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How can academics apply the research methods of their own subjects to their teaching? **George MacDonald Ross** takes a disciplinary view of philosophical research into the teaching of philosophy.

What makes the Higher Education Academy unique in educational development circles is its firm focus on disciplinary differences. This is why it has a network of 24 Subject Centres, each with its own distinctive perspective on helping academics to improve the quality of their students' learning. However, disciplines differ as much in their methods of research as of teaching, and at a time when the spotlight is on the relationship between research and teaching, we need to consider the implications of different research traditions for research into teaching.

The concept of the scholarship of teaching has become widely accepted, and it demands that all university teachers should be actively engaged in research into teaching – at least into the effectiveness of their own teaching. However, it is unreasonable to expect hard-pressed lecturers to learn an entirely new and foreign research methodology in order to fulfil this expectation. The methods of

educational researchers are very different from those of philosophers, physicists, and practitioners of other disciplines.

It is not merely that academics would have to learn new skills, such as statistics or sophisticated techniques for analysing questionnaires. Rather, many are actually repelled by the language and modes of argument of educational research. They will not read it, and still less will they themselves write in the same style.

The Academy Subject Network has already done much to help academics in different disciplines to become more professional in their teaching by presenting the findings of generic educational research using a language and modes of argument acceptable to them. However, this alone does not address the *raison d'être* of the Subject Centres, which is to broker research into subject-specific issues that are outside the field of generic educational researchers. There is no research to broker if no research is carried out. Little research will be carried out if practising academics have to re-train

themselves as educationalists in order to be taken seriously. And if the outcomes are presented in the style of generic educational research, few of their colleagues will pay any attention to it.

This presents a serious challenge. If Subject Centres are to fulfil their function of stimulating and disseminating subject-specific educational research, they must conduct meta-research into how the established research methods of their own disciplines can be applied productively and validly to educational issues. If the outcome is negative, then the whole project of the scholarly teacher and of subject-based educational research will have to be abandoned. On the other hand, if the outcome is positive, this means that current generic research is lacking dimensions that can be supplied only by subject-based academics with their own distinctive research skills. Rather than simply translating the generic into the subject-specific, Subject Centres will generate a two-way traffic, in which subject-specific research methods will

# Research into teaching ph





feed into generic research, to the benefit of all.

My own subject of philosophy is a case in point. Relatively little research into the teaching of philosophy has been carried out — not because philosophers are uninterested in their teaching, but because hitherto there has been no culture of systematic research using philosophical methods. As it happens, there is a separate discipline of the philosophy of education, in which philosophers have made important contributions to generic educational research, especially with respect to school teaching. But philosophers of education do not normally teach philosophy to university students, and there has been little dialogue between philosophers of education and mainstream philosophers about the teaching of philosophy, or about the application of philosophical research methods to generic educational research. There is still a dearth of philosophical research into the teaching of philosophy.

Any teacher can do simple, empirical research into his or her own teaching, without needing sophisticated statistical tools or a high-level theory. For example, teachers can make a single change to their teaching methods, and see whether it results in significantly higher marks. But more is needed for a substantial contribution to the

literature. Philosophers can add more by applying the research techniques at which they are most skilled — analysing the concepts used to describe educational processes, evaluating the logical relations between claims, unearthing hidden assumptions, and so on. Not only is it possible to do robust, subject-specific educational research using a mixture of such techniques, but they are also sorely needed in generic educational research. Just as subject-specific research will be better if it is informed by the outcomes of generic research, so generic research will be better if it is informed by the research skills of philosophers.

I certainly would not wish to argue that philosophy is unique in this respect. There is widespread dissatisfaction with educational research as being restricted to a relatively narrow range of techniques and values, and complaints come from all quarters. For instance, teachers of the humanities complain that there is too much quantitative research of little significance, whereas scientists complain that there is insufficient quantitative rigour. Indeed, in the US there is now a flourishing movement, called Physics Education Research, in which dedicated staff do research into the teaching of physics using the broad research methods of physicists. In the

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# philosophy

# Case studies: pedagogic

UK, the Subject Network has an obvious role to play in fostering comparable research across the disciplines.

Subject-specific research will not happen unless it is funded and recognised. Humanities disciplines have been distinctly unsuccessful at obtaining funding under initiatives such as the Fund for the Development of Teaching and Learning (FDTL) Phase 5, and there are worries that educational research may not be taken seriously in the next Research Assessment Exercise. With the support of the Academy centrally, humanities Subject Centres have come together to research into the reasons for the low success rate in obtaining grants; to articulate the ways in which humanities research methods can add value to educational research; and to draw up criteria for assessing the quality of research. The results will be reported on the Philosophical and Religious Studies website at <http://prs.heacademy.ac.uk>.

We certainly do not want to see educational research splintered into a myriad of sub-disciplines. But by working together through the Academy, we can foster the growth of robust educational research within the disciplines, and at the same time make our own distinctive contributions to the quality of generic research. Let us finally overcome the historic divide between the generic and the subject-specific! ●

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## Case Study 1

### Pedagogic research in art and design: an RAE perspective



The art and design sector has seen significant developments in pedagogic research that have matured from anecdotal accounts and case histories into systematic enquiries drawing from, and adding to, the body of literature. A range of subject associations in art and design, together with the Academy Subject Centre for Art, Design and Media and GLAD (the Group for Learning in Art and Design), have helped to support and stimulate these developments.

An underlying feature of this research has been an emphasis on the link between research and *learning* rather than that between research and teaching. This may be a consequence of an education through disciplines where most knowledge is contested and so the passive transmission of information plays a marginal role in the student learning experience. Generally, the

teaching practices of studio-based subjects in art and design aim to enable students to construct their own intellectual frameworks so that they can build the attributes and competencies needed to sustain lifetime careers. Much research has been devoted to a better understanding of this learning experience.

A further stimulus to this work may come through the explicit inclusion of pedagogic research in the criteria for the 2008 Research Assessment Exercise (RAE). The criteria for the RAE Main Panel O (which assesses art and design, creative and performing arts, the history of art, architecture and design, cultural communication and media studies and music) make clear that no type of research will be privileged over any other and that all forms of research outputs – whether textual, visual, sonic, digital or dynamic – will be treated equally. In particular, applied research, practice-based and pedagogic research are all specifically identified within the types of research to be embraced in the assessment. Though it is not anticipated that the volume of pedagogic research submitted in RAE 2008 will be high, it is hoped that its specific inclusion in the criteria will help stimulate both a deepening and an embedding of such work and an enhancement of its status.

**BRUCE BROWN** is Director of the Art Design Media Subject Centre and Chair of the RAE Main Panel for these subjects.

Further information [www.rae.ac.uk](http://www.rae.ac.uk)