.<sup>72</sup> He explains:

In a nutshell, the problem is whether, and to what extent, someone can study, understand, or explain the beliefs, words, or actions of another. In other words, to what degree, if any, are the motives and meanings of human behaviors and beliefs accessible to the researcher who may not necessarily share these beliefs and who does not necessarily participate in these practices? Do students of culture have virtually unimpeded access to the intentions and meanings of the people, societies, or institutions they study or, to take the contrary view, are all human observers cut off from ever being able to see past their own biases, contexts and presuppositions?<sup>73</sup>

Similarly, Eric J. Sharpe argues that the most persistent methodological concern in the study of religions is the religious allegiance (or lack of it) of the student: does the student function best as an insider or an outsider? To this

one can only answer that the insider knows by experience what to the outsider is mere conjecture: the 'insider' is allowed access to 'mysteries' which remain barred to the uninitiated. On the mundane level of such things as history and geography, on the other hand, the outsider may be the better informed of the two. Sharpe warns: 'Whether the outsider can enter imaginatively into the insider's "spiritual experience" is extremely doubtful.'<sup>74</sup>

However, as Knott explains, some scholars are urging a move away from the insider/outsider dichotomy towards a reconceptualisation of the study of religion so that academics are no longer compelled to compartmentalise the world of faith and the world of scholarship.<sup>75</sup> McCutcheon echoes this when he remarks that in recent years there has been a revolution in the way scholars conceive of themselves in relation to the people they study which has entailed a rethinking of the opposition between insiders and outsiders, subjects and objects. He explains that scholars are questioning the limits of the subject, the limits of the object, and whether anyone can attain neutrality when it comes to studying human behaviour. The question is: where does the detached observer begin and the observed subject end? That is, is the gap between the two as apparent as many have assumed, or is it merely an illusion, constructed and maintained by writers in an effort to generate authority through supposed objectivity? If it is the latter, writes McCutcheon, we might no longer talk about solving the insider/outsider problem as much as deconstructing it. This position is called reflexivity.<sup>76</sup>

## **Faith versus scholarship/commitment versus non-commitment including reference to the problems inherent in text-based studies**

The QAA Benchmark Statement for TRS acknowledges that 'the nature of theology and religious studies means that studying the subject may have a profound impact on the student's life and outlook'.<sup>77</sup> The statement continues: 'Critical analysis may destabilise profoundly held convictions producing sharp rejection of academic study, but may also stimulate real engagement with contemporary concerns'.<sup>78</sup>

According to Philip L. Tite, a pervasive, yet under-discussed, problem in religious studies classrooms is the presence of faith crisis. He claims that many students face a type of cognitive dissonance when confronted with the critical-analytical approach in the academic study of religion.<sup>79</sup> Kate Crosby, Stephen Pattison and Andrew Skilton have noted that in no other subject than TRS does the academic agenda confront so fundamental an aspect of the individual's identity. When experienced as such, this confrontation can lead students to suspend critical judgement and withdraw from the academic process to protect their faith, or to focus on 'safe subjects'. On the other hand, it may lead to their alienation from their own faith background, even to the transferring of their faith on to the academic process as a substitute worldview.

Crosby, Pattison and Skilton thus conclude that these responses mean that the academic study of the subject can lead to the very opposite of the explicitly intended outcome: the suppression rather than the mastery of a critical approach.<sup>80</sup> In addition, they point out that although concerns about answering questions, lacking understanding, looking stupid might be commonplace in any lecture theatre, TRS adds a further layer of anxiety for students, connected with the fear of exposing very personal aspects of oneself to an audience that is not necessarily sympathetic; potentially misrepresenting their beliefs in a context where statements cannot easily be recovered or withdrawn, or, on the other hand, offending against the anticipated beliefs of others, including the lecturer.<sup>81</sup>

According to the QAA Benchmark Statement, students are required to 'read and use texts both critically and empathetically, while addressing such questions as genre, content, perspective, purpose, original and potential meaning, and the effect of translation if the text is not read in the original language'.<sup>82</sup> Apart from the problem of accessing texts in their original language, text-based teaching and learning (on which TRS is, to a large extent, based) also presents particular dilemmas for students of faith because religious beliefs can be challenged by the historical-critical study of scriptures. As regards the Judeo-Christian tradition, according to Roger Newell, there are two irreconcilable approaches to reading the Bible which often collide in a TRS undergraduate's first academic experiences. Religious students find the scholarly approach a disappointment compared with their preferred way of

reading, but upon closer examination the limits of an exclusively devotional way or an exclusively academic way soon become apparent.<sup>83</sup>

On a different but related topic, John K. Simmons discusses the pedagogical dilemma of maintaining neutrality in the TRS classroom. He feels that spiritual guidance emerges naturally in the academic study of religion, and that teachers should accept this. Simmons has developed a pragmatic teaching strategy, neutral enthusiasm, which he believes preserves the neutrality of classroom presentation in religious studies courses, yet recognizes the unavoidable evocative power present in the intellectual territory that is religion.<sup>84</sup>

## **Self-disclosure and emotion**

Of all academic subjects, the study of theology and religion arguably demands the greatest degree of self-disclosure from students. Some teachers have harnessed the emotive potential of the subject and constructed teaching exercises around it. Theresa O'Donovan recounts a course she taught in which students were asked to address course content in anything but an essay. She realised that the assignment required her students to temporarily leave the safe ground of distanced rationality and to approach the material differently. She recalls that students often became passionately engaged with the material, which added a risk factor to this research, because tears and anger can (and did in this case) ensue. The risk to the student is on the level of self-disclosure. The risk to the instructor is encapsulated by the question: how does (s)he contextualise the submissions of individual students such that they are respectful to the other students and also serve the interests of the class as a whole? O'Donovan admits that it is not always possible to achieve this.<sup>85</sup>

Similarly, Stephen R. Haynes recommends the method of strategic self-disclosure?the practice of revealing one's own orientation toward a subject matter, a discipline, or the institutional context in which teaching and learning take place?to create the conditions for community and student transformation in the classroom. Haynes is also realistic about the inherent risks. Self-disclosure can, he writes, permanently alter the classroom environment and may tap into the teacher's insecurities.<sup>86</sup>

## **Absence of an agreed methodology**

Mike Fearn and Leslie Francis have made the point that the absence of core subject matter in TRS may be causally related to the absence of a universally agreed methodology. Linguists, historians, sociologists, archaeologists, philosophers, and psychologists may all find themselves teaching in TRS departments.<sup>87</sup> The QAA Benchmark Statement affirms this: 'Much of the excitement of the discipline lies in its contested nature. What should or should not be regarded as belonging to the subject, what methods should be used, the different results that come from adopting different presuppositions?these are some of the issues.'<sup>88</sup> Though the lack of an agreed methodology is indeed challenging and thought-provoking, it does present particular issues which may lead to academic dispute and fragmentation.

## **Guarded attitudes to empiricism**

The views of Stephen Pattison are representative of the attitude of a number of theologians toward empirical methods which could, if developed and applied to pedagogy, provide an impetus to the formulation of TRS-specific pedagogical research methods. According to Pattison, in the academy, there exists an implicit reductionism which implies that the less a discourse of activity is science-like, the less legitimacy it has. Pattison claims that scientific thinking and empirical methods are gradually restructuring the arts and humanities, including practical theology, as they seep in from the social sciences.<sup>89</sup> In Pattison's view, aspects of scientific thought and method are of value for practical theology but, ultimately, practical theology must defend itself against a paradigm take over by quasi-scientific methods by clarifying its own identity and purpose.<sup>90</sup>

Pattison feels that a number of losses may emerge if practical theology?and presumably this could be applied to other br

anches of theology?capitulates to empiricism. One is 'the fetishism of facts'. He explains: we collect so much data and facts that what is needed is not more data, but connections between and insights into the significance of facts, since we do not know what to do with them.<sup>91</sup> Connected to this is Pattison's theory that in a wholesale empirical model, knowledge supplants judgement.<sup>92</sup> Similarly, he argues that the hegemony of 'scientific' knowledge encourages narrowness and specification so that researchers know more and more about less and less. However, Pattison points out that if practical theology becomes too narrowly preoccupied with empirically understanding the details of theology, though it may have become more 'doable', finite and explicit, it may lose the very elements which render it valuable to humanity; understanding, for example, that which is of ultimate significance for existence but which cannot easily be treated of in propositional as opposed to creative terms.<sup>93</sup> Pattison also claims that social science empiricism will make practical theologians, who should be engaged in speculative, risky work, defensive and constrained in their concerns.<sup>94</sup> In addition, he points to the decline of narrative-based research and concern about worldviews and discourse which accompanies the move towards empiricism, arguing that, as a discipline that depends on communal and individual stories and which prioritises interpretation, practical theology should not easily surrender to rational instrumentalism based on 'hard' evidence.<sup>95</sup> Finally, Pattison claims that capitulation to empiricism would lead to the loss of subjectivity, insight, wisdom, intuition and the intrinsically valuable and interesting in practical theology.<sup>96</sup>

Pattison, who claims that he is not opposed to the use of empirical methods in practical theology per se, argues that, in order to defend against a complete turn to the empirical, practical theology must adhere to a notion of itself as a discipline of interpretation, wisdom and understanding, resisting demands to become empirically and technologically based.<sup>97</sup>

In his words, contemplation, rumination, reverie, hovering attention?perhaps even hovering inattention?need to be valued more highly as main constitutive methods in practical theology. For Pattison, a combination of the empirical and the reflective represents the optimum way of trying to engage in wise and creative activity.<sup>98</sup>

## **Pedagogical research methods for use in TRS**

Presuming that it would be advantageous for TRS to develop a model of discipline-specific pedagogical research which could be used in parallel with methods gleaned from educational research and from other disciplines, and bearing in mind current models and practices in both generic and humanities-specific pedagogical research and the special issues involved in the study of TRS, there are a number of channels along which this model could develop. These are outlined below.

### **Qualitative surveys**

Questionnaires and interviews, including focus groups (which are similar to the seminar method of teaching in TRS), which are also used in TRS research per se, are a potential method for pedagogical research in TRS, but the semi- or unstructured rather than the structured kind would better suit the temperament and outlook of the subject. Case studies, which may often employ the qualitative survey method, could be an important method in pedagogical research in TRS, since they are ideally suited to small-scale research (and pedagogical research in TRS is certainly small-scale at the moment, not least as a result of a lack of funding). The ethnographic method popular in religious studies embraces the case study approach.

### **Quantitative surveys**

Although the methods which can be used to resolve the special issues involved in teaching and learning in TRS will inevitably?because of the nature of the subject?primarily be qualitative, questionnaires (for example, student feedback forms) may be of use.

### **Content analysis**

That this is a quantitative method means that it will be rejected out of hand by some TRS academics, despite the fact

that it could be used to produce empirical pedagogical research in their subject. One possible approach would be to use this method to analyse module handbooks. This would be a fitting response to critics (chiefly educational researchers) who accuse subject-specific pedagogical research of a lack of sophistication. Insofar as content analysis deals also with the identification of themes, dispositions, ideologies and beliefs, it is a method in which TRS academics are already well-versed. Though this may not be recognised at first, content analysis has, then, the dual advantage of being an approach which is familiar and which at the same time allows TRS academics to address educational researchers' criticisms of pedagogical research in the disciplines.

## **Documentary analysis (including literature reviews)**

TRS scholars spend much of their time engaged in documentary analysis, making this an obvious choice of method for pedagogical research in the discipline. Its appeal for this group would be further enhanced by the fact that it has not been monopolised by social scientists. These considerations apply to both primary and secondary documentary analysis, and also to archival research.<sup>99</sup> Conceptual analysis, a form of documentary analysis which is interested in ideas and their contested meanings, and with how this affects our understandings of the world, would also accord with the outlook of this discipline, since interpretations and worldviews are amongst its central concerns. In support of this, the QAA Benchmark Statement identifies exploration of the interface between TRS and literature, and engagement with critical analysis of data and arguments, as belonging to the academic standards of the subject.<sup>100</sup>

In practical terms, documentary analysis could be used in pedagogical research in TRS to assess module handbooks (a researcher could, for instance, compare all module handbooks for Judaism in the UK), lecture handouts, curricula, student essays (although this kind of research has ethical implications) and university websites.

## **Qualified evidence-based practice**

As discussed previously, pedagogical research is increasingly characterised by a 'what works?' agenda. By way of background to this surge of interest in evidence-based practice, I will appeal to Yorke's theory of gradation of educational interpretations. At one end of Yorke's scale lie the relatively narrow, predominantly instrumental, focuses on the practice of teaching, learning and assessment, and how they might be made more effective/efficient.<sup>101</sup> Pedagogical research here is empirical? even technician? in character, and is concerned with 'what works' or 'what might work better'. Yorke's theory is supported by Angela Brew, who notes that, following the medical model, there are now growing demands for well-argued empirical evidence of the impacts and effectiveness of educational interventions and changes.<sup>102</sup>

Although educational research continues to be directed by the 'what works' agenda, a number of pedagogical researchers are urging caution vis-à-vis evidence-based practice. Yorke maintains that the evidence-based approach risks disconnection with theory, arguing that there is danger in an uncritical acceptance of 'what works', since circumstances vary in education. Returning to his theory of gradation, he explains that the other end of the scale from evidence-based practice is a more encompassing perspective within whose scope anything that might influence teaching, learning and assessment might be found. Within this broader vision, philosophical, sociological and psychological conceptions about values, conditions and purposes will be made apparent, he claims, in a way not often appreciated by the narrowly focused empiricist.<sup>103</sup> Similarly, Brew warns that it would be naive to assume that medical models of evidence-based practice can be readily applied in the higher education context. She believes that 'academic developers will need to develop new ideas and models of evidencebased practice applicable to their profession'.<sup>104</sup> The challenge for TRS disciplines is to decide where on the gradation scale their pedagogical research should lie.

## **Practitioner-centred research**

Practitioner-centred research aims to improve professional practice by adding to the store of usable knowledge of professional practice. According to Webber, Bourner and O'Hara, the strengths of this methodology lie in the

ownership of the research by practitioners. They point out that, in contrast to action research, the research process in practitioner-centred research is managed by the academic practitioner, focusing on their own practice rather than that of an outside professional researcher. The idea is that practising professionals are in a privileged position in engaging in the process as they are able to test out and refine their ideas through application to their own professional practice. Webber, Bourner and O'Hara continue: once clear that the idea can work, the practising professionals are in a position to disseminate the research in a way that will enable other practitioners in their field to experiment with, evaluate and possibly adopt the new development. The individual and contextualised nature of practitioner-centred research means that personal learning can be converted into useful professional knowledge.<sup>105</sup> However, caution must be urged. Potential drawbacks stem from the subjective nature of the research and the fact that, in contrast to action research, there is no built-in scrutiny.<sup>106</sup> Consequently, practitioner research is dismissed in some academic circles as uncritical.

## **Action research**

According to Hutchings, the scholarship of teaching and learning 'is characterised by a transformational agenda'.<sup>107</sup> That agenda?to foster long-lasting student learning?is exemplified by action research. The QAA Benchmark Statement states that the study of theology and religion should provide 'opportunities for critical involvement in changing the way things are',<sup>108</sup> which suggests a role for action research both in research into TRS as a subject and in pedagogical research undertaken by subject practitioners. Action research is particularly relevant to TRS, since these disciplines encourage self-reflection and self-disclosure and challenge current mindsets, including faith stances. Similarly, since, according to Kemmis, informal criteria for evaluation may be more suitable than formalistic and overtly 'theoretical' ones in action research, because this method is actually practised by teachers in their own social process,<sup>109</sup> it would appeal particularly to TRS academics whose reluctance to undertake pedagogical research stems from an assumption that it is dominated by social science empiricism. In addition, because the data analysis techniques in action research are similar to those used by an interpretative researcher in history or ethnography, they would also be familiar to TRS academics, who utilise interpretative methodologies in their research.

In this vein, Pring believes that the solution to the language problem is to make teachers themselves the researchers, rather than the object of research as is the standard practice. He favours action research, which he regards as an ideal way to bridge the gap between research and teaching, since it is practical. He envisages a world in which research could inform educational practice not in the sense of dictating how and what teachers should teach, but as: a set of hypotheses?constantly tested in terms of teaching styles, pedagogical practices, resources, school policy, and effects upon the rest of the curriculum?The curriculum should be seen as a set of proposals which is constantly being implemented, tested out, found wanting in some respect, leading to the formulation of new proposals. <sup>110</sup>

Action research could, then, be a useful way of changing classroom practices or adapting module handbooks in TRS, but again caution should be urged. An approach which requires academics to impose their ideas on a situation with a view to changing it may give rise to concerns about imperialism and colonialism among TRS scholars.

## **Observation research (participant observation/ethnography, including phenomenography, exposure learning and personal encounter with members of faith groups)**

The QAA Benchmark Statement lists in-depth study of sacred practices, 'opportunities to consider the artistic, ethical, gendered, social, political and cultural characteristics of religion' and 'fostering empathetic engagement with both familiar and unfamiliar viewpoints' as being amongst the academic standards for TRS;<sup>111</sup> such standards could be attained by means of participant observation, particularly since this is a method already familiar to religious studies academics. To specify further, TRS is by its nature more discursive and reflective?'soft'? than it is empirical and statistical? 'hard'?meaning that unstructured observation would be preferable to structured/systematic observation. However, according to Barbara Patterson, who uses ethnography to teach TRS, fear is one of the most difficult hurdles to

overcome when using this method:

Fears about our right as non-experts to use ethnographic concepts and techniques, fears about the additional time and energy, fears about being too relationally and intellectually integrated with our students and Community Partners [the organisations in which Patterson's students were interned]. I feared that the class would get out of control, that the agenda of the day might reshape the agenda of the course, that our work would drown in some touchy/feely mess. Then, there were fears about how we might enter into another community's space and truly offer something useful to them.

In her experience, only continual communication with her students, other staff and the participating organisations helped the class overcome these fears and attain perspective. Once they had done so, their experiences were positive ones: 'Students are eager for this kind of course because as research has suggested, not only are their experiential and intellectual needs being fed, their developmental needs are being nurtured as well.'<sup>112</sup>

## Phenomenography

Phenomenography, a form of ethnography that investigates the qualitatively different ways in which people experience or think about something, has been used extensively in religious studies research, and is therefore potentially transferable as a method for pedagogical research in the field. It appeals to the preference among religious studies scholars for naturalism and non-obtrusive research methods. It would be a particularly valuable method for researching student learning, coming to an awareness of the different ways in which students understand learning and approach studying, which is the way it has been most widely applied in higher education. The method is less familiar to theologians, who would therefore presumably be more reluctant to use it.

## Exposure learning: a case study

According to Joyce Ann Mercer, who conducted an exposure learning exercise with theology students in Manila's red light district, exposure learning holds the potential to provide experiences of disorientation/reorientation that call into question existing paradigms held by students, opening the way for the construction of new and transformed ways of knowing. For Mercer, exposures are part of a larger pedagogical framework in which she understands education to be a participatory transformative practice.

Mercer is aware of the risks, such as the student resistance to learning which may ensue when meaning-perspectives are challenged, but she feels that exposures hold the potential of minimising resistance because it is the experience together with shared critical reflection on it, and not the teacher's viewpoints, that unsettle prior interpretive frameworks.<sup>113</sup> She does acknowledge, however, that exposure creates ethical dilemmas, and that there is also an unclear relationship between experience and action in this kind of learning. She elaborates on the ethical issues: one of the most significant critiques of exposure learning argues that it is a kind of voyeurism in which the students add to the exploitation of the people in that context. There are also ethical dilemmas in exposure learning related to the learners themselves. Exposure learning is a form of experiential education that is unpredictable and spontaneous. This gives rise to vulnerability and risks, but then, says Mercer, this is what makes exposures so transformative.<sup>114</sup> She thinks that there is an educational gain to be achieved by accepting, even valuing, the presence of risk in educational design, but what she finds difficult is the highly subjective determination of how much risk and discomfort remains constructive in any given experience. In addition, exposure learning imposes a counsellor-client dynamic on to the teacher-student relationship which may be deemed inappropriate, although, according to Mercer this could be remedied by referral by the teacher to a counsellor.<sup>115</sup>

In terms of the unclear relationship between experience and action in exposure learning, Mercer feels that the heart of the issue concerns a perspective on transformative education which conceives of education as moving towards

action. It was assumed by those who designed the exposure exercise she used that if students transformed their frameworks for making sense of prostitution, then they would necessarily act differently in relation to it. However, it is now clear that the pathway between new thinking and any particular new action is neither straight nor automatic.<sup>116</sup>

These considerations would have to be borne in mind by TRS academics who choose to use this method to develop their pedagogies. Personal encounter with members of faith groups: a case study Sophie Gilliat-Ray's experiences as a teacher have led her to the conclusion that the most effective learning about other faiths takes place through personal encounter (where students meet adherents of other faiths, particularly in their natural setting, often a place of worship): 'Any opportunity that took the student out of the formal learning environment and which placed them in a minority situation was positive'. She recommends small group visits, explaining that when students visit places of worship in large groups, it becomes more difficult to feel the atmosphere, to look around and to ask questions. In a smaller group, they can begin to experience what it might be like, for example, in a minority situation. Smaller groups are also have a less intrusive effect on the faith communities in question.<sup>117</sup>

## **The phenomenological method of empathetic engagement**

Bernadette McNary-Zak recommends empathetic engagement as a method for teaching religious history, but this method could also be applied to research into theology and other forms of religious studies and also to pedagogical research in the context of this discipline. To explain, McNary-Zak quotes the education theorist Stephen Brookfield: "As with all phenomenological approaches, the purpose is to enter another's frame of reference so that the person's structures of understanding and interpretive filters can be experienced and understood by the educator, or a peer, as closely as possible to the way they are experienced and understood by the learner."<sup>118</sup> She also cites Ninian Smart, who suggests a form of the phenomenological method as a complement to other methods of study and analysis which deals with the recurring problem of "describing religious and secular worldviews as they actually are".<sup>119</sup> Smart refers to this method as structured empathy. Empathy "helps us to better grasp the facts for the facts include the way [someone] feels and thinks about the world".<sup>120</sup>

To illustrate the method in practice, it may be useful to explain that McNary-Zak's own research was prompted by an African American student's claim that her family's story did not fit with the material covered in a class on the history of American Catholicism. McNary-Zak recalls that the discernment of the student's worldview through a phenomenological process bracketed a particular moment and preserved her experience as legitimate without reducing it. Participation in this process required McNary-Zak to situate the student's remark in its appropriate context. McNary-Zak's ability to 'feel in' enabled her to gain insight into the student's perspective and the source of her remark. Such empathy offered a non-threatening, nonconfrontational way of seeing her worldview. Empathy diffused the traditional hierarchical power relation between teacher and student while still preserving otherness. The diffusion meant that the teacher became the learner and the student became a source of knowledge, and it provided a unique opportunity to view and assess the course's operative assumptions. The result is a revised course.<sup>121</sup>

McNary-Zak outlines the advantages and disadvantages of empathetic engagement. One of the advantages as she sees it is that this method cultivates an awareness of the multiculturalism and the need for deeper social interaction that characterises many classrooms.<sup>122</sup> She also argues that 'Empathetic engagement invites active participation in the ongoing process of interpretation of the past and present. When we encourage the unveiling of operative assumptions in ourselves and in our students we explore the realm of possibility for the study of religious history in the future'.<sup>123</sup> In terms of disadvantages, McNary-Zak points out that the method involves a risk which is often unfamiliar to students. It can lead them to realise that "what [they] thought of as fixed ways of thinking and living are only options among a range of alternatives". Many students do not deem this risk a worthwhile one, and those who do sacrifice the familiar for the unfamiliar.<sup>124</sup> In addition, for those students who choose to assume this risk, the effects of empathetic engagement are initially personal and private. Only the individual can evaluate the dimensions of their empathetic engagement.<sup>125</sup>

## **Feminist approaches**

Feminist research methodologies could be drawn on in pedagogical research in TRS, since they are already influential in research into TRS as a subject. A great deal more could be written about this but the time and scope of the research project which grounds this article precludes this.

## **Peer review**

Peer review is a fallible method but continues to be a part of the job of a TRS academic.

## **Comparative analysis**

This would be a useful model for pedagogical research in TRS, particularly in light of the QAA Benchmark Statement's identification of one of the academic standards of the subject as the 'in-depth study of one or more particular religious traditions'.<sup>126</sup>

## **Interpretative methods**

Research in TRS proceeds by way of a close interpretation of texts, historical events, and so on. The interpretative method could, then, without too great a need for adjustment, be applied to the study of classroom situations, module handbooks, and other objects and events of pedagogical significance in TRS.

## **Classroom Assessment Techniques**

Classroom Assessment Techniques (CATs), which allow teachers to receive continual feedback on whether and how well students are learning what the teacher hopes they are teaching, are suitable for application in the TRS classroom. One proponent of CATs, Barry K. Gaeddert, explains that feedback is instant, so changes to teaching methods can occur immediately. According to Gaeddert, student learning is enhanced by teaching staff who are willing to attend to students' expressed comprehension (or lack of) of the material. He also reports that CATs find support in cognitive learning theory, which focuses on the processes occurring in the mind of the learner. He points out that when the learner is an active participant in the learning process, as they are so conceptualised in CATs, cognitive links are more readily established with their prior knowledge and experience. Students are thus involved in the active mental processing associated with new information and become more aware of themselves as learners. Gaeddert makes the point that, while much emphasis is placed on the use of CATs to improve teaching, they have consistently been linked to improved learning too.<sup>127</sup>

## **Congregational studies as a pedagogical tool**

Joyce Ann Mercer explores congregational studies as a valuable teaching tool for contextualizing theological education across disciplines. As Mercer says in the abstract of her article, as a form of pedagogy, congregational studies situates learning in a particular local ministry context. In addition, such a pedagogy apprentices learners within a particular 'community of practice'—namely, that of professional church leaders of various types having the knowledge and skills that allow them to read diverse contexts of ministry and improvise appropriate and faithful strategies of action within those contexts.<sup>128</sup> This approach may be regarded as devotional and against the grain of academia by some teachers, and it may also exacerbate faith versus scholarship/commitment versus non-commitment problems, which means that its use in TRS pedagogy must be approached with caution. In its favour, however, this method may help to minimise polarisation between insiders and outsiders.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion to this report, it may be asserted that pedagogical research is overwhelmingly generic in approach and that it relies extensively on the qualitative research paradigm.<sup>129</sup> There is very little subject-specific pedagogical research, and there are very few examples of TRS-specific material. However, any TRS-specific pedagogical

research which does exist also relies on qualitative methods. There is, then, considerable methodological affinity between pedagogical research per se and pedagogical research in TRS. Admittedly, there are notable differences between the two, chiefly in terms of the fact that the qualitative methods used in pedagogical research in TRS are usually non-empirical and that, although generic pedagogical research makes some use of quantitative methods, these are scarce in TRS-specific pedagogical research.

There are three possible responses to the lack of TRS-specific pedagogical research:

- A retreat from discipline-specific pedagogical research and capitulation to educational research methods, the majority of which are social science-based.
- An initiative towards discipline-based pedagogical research, in the manner of the approach pioneered by the English Subject Centre.
- An initiative towards the development of hybrid methodologies/ methodological pluralism, whereby methods from the discipline are melded with methods from educational research and from other disciplines, in the manner of the approach of the Subject Centre for History, Classics and Archaeology.

The most advantageous option for TRS is the third because it will incur more gains and fewer losses for TRS-based pedagogical research than either of the other two. It will allow TRS academics to tap into the tradition of educational research and the expertise of educational researchers and pedagogical researchers from other fields whilst drawing on methods from their own subject to develop rounded and relevant pedagogical research methods for use in TRS. These methods may also prove to be valuable to researchers from other fields, enabling pedagogical researchers from TRS to play an active role in the 'trading zone'. The third option will also enable pedagogical researchers in TRS studies to achieve credibility in the eyes both of educational researchers and their subject peers. Ultimately, it will benefit students to a greater extent than either of the other two options would because they will be the recipients of best practice from educational research which has been given meaning in a disciplinary context. Option three is the only one which does not cut itself off from any source of knowledge or expertise.

The harnessing of hybrid methodologies necessitates the development of discipline-based pedagogical research in TRS, to complement educational research methodologies, which are already well-established. Taking into consideration existing educational research methodologies, and the various special issues in TRS outlined in this report, there is a great deal of scope for the development of a TRS studies specific method of pedagogical research, primarily in the form of the qualitative survey method, documentary analysis including literature review, phenomenography, comparative research, and some quantitative methods.

## Endnotes

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- Using the work of others without authorisation. Compare with Paul Hyland's description of historians as methodological 'cherry pickers' (see 6b) below) (Hyland was Co- Director of History in the Subject Centre for History, Classics and Archaeology from 2000-2007). It seems that pedagogical research in TRS could adopt a similar posture of methodological pluralism.
- Appendix to email of 27.04.07.
- These reflections are based on telephone conversations and emails with Paul Hyland and Alan Booth, neither of whom is at the History Subject Centre any more, but both of whom have researched and written extensively on teaching history in higher education.
- It is worth bearing in mind that the interpretative approach used by pedagogical researchers in history?which would also be resonant with the experiences of TRS academics?is not regarded by historians as a method unique to pedagogical research in history, insofar as the opinions of Booth (expressed during our phone call of 15.06.07) are representative.
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- Jane Hicks interviewed a group of seven archival researchers working in religious studies, six of whom advocated the use of archives early in the study of religion. They claimed that the use of archives would make history come alive for the students and arouse their interest in religion. Hicks argues that, exposed to the sorts of documents and effects housed in archives, students undertake the construction of academic knowledge for themselves and gain better understanding of the nature and limits of our discipline. She also feels that archives develop students' historical consciousness, bringing the past to life and inviting immediate and creative engagement in ways that can resonate with theological significance (see Jane E. Hicks, "'I Wasn't Prepared for the Emotion": Archival Research in Religious and Theological Studies', *Teaching Theology & Religion*, (Feb 2003), vol. 6, no.1, pp. 43-47 at p. 46).
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Created on: July 18th 2008

Updated on: August 19th 2010