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Talking among ourselves? A personal journey across the silos of educational research

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Abstract: This short paper examines the nature of higher education (HE) research by identifying a series of 'silos' through which one researcher has travelled, or been a part of, during the course of his academic career. The eight silos: sector, thematic, discipline, methodological, analytical, ideological, regional and institutional each constitute distinct sub-communities through which educational researchers develop their academic identity. Research audit and epistemological fragmentation across national contexts has had the effect of driving researchers deeper into their silos. However, as members of a divergent and loosely knit scholarly community (Becher and Trowler, 2001), it is argued that there is a particular need for HE researchers to develop work which crosses sectors and national boundaries and engage, in the process, with a broader community of researchers in education and the social sciences.

Keywords: Educational research; academic identity; sub-communities

Introduction

Mapping research in one's own discipline or field of enquiry is rarely of interest to the modern scholar. This is due, at least in part, to the epistemological fragmentation that increasingly drives academic careers. In the age of the audit, government funding for university research in the UK, Australia, New Zealand and elsewhere in the world is contingent on outcome and 'impact' measures such as refereed papers. In this competitive context, the career-minded academic is probably best advised to specialise in one sub-disciplinary niche rather than question how the 'whole' fits together.

This paper will identify eight educational research 'silos' by reference to the author's own academic career and shifting interests over time. In so doing, the discussion builds on Tight's (2003) framework of research in HE that identified themes or issues, methods and methodologies and different levels of analysis as three points of departure.

Research silos

Sector silo

My initial understanding of educational studies and the field of educational research was formed as a part-time MA student during the 1980s. This understanding owed a lot to the work of Richard Peters who argued that education far being an autonomous discipline was essentially an applied amalgam of history, philosophy, psychology and sociology (Peters, 1964). Here, educational research is understood as a branch of the social sciences composed of four basic disciplines. It is a distinction reflected by some of the most well established education journals mirroring these specialist domains[i]. I discovered other literature carried the implicit assumption that educational research was something that was focused purely on what happened in schools. 'Curriculum studies' appeared especially insular in this respect, referring to little beyond the 'school curriculum'. As a university lecturer, with a limited

interest in the compulsory sector, I found this presumption particularly irritating largely ignoring research in the post-compulsory world of further and higher education. Hence, unlike the vast majority of my fellow MA students, my *sector silo* became HE rather than the world of schools[ii].

This decision had a profound impact on the direction of my career. I joined, and have subsequently remained a member of, the UK Society for Research in Higher Education. It also meant that I have spent my subsequent career as an educational researcher outside any School or Faculty of Education partly because few pay any serious attention to educational research in HE. However, I am hardly alone in pursuing my educational research career outside this context. In researching the departmental affiliations of contributors to HE academic journals, Tight (2003) found that about half were located outside education faculties or centres. This means that there is a large divergent community of educational researchers who do not necessarily think of themselves as 'educational' researchers (eg Healey and Jenkins, 2003).

Thematic silo

Having determined where my identity lay in sector terms, my next decision was to decide what to start researching for my MA dissertation. I chose an investigation into the reasons for the rise in 'good' degree results[iii] during the 1980s. Over the next few years I focused on producing papers from further research in this *thematic silo*. While I was able to publish this research in generic HE journals, I became aware of the vast array of other thematic silos around and the existence of specialist outlets to support this research. Assessment is perhaps a good example with journals in the HE sector such as *Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education*. Assessment, though, is arguably itself a sub-set of research into 'Teaching and Learning' which has grown rapidly in recent years as a result of government initiatives to raise the status of teaching across national contexts (eg NCIHE, 1997).

Discipline silo

After a period mining statistical data on degree results, I turned my attention to the nature of pedagogy and academic identity in my own 'discipline', business and management studies. I use the word 'discipline' advisedly as business and management is really an amorphous grouping of basic disciplines such as sociology, economics, psychology and mathematics re-packaged and applied. This gradual migration coincided with my decision to register for a doctorate and, as a result, I spent five years studying and writing about the beliefs and prejudices of my own complex and unwieldy 'tribe' (Becher and Trowler, 2001). In seeking to publish this research I realised that peer reviewed outlets with an interest in business and management education were few and far between. While some of my papers appeared in business and management education journals, I later pursued a deliberate policy of seeking to publish in 'mainstream' HE journals such as the then newly launched *Teaching in Higher Education*.

During this period I had taken the opportunity to develop a course on business ethics and began to be drawn into thinking and writing about this emerging area of the curriculum. This resulted in involvement with a specialist network of European business ethics educators[iv] and publication in specialist business journals[v]. My immersion in this discipline silo might have deepened and continued had it not been for the Dearing Report on HE (NCIHE, 1997). Its recommendations led to a heightened interest in the provision of educational development for academic staff in the UK with the ostensible objective of improving the 'quality' of teaching. Given my research interests I was asked to help my institution develop a Postgraduate

Certificate in Learning and Teaching. As founding director of this new course, and frustrated by the limited scope of the literature, my research interests began to shift away from business and management education and towards the ethics of academic practice. While I have never abandoned my interest in business and management education, I have become absorbed in a broader thematic agenda.

Whilst I have sought to climb out of my discipline silo, sector-wide initiatives have simultaneously created greater opportunities for researchers to become more entrenched here. The UK Higher Education Academy has bolstered the discipline silo with most subject centres funding their own research projects and founding specialist journals. As a past recipient of funding for two small-scale projects and a contributor to the Business, Management and Accountancy subject centre journal[vi], I have benefited along with others.

Methodological silo

While much of my early research relied on basic statistical analysis of degree results I had begun to adopt more qualitative methods during my doctoral studies. My interest in the work of Becher and Trowler (2001) and Evans (1988, 1993) meant that I increasingly conducted research that was essentially 'ethnographic'. In the late 1990s I found myself attending a conference dedicated to ethnographic approaches to researching HE. Perhaps this was inevitable since I was researching and writing about a community (ie business and management educators) of which I was a part. This methodological approach has deepened as I have concentrated my attention on the ethics of academic practice.

Methodological dispositions can have a significant impact on research careers. Within this context, 'hard' knowledge domains have long ranked more highly than 'soft' ones and 'pure' subjects are considered more prestigious than 'applied' ones (Becher and Trowler, 2001). This has led to academic drift, toward the 'hard' and the 'pure' in many disciplines over time, such as economics. Education is a low status field viewed as 'soft applied' and lacking in perceived rigour (Becher and Trowler, 2001). The pursuit of academic status has implications for methodology. This has been reflected by the deepening bias in social and educational research in favour of quantitative approaches. Policy making bodies, to which much educational research is beholden for its funding, historically prefer to fund research based on such methods (Finch, 1986). Researchers who pin their colours to the mast of a particular qualitative method find themselves increasingly maginalized as the ability to generate research grant income has become central to career progression.

Analytical silo

Tight (2003) identifies 7 different levels of analysis within the study of HE. My research has, by in large, been focused at what I would describe as the micro level: the level of the individual (academic) or academics as a group rather than that of the institution, nation state or international arena in Tight's terms.

Within my HE sector silo, there is a noticeable gulf between those who focus their work at the 'policy' level and researchers, often focused on themes such as 'teaching and learning' or the 'student experience' (Tight, 2003), who operate at an entirely different level of analysis. Output across these *analytical silos* rarely meet in the same journal. *Higher Education Quarterly*, for example, is intended principally for those with something to say at the policy level.

Ideological silo

Whether we like it or not everyone belongs to an *ideological silo*. The 'implicit' ideologues may be unaware or indifferent but nevertheless through their choice of theme, methodology, membership of societies or networks and journal outlets will demonstrate where their sympathies lie. In this respect, those who are members of the Higher Education Academy and seek to publish in *Active Learning in Higher Education* must sign up to the modern 'mantric incantation' (Trowler and Bamber, 2005) of 'reflective practice'. At the 'explicit' or harder end of the spectrum are the Marxists, Feminists, post-modernists and 'liberal educators' each with their own networks and journals[vii]. My concerns about the dominance of 'psychologized' constructions of HE teaching and learning (Malcolm and Zukas, 2001), drew me to *Teaching in Higher Education* because of its editorial policy. This aims to, *inter alia*, 'apply sustained reflection, investigation and critique' to learning and teaching in HE by 'avoiding a narrowly technical view of teaching and learning methods' (*Teaching in Higher Education*, 1996, p 5).

Regional silo

Research audit exercises in the UK and Australia demand that work is of international standard if institutions are to gain any significant research funding. Most serious educational researchers seek to develop this claim since career progression is normally dependent on demonstrating 'international' standing. In this respect, I am no different to anyone else. In my early days trying to get papers published I was not very discriminating or particularly knowledgeable about which journals really 'counted'. In recent years, many new journal titles have appeared. The words 'International' or, at least 'European', are now practically *de rigour* but do not automatically mean the journal can really live up to this boast. There are, of course many established and well-respected journals with a deliberate regional focus such as the *European Journal of Higher Education* or the *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Vocational Education Research*.

Despite this emphasis on 'internationalism' there is remarkably little knowledge exchange across the Atlantic in HE research. Altbach and Engberg (2001) comment that research into HE is more firmly established in North America than elsewhere in the world. Insularity though appears to prevail on both sides of the Atlantic. I became increasingly aware of this fact when researching a recent book on the ethics of teaching in HE (Macfarlane, 2004) finding little European-based literature to compare with the interest and output in this area available from North American scholars.

Institutional silo

Most recently I have worked as an educational developer at both an 'old' pre-1992 and 'new' post-1992 UK university. At both institutions, in common with many other universities, part of the money from the Higher Education Funding Council for England's Teaching Quality Enhancement Fund has been used to pump prime small-scale pedagogic research projects. The use of such funding can produce useful insights for institutions and a building block for embryonic educational researchers. There is though the attendant danger that such research will result in an inferior replication of previously published work and not be subjected to rigorous external peer review. A good example of this phenomenon is research on student retention. As participation rates in HE have soared, retention has become a critical issue for the reputation and financial health of institutions. This has led to institutional funding of retention research to support improvement strategies. The same phenomenon is apparent in the US where the problem of retention is long standing and significantly worse than the UK given historically higher participation rates. Despite a growing body of international research

evidence about retention (eg Tinto, 1993; McInnes, 2000; Yorke, 1999), research on the subject, often falls into a 'not invented here' pattern (Barefoot, 2004).

Out of the silo

In tracing my personal journey across the silos of educational research, I have sought to briefly explore the nature of different scholarly sub-communities. I have not sought to concern myself with controversies regarding the essential purpose of educational research. Moreover, the eight silos I have identified are not intended to suggest that these are the only ones. They simply tie in with my own career path and experiences. I have also indicated that I do not regard myself as a 'typical' educational researcher. I have never worked in an Education Faculty, do not come from a background (or have research interests) linked to the compulsory sector and have been allowed to develop my own research interests relatively free from the pressures of needing to generate significant grant income. I regard myself as lucky in practically all these respects. However, while I am not, perhaps, a 'typical' educational researcher, I am far from untypical of those publishing in the field of HE (Tight, 2003).

Some readers may be wondering what my problem is with educational research 'silos'. Afterall, it is true that we all need to make decisions to specialise in something and cannot, by definition, be expert at everything. In this sense, I am not arguing that educational researchers should become a 'jack of all trades' since we are all familiar with how this saying ends. What I am suggesting, however, is that there are sound research reasons why becoming entrenched in a silo is distinctly unhealthy. Firstly, silos reinforce a lack of awareness among researchers regarding previously published research that is relevantly similar to their proposed or existing project. Awareness at this early stage can help to inform a new study in a particular sector, region or institution or one that adopts a different methodological approach or analytical focus. Secondly, silos are insulated from the wider dissemination of educational research and the 'testing out' of the applicability of results across different sectors, regions and institutions. Finally, educational studies will continue to remain, in Nixon's (2002) words, 'strangely rootless' (p 2) unless or until we make determined efforts to look outside our silos. As a divergent and loosely knit academic tribe, there is a particular need for educational researchers to find one another and develop in the process a less parochial sense of our own identity. In short, we need to stop just 'talking among ourselves'. Far from diluting anyone's sense of academic identity such attempts can only enrich experience, build a wider dialogue and forge a more closely-knit academic community.

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[i] ie *Journal of Philosophy of Education*, *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, *Journal of Educational Psychology* and *History of Education*

[ii] There are, of course, many sector silos within the compulsory sector including early years, primary, secondary and in post-compulsory such as further and adult education (see Nixon, 2002)

[iii] ie 'Firsts' and 'upper second' undergraduate degree classifications

[iv] *European Business Ethics Network*

[v] eg *Journal of Business Ethics* and *Teaching Business Ethics*

[vi] *International Journal of Management Education*

[vii] eg *Gender and Education*