What can qualitative researchers and teachers learn from quantitative researchers and teachers (and vice versa)?

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What can qualitative researchers and teachers learn from quantitative researchers and teachers (and vice versa)?

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The International Benchmarking Review of Sociology1 highlighted how in terms of both content (i.e. what is taught) and delivery (i.e. how it is taught) the provision of quantitative method teaching in UK universities lags behind that provided in Australia, Canada, the United States, as well as many European countries such as the Netherlands, Norway, Sweden and Spain. It concluded that this state of affairs had a negative effect on the quality of the quantitative skill-set possessed by the typical UK social science graduate and that ‘business end-users bemoan the lack of quantitative longitudinal data researchers’1.

Against this background, key professional associations and funding bodies within the social sciences, such as the British Academy and the ESRC, are seeking to develop undergraduate students' quantitative statistical skills2. Indeed, the Nuffield Foundation, in partnership with the ESRC and HEFCE, has recently invested just less than twenty million pounds establishing fifteen centres of excellence nationwide under the banner of what is referred to as the Q-Step programme3.

Q-Step is a far-reaching capacity building move to promote undergraduate curricula reform and pedagogic innovation to help produce more numerate social science graduates. However, I am wary of any agenda which seeks to embed the development of quantitative skills within an employability agenda. Rather, my interest in this shift towards enhancing the profile and role of quantitative methods in social science curricula lies in the fact that I have long advocated the need to engage students with core substantive topics and theoretical debates using both numeric and narrative forms of information and data. This is a position I have certainly strongly advocated in my respective research method and theory textbooks4,5. Indeed, like many colleagues I am sure, in both my academic writing and teaching I always start with the evidence for and against an idea, a policy, an opinion, a conclusion, regardless of if this evidence is numeric of narrative in form.

I think this dual emphasis on both words and numbers is an essential starting point if we are as educators and practitioners are to pursue the goal of developing graduates who aren’t just employable, but who also possess the transferable analytical and critical thinking skills necessary to be the informed politically-engaged citizens that today’s advanced democratic society’s so desperately need. As a medical sociologist and criminologist, I firmly believe my students must be capable of analysing using both words and numbers pertinent issues within the realms of both crime and justice and health and social policy. That is if they are to be able as informed citizens to hold fully to account society’s socio-economic, cultural, professional and political elites.

I know the Q-Step programme is not viewed with enthusiasm by everyone. I have found the feelings of many of my colleagues range from disinterest and disengagement to disdain and outright ideological rejection. I am not surprised by this. Indeed, it is not unknown for sociology and criminology students to begin an introductory research methods course, for example, on the receiving end of an anti-positivist diatribe devaluing the importance of quantitative methods in the social sciences, in preference for more qualitative approaches6.

Yet I think it is important to not get bogged down in debates about the value of qualitative over quantitative approaches (or vice versa). Or for that matter what their respective profile in already overcrowded undergraduate curricula should be. Rather, I think the Q-Step programme is important precisely because it serves to remind us all - be we qualitative- or quantitative- focused researchers - of a key lesson we can learn from each other. Namely, that if we are to promote our students’ critical thinking and lifelong learning skills, rather than just their future employability, then we need to work closely together to embed a culture of narrative and numeric evidence-based inquiry and substantive and theoretical debate across the curriculum, not solely within research methods modules.

Certainly my own research has shown that pedagogic innovation in how we deliver qualitative and quantitative teaching is not in itself enough to engage and develop students’ research and critical thinking skills7. As a result, I for one welcome the opportunities for broader-based collaboration and curriculum innovation, the Q-Step programme brings with it.

References

6 Machnes, J. 2012. Quantitative methods teaching in UK higher education: The state of the field and how it might be improved London: Higher Education Academy