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# The Undergraduate Education Studies Dissertation: Philosophical reflections upon tacit empiricism in textbook guidance and the latent capacity of argumentation

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**Abstract**

The final-year undergraduate dissertation is commonplace in Education Studies programmes across the world and yet its philosophical assumptions are complex and not always questioned. In England there is evidence to suggest a tacit preference for empiricism in textbooks designed to support early researchers. This brings, we suggest, problems associated with dualism, instrumentalism and of accounting for value, redolent of the dilemmas that emerge from Hume's empiricist epistemology. The paper suggests that if argumentation were explicitly taught to undergraduates it may help oversee the more judicious use of empirical approaches that are currently privileged in dissertation guidance.

**Key words**

Empiricism, Dualism, Values, Argumentation

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"Usually (but not always), there will be an expectation that the kind of evidence you collect during a research project you undertake at university will be *empirical*. That is to say, you will be expected to go out into the wide world and collect data yourself rather than relying on information marshalled by others – for example in a book. (In fact, a research project as a literature review - that is, *just* as a literature review - is sometimes acceptable, but if you want to do a research project that is based solely on the literature you should check with your tutor)." (Thomas, 2013: 20-2)

## Introduction

The final-year undergraduate dissertation in Education Studies is a familiar requirement in many universities worldwide. For example, at Brown University, Rhode Island, students 'seeking to graduate with honors must apply to write a Senior Thesis during their sixth semester' (Brown University, 2015; see also University of Nebraska, 2015). So too at Portland State University, Oregon, where in 'the final year of undergraduate study, Honors College students complete a thesis' (Portland State University, 2015). The pattern is repeated in Europe where, at the Freie Universität, Berlin, undergraduates are required to 'write a bachelor's degree thesis, which is typically about 25 pages long and must be prepared within eight weeks' (Freie Universität Berlin, 2015). In Scotland students seeking Honours in Primary Education at the University of Glasgow are expected to write 'a research based dissertation... on a topic chosen by the student' (University of Glasgow, 2015). So too in Malta, where the university stipulates that 'the undergraduate dissertation is a compulsory component of the UoM B.Ed.(Hons.) programme' (University of Malta, 2015).

The seeming ubiquity of the dissertation - 'independent work project', 'bachelor's degree thesis', 'senior thesis', 'senior project', 'honors dissertation' - in undergraduate Education Studies programmes is mirrored in English universities. Here it is common for the academic and personal benefits of dissertation-writing to be

emphasised insofar as it is said to present the student with the challenge and virtues of independent learning. Indeed, for some, the dissertation is the 'gold standard for British higher education' (Healey, 2011, p. 1. See also Walliman & Buckler, 2008). English universities also commonly share with other academic communities the requirement that students should choose between a 'theoretical' or an 'empirical' study. At the University of Malta, for example, students are counselled that their initial choice may well be misguided: 'Contrary to popular belief amongst students, the dissertation does not necessarily have to include empirical research. There are also literature type, investigative type and project type dissertations, to mention a few' (University of Malta, 2015). Glasgow reminds undergraduates that 'although empirical work may be carried out, it is not essential' (University of Glasgow, 2015), while at the University of Göttingen students are told: 'There are essentially two different types of work, namely theoretical (also called a literature work) and empirical work' (Universität Göttingen, 2015). Similarly at Waikato, in New Zealand, the *Education Studies Dissertation* module is described as: 'A report on the findings of a theoretical or empirical investigation' (University of Waikato, 2015).

The argument we make in this paper is that such a choice between a 'theoretical' or 'empirical' study is not only philosophically misleading but may entice the student towards the latter. We say this because, in England at least, a plethora of guidance is published in the form of textbooks that profess to support final-year students in their dissertation writing (e.g. Sharp, 2010; Thomas, 2013; Walliman & Buckler, 2008; Burton, Brundrett & Jones, 2008; Bell, 2005; McNiff & Whitehead, 2010). In them, however, we find a tendency for empiricism and encapsulated in Thomas' dubious reflection that 'usually...there will be an expectation that the kind of evidence you collect during a research project you undertake at university will be *empirical*' (Thomas, 2013: 20). We argue that if Thomas is right the assumption is questionable and, moreover, may undermine national subject benchmarks for Education Studies that show there is nothing incumbent within them requiring a preference for empiricism (QAA, 2007. See also Taber, 2012, and our discussion below).

The shape of the paper is this. First we question whether education is a science or humanity, a subject or discipline, merely to register some of the implications and the complexity this has for research within the domain. We then outline the main

characteristics of British empiricism through Hume and Ayer and show how their epistemologies set values adrift by deeming them unverifiable. This leads to our scrutiny of a selection of English dissertation textbooks to verify our charge of 'tacit empiricism' with them. We make clear from the outset that our goal is not to criticise empiricism *per se* and, indeed, in drawing upon evidence from English textbooks to demonstrate how they marginalise other forms of inquiry, we clearly employ empirical methods ourselves. Finally we suggest that teaching undergraduates about argument may help overcome some of the problems and preferences of dissertation guidance in England today.

## Empiricism and Hume's legacy

It is contestable whether Education Studies is an academic subject or a discipline. If viewed as a subject, greater emphasis is placed upon the contributory disciplines of psychology, sociology, philosophy, history and politics. If viewed as a discipline, more attention is drawn to 'its own distinctive discourse and methods of enquiry' (QAA, 2007: §2.3). Either way – and we proffer no judgement here - epistemological contestation is central to education research. Empiricism, either in the early-modern form of Locke, Berkeley and Hume, that we talk more of below, or in its culmination in logical positivism in the first decades of the 20th century (see Friedman, 1999: 5), can no longer enjoy an uncontested position of dominance in educational research. Enduring challenges to empiricism include the undermining of the fact/value distinction (Quine, 1951), as well as from philosophers who would question that which is 'added in' during the process of *interpreting* experience (e.g. Rorty, 1979; Sellars, et al., 2003; Davidson, 2003). Thus, whereas empiricism may have once laid claim to being a foundational approach to epistemological truths (see Phillips & Burbules, 2000: 5), today it has to take its place amongst a raft of competing epistemologies and, at the very least, requires explication as an approach to knowledge. One consequence is that educational researchers need to be informed of the potential dangers in generating empirically-grounded claims without recognising the problems originating in such things as theory-laden perception, the complexity of induction, the over- or under-determination of claims from evidence, the social nature of research, the perspectival relativity of reason, and so on (see Johnson, 2009). Such issues often originate in the humanities and in broader fields of social

science that raise complex questions concerning epistemology, ontology, axiological and the role of theory. Despite this complexity, these intricacies are poorly represented at the undergraduate level where the default assumption is too often unproblematised empiricism.

Humeanism is a philosophical approach that renders empiricism the only sure source of knowledge in which values are set adrift or subjectivised as unverifiable. Hume was clear that *all* the 'material of thinking' was drawn from sense experience and that all our ideas, or 'feeble perceptions' as he called them, were mere 'copies of our impressions of more lively ones' (Hume, 1996: 15). These were derived from 'outward' sensations, or sense experiences, that were then subjected to reasoning or 'inward sentiment' (ibid. p.15). For Hume there was no other source of knowledge, for while metaphysicians may lay claim to complex ideas of ultimate 'original principles' they did so without acknowledging their attachment to contingency and interpretation:

> But though our thought seems to possess this unbounded liberty, we shall find, upon a nearer examination, that it is really confined within very narrow limits, and that all this creative power of the mind amounts to no more than the faculty of compounding, transposing, augmenting, or diminishing the materials afforded us by the senses and experience. (ibid. p.14)

Hume's empiricism came to imply that reliable knowledge could only be gained from observable evidence where issues of replication, the prospect of verification, the use of instrumentation for accuracy and detail, and so on, were deemed integral to the process.

One of the limitations of Hume's empiricism is that it deforms by marginalising issues of value. His concern for the limits of human thinking and for the necessity of epistemological modesty was based on the assumption that 'Reason is, and ought only to be the slave of the passions, and can never pretend to any other office than to serve and obey them' (Hume, 1973: 458). Because 'reason is perfectly inert' (ibid. p.458), a mere tool or purposeless instrument, and non-cognitive passions (emotions, beliefs, values) a-rational, Hume is renowned for his declaration: 'Tis not contrary to

reason to prefer the destruction of the whole world to the scratching of my finger' (ibid. p.416). Some have argued, however, that such a view of reason is philosophically untenable precisely *because* it omits an explicit conception of what is right, just or valued. We can only give a flavour of their argument here, but philosophers like Korsgaard and Hampton would claim that Hume's view of reasoning is unreflective of its value assumptions and is 'as hip-deep in normativity as any moral theory, and therefore just as metaphysically problematic' (Hampton, 1998: 206. See also Hampton, 1996; Korsgaard, 1997. See Gibson, 2011 for a longer exegesis of Hampton and Korsgaard's arguments). For some, Humean empiricism emerges as a conservative political philosophy insofar as it arrives at a position of 'righteous contentment' with the way things are by distorting practical engagement with reality (Marcuse, 1972: 141). It is something Hume may well have acknowledged, for at the start of the *Enquiry* he concedes that his philosophical arguments bore no 'direct reference to action and society' (Hume, 1996: 9). Our point is that Hume's persistent scepticism regarding the remit of human reasoning prevented him from making logical connections between his philosophical empiricism and the values that emerged in his writings on social, political and economic matters. As a conservative, these were reducible to matters of personal passion and social custom, where scratching a finger or the world's destruction were considered epistemologically equivalent.

Two centuries later this predilection in British empiricism became even more crystallised and distorted with Ayer's *Language, Truth and Logic* ([1936] 1971). In it he argued that all propositions were either analytic, that is to say axiomatically true by virtue of their meaning as in mathematical or logical statements, or, in keeping with Hume, susceptible to the principle of verification. Verification concerning propositions about the world were either 'strong' or 'weak' but were possible *only* by means of empirical enquiry (ibid., p. 178-9). Values, in contrast, were cast adrift as 'emotive', alien to the possibility of verification and without cognitive substance. In short, facts and values were categorically distinct. The former were verifiable through enquiry, as in scientific endeavour, but 'statements of value' were simply expressive of a person's emotions or feelings and 'unverifiable' (ibid. p. 108):

When such differences of opinion arise in connexion with an ordinary

empirical proposition, one may attempt to resolve them by referring to, or actually carrying out, some relevant empirical test. But with regard to ethical statements, there is, on the 'absolutist' or 'intuitionist' theory, no relevant empirical test. We are therefore justified in saying that ... ethical statements are held to be unverifiable. (ibid., p. 109 our emphasis)

While Ayer tried to assure his reader that despite this fact-value dichotomy he was no advocate of 'relativism' or 'subjectivism' (Ayer, 1936, p. 107-9), he has been widely accused of a *reductio ad absurdum* by taking verification to a point of excess in maintaining that issues of value are meaningful *only* if verifiable (see Quine, 1953: 38 on Ayer's 'radical reductionism'). We would argue that some of the deformities that emerge from empiricist epistemology resonate within dissertation advisory textbooks today.

**Bias in dissertation textbooks**

Many of the copious, reassuring textbooks for the neophyte educational researcher in England are biased in three ways. First, the taxonomies used to describe empirical research are insufficiently problematised and draw attention away from key philosophical quandaries. Second, that while non-empirical inquiry *is* often acknowledged it is then frequently selected out or marginalised as if it were inappropriate or too problematic for undergraduates to consider. And third, because of these underpinning complexities, often the solution to selecting a research approach is to oblige the student to make their 'own personal choice'. We develop these themes in turn.

The first problem is one of defining taxonomies and of the ensuing assumption that education research is *either* empiricist *or* interpretivist in nature. We acknowledge that advice for undergraduates will need to avoid some of the ontological and epistemological complexity of surrounding debates and that this will mean that it will sometimes be preferable to emphasise sharp distinctions rather than imply subtlety, perhaps especially in the choice of terminology used to label key choices. This, however, produces its own problems. 'Qualitative' and 'quantitative' are frequently used to describe both research 'methods' and research 'approaches'; 'positivism' and

'interpretivism' are twain that should never meet; 'empiricism' is often contrasted with 'normative' or philosophical investigation, and so on. Many textbooks, however, suggest that educational research must clearly fall into one or other of these camps (see Mackenzie & Knipe, 2006). Many explain this necessity by constructing a bifurcating taxonomy. On the one hand is placed the empiricism of Locke, the 'paradigm of positivism' (Thomas, 2013: 107) and connected in some way with the sociology of Comte that employs numbers and quantifiable data:

> Strictly speaking this (empiricism) means something that has been found out from experience, from trial and error or from the evidence of your senses. 'Empiricism' is often wrongly used, though, with the intimation of experiment of some kind, so when people talk of 'empirical evidence' they usually (incorrectly) mean evidence coming from some kind of trial or experimental study. (Thomas, 2013: 22)

This is then contrasted with the 'paradigm of interpretivism' that is equated with 'constructivism' and said to emerge from Husserl's phenomenology, where the quest was more one of finding explanative words by using the qualities of 'narrative' rather than 'cause'. It is a dualistic taxonomy common in many English textbooks (and from evidence above elsewhere) that makes a clear distinction between the two realms of *empiricism* or *interpretivism*. However, from the perspective of a student one might anticipate a problem of perception about how they would then view their proposed teacher interviews (say) as *either* 'empirical' *or* 'interpretive'. Thomas acknowledges that the bifurcation 'is something of an oversimplification' and warns his reader about 'not getting trapped in a mind-set that says that we have to be either positivist or interpretivist' (ibid., 113). But, because a divide *has* been made, it must inevitably encourage the student to think in terms of opting for a polarised choice, despite the complexity about the sort of knowledge her planned interviews (in this case) may yield.

Pring has argued that the problem originates with a taxonomy that is too-rigid and is perpetuated by the language of bifurcation: 'It is as though the Cartesian dualism has returned in a more subtle form to trap the unwary' (Pring, 2005: 229. See also Pring, 2000). His argument is that while 'the scientific paradigm' minimises the possibility

that it is the social world that decides how it 'constructs' ('represents' 'values' 'preferences', 'finances') its enquiry, advocates of 'interpretivism' fight shy of truth claims while still implying much the same in declarations about their research being 'more sophisticated', 'more reasonable', 'appropriate' or making the world 'better informed':

> Just as the social construction of the physical world depends upon a real world, independent of that construction and constraining what construction is possible, so the social construction of the personal and social world presupposes the independent existence of objects (persons) which can be described in terms of consciousness, rationality, intentionality, responsibility and feeling. The very 'negotiation' of meanings can be conducted only within a framework of shared meanings, (and these) meanings (in their most general state) are not open to negotiation. That is how the world is, independent of my construing it – and how it must be if I am to enter into negotiations with others. (ibid. 255)

Unlike Thomas, who is evidently aware of but offers no solution to the young researcher of 'getting trapped' by dualism, Pring's critique is directed towards the misplaced polarisation between empirical and interpretive research itself, where the former is less able to deliver the certainties originally demanded by the Enlightenment, the basis of post-foundational critiques, and the latter feigns coyness about the veracity of its value judgements.

**The marginalisation of non-empirical inquiry**

A second problem is that this distorting polarity is related to with the way in which textbooks often recommend that a student should choose to focus their dissertation on either 'primary' or 'secondary' data (e.g. Bridges, 2011; Symonds & Gorard, 2010). This is presented as a requirement to opt for an 'empirical study' *or* a 'desk study' (University of Gloucestershire, 2014), a 'field based enquiry' *or* a 'document based enquiry' (Bath Spa University, 2012), that sequester fundamental weaknesses of conception and mirror the problem of epistemological dualism outlined above.

First: Even as a surface phenomenon such a bifurcation is descriptively problematic for a 'document based enquiry' ('library study', 'review of literature' 'theoretical study') is always *also* a requirement of the 'empirical' or 'field-based enquiry'. Moreover - and for the sake of humour - one would imagine that *all* students who opted to write an empirical study would at some point *sit at a desk*. Our point is that such surface descriptions belie deeper problems of trying to account for the generation and interpretation of primary/secondary data in educational research.

Second: The problem of 'interpreting' secondary data is clear from Walliman and Buckler's observation that 'secondary data are data that have been interpreted and recorded' (2008: 145). Presented in such a way, it would seem to provide the researcher with empirical evidence of that which has already been validated in some way. What makes this questionable is how the process of 'interpretation' becomes opaque or invisible to the secondary user, who then fills their 'literature review' with it. Advice and discussion regarding the complexity of 'interpretation' is too often muted in such textbooks in favour of a presumption of previously recorded and reified given-ness. If 'interpretation' is enmeshed within 'secondary data' we would argue that such advice to undergraduate students would need to prepare them more adequately for the fundamental and complex task of selecting and *re-interpreting*, contra *re-presenting*, this material as canonical empirical evidence, and we build on this in our final section on argument.

Third: Perhaps more importantly, there is a clear preference in much of the commercially published advice for undergraduates to gather 'primary data' while nodding at the possibility of other types of 'desk' or 'literature' study, and this underpins our thesis of tacit empiricism. O'Hara et al. (2011) state:

> For some the dissertation may be philosophical, theoretical or be largely based on archive or documentary data of various kinds. However for many students on education and related courses, the dissertation may also involve a strong practical dimension involving social experiments of primary data collection in the field. (O'Hara et al., 2011: 2-3)

Similarly, the quotation that heads this paper includes the probability that a research

project 'will be empirical', that 'you will be expected to go out into the wide world and collect data yourself rather than relying on information marshalled by others – for example in a book' (Thomas, 2013: 20-2). It counsels that 'a research project that is based solely on the literature' (ibid: 22) is a possibility, but presents it as if it were 'unusual' and thus a potential hindrance. The implication is clear, that unless a student wishes to be perceived as atypical, their study should generate 'primary data' (via interviews, observations and other empirical methods) for which copious advice is given. However, even *if* the advice is empirically accurate regarding its empirical preferences (and this is questionable - see the University of Winchester below), there is no attempt to *resist* or *counter* the assumption. While it is acknowledged that an undergraduate dissertation could draw solely 'on information marshalled by others', its feasibility is dismissed by quite literally bracketing out this possibility: '(In fact, a research project as a literature review – that is, *just* as a literature review – is sometimes acceptable, but if you want to do a research project that is based solely on the literature you should check with your tutor)' (Thomas, 2013: 22). In such a way '*just* a literature review' is marginalised and relegated as an option, and a student who may choose to approach enquiry of this sort remains unsupported (certainly in this advice) while non-empirical enquiry is misrepresented and side-lined.

Furthermore, such advice is not only *philosophically* dubious but is possibly *empirically* inaccurate. Some universities in England do indeed seem to demand empirical enquiry while others veto it. At Bath Spa, the Education Studies undergraduate dissertation handbook stipulated (until recently) that 'The ED6001 enquiry should be empirical in nature' and so appeared as *mandatory* (Bath Spa, 2012: 4). At the University of Gloucestershire, as at Göttingen and Waikato, empiricism appears a *possibility* inasmuch as students are required to opt for an 'empirical investigation' ('where there is an emphasis on collection, interpretation, analysis and evaluation of primary data during the active learning experience') *or* a 'desk study' ('where there is an emphasis on a wide range of, and careful synthesis and critical evaluation of the source material') (Gloucestershire, 2015). However, in Education Studies at the University of Winchester empirical enquiry is effectively *proscribed*:

Education Studies dissertations are not normally empirical because such work

does not easily enable students to achieve the Level 3 Learning Outcomes for Education Studies. If you are considering empirical research it is essential that you inform a tutor at the very beginning of the proposal process. If, after critical discussion you are allowed to design some small-scale empirical research, then you must also undertake additional research training and ethical scrutiny before embarking on any data collection. Failure to do this will result in a failed dissertation. (University of Winchester, 2015)

The marginalisation of that which is *not* empirical (grouped under categories like 'the extended literature review', 'documentary data', the 'philosophical') is evident also in the selection and recommendation of preferred types of research methods. Sharp, for example, suggests a 'taxonomy' of 'research paradigms' that he refers to variously as 'kinds' or 'types' (Sharp, 2010: 45-56. See also Burton et al. 2008; Walliman & Buckler, 2008: 150):

- surveys
- experimental
- case studies
- action research
- documentary research
- ethnographic
- phenomenological
- grounded theory

He suggests: 'The likelihood is that your work, either by design or by accident, will naturally align itself with one of the first of the five' (Sharp, 2010: 45). Leaving aside the crude account of the 'accidental' or 'natural' description of research design, that provides further evidence of the empiricist's scotoma, along with the unexplained demonization of ethnography, phenomenology study and grounded theory that are positioned hierarchically beneath the preeminent five, the fifth validated possibility is 'documentary research'. However, in subsequent discussion of the various five 'likely' possibilities, documentary research goes unheeded. No information or advice is given to describes the procedures and possibilities of carrying out such an activity nor, indeed, whether policy-critique through published documentation is implied by the

term. This contrasts quite explicitly with the first four 'types' that are given lengthy synopses and practical advice. In other words, 'documentary research' (or 'secondary data' in Walliman and Buckler's terms) is mentioned as an option, but then overlooked and effectively proscribed. In short, it is an example of taxonomic selection that marginalises that which is deemed 'uncommon' while advancing empirical options uncritically, and, in so doing, avoids questioning *in what way* 'documentary research' might itself be considered empirical.

Similarly, non-empirical research is selected out and marginalised through 'example material' used to illustrate what practical choices a student will need to make in the formulation of their research proposal. For example:

> Let's imagine that you are interested in hospital education services for children who are chronically sick. You could pose questions such as the following:
> 1. How many children are educated in hospitals in England, how have trends changed in post-war years and what are the possible reasons for this?
> 2. What is the experience of children educated in hospital today?
> 3. What are attitudes to hospital-educated children when they return to school?
> 4. If a rest period is introduced into the hospital school day at mid-morning, what will be the consequence on children's lunchtime behaviour?
>
> (Thomas, 2013: 125. See also Walliman & Buckler on the possible options of 'research into children's playground in cities', 2008: 165)

Question 1, says Thomas, 'is unequivocally concerned with description and descriptive *statistics*'. Question 2 'leads you to examine children's experience' and methods of '*observing* the experience of children' or '*asking* the children or parents themselves'. Question 3 leads to a consideration of attitudes that could be researched by '*interviewing* individual children' or 'by giving a *questionnaire* to children'. Question 4 'involves some kind of assessment of consequence: What happens when?' And thus, 'particular kinds of question lead to particular kinds of study' (Thomas, 2013: 93 *our emphasis*). But the earlier suggestion that 'just a literature review' is feasible is in effect ignored, that one might choose, for example, to make judgements

about whether children *ought* to be educated in hospitals at all or what is implied by education in such contexts. Our concern is that if an enduring problem in empirical research is accounting adequately for axiological issues, then what emerges is the likelihood that the empirical dissertation is currently fabricated to duplicate this inadequacy, and, by tacit and biased  selection, education research is reduced (although some might think elevated) to a social science. Levin (2005: 51), for example, talks consistently of education as if were a branch of 'social science' and Thomas includes eighteen references to the term (Thomas, 2013) but refers not once to the possibility that it may be also part of the humanities.

**The subjectivising of choice**

The third issue is that one way out of this complex weave is to individualise a student's selection of research method as if it were a consumptive item. Greetham, for example, describes the kind of student attracted to the 'empirical approach' and in so doing casts it as a personal preference or a psychological disposition:

> Empirical Approach: ... *you may be the type of person who likes to meet and talk to people* and would be quite happy persuading them to be part of the research project by completing a questionnaire or agreeing to be interviewed... *You will have to ask where your abilities lie*, so that you can ensure your project draws mainly on one or a blend of abilities in which you're strongest. Use the following checklist of questions to get the blend right. Give yourself a score out of ten for each ability. (Greetham , 2009: 35 & 37 *our emphasis*)

Having explained the simplistic bifurcation between positivism and interpretivism that we have criticised above, Walliman and Buckler similarly suggest:

> You will need to think about this. *Your own personal philosophy* about how we can see and understand the world around us will be a fundamental factor in your attitude to your investigations. (Walliman & Buckler, 2008: 164-5 *our emphasis*)

The philosophical quandaries mentioned in our introduction, about the tough

ongoing debates about entrenched research dogmas, are here reduced to 'personal' choices and 'attitudinal' issues that students must face, but who remain quite possibly unaware that such a selection embeds deep epistemological and ontological assumptions. In the appeal to the personal there is sequestered a passive model of 'personality' that denies the interested nature of knowledge production, such that issues associated with political and moral judgements about the world are marginalised. (Below we develop this stance via the reduction of ethics to a technical requirement for 'effective study', rather than an explicit quest for 'transformative paradigms').

To sum up so far: we have questioned the nature of dualism in educational research; the marginalisation of non-empirical enquiry through the assumption of a questionable dualistic taxonomy; the preference for primary data and exemplary materials that distort the meaning of interpretation; the perception and presentation of education as if were (only) a social science; and the appeal to personal choice rather than epistemological validation. We have argued that these are some of the ways in which tacit empiricism is advanced in dissertation textbooks and have suggested that much of this legacy can be attributable to British empiricism.

**Instrumentalism, ethics and value**

British empiricism lingers in advice given to students today in the way it separates the *instrument* of reasoning from the *purpose* for reasoning. This mirrors, we suggest, Hume's portrayal of reason as 'useful but blind' (McGuigan, 2006: 171). Because reason is here conceived a tool that discovers the best action to achieve a subject's passions, underpinned by a profound scepticism towards the possibility of reason deliberating upon those purposes and values, some have argued that '"Humean" now serves as a virtual synonym for "instrumentalist"' (Setiya, 2004: 365. See also Audi, 2002: 236; Horkheimer, 2004: 3). This is clearly redolent of dissertation advice that would align empiricism with the dispersal of values and ethical judgements to individual students who are then required to consider 'their own personal philosophy' or 'subjective choices' about their research preferences.

This licence, however, is clearly *not* granted to students when they engage in the

processes of primary data collection during empirical research. Here dissertation advice on appropriate *ethical* behaviour is bountiful and robust. Walliman and Buckler (2008), for example, devote a chapter to *What's All This About Ethics?*

> Ethics is about moral principles and rules of conduct... they focus on your behaviour towards other people and their work. It is therefore important to avoid unfairly usurping other people's work and knowledge, invading their privacy or hurting their feelings. (ibid. p.30)

They explain how a research proposal will often require the student to complete their institution's 'ethics form' (ibid. p.32) that helps focus attention on questions of consent and permission, the risk to participants, and dealing with issues of a 'confidential and sensitive data' (ibid. p.32). Burton et al. (2008) likewise suggest:

> Teachers and researcher share one common responsibility, namely 'duty of care' in relations to all those participating in the research process. Behaving in an ethical manner will also increase the chances of maintaining positive relationships between researcher and participants for the duration of the study. (p.50)

Putting aside the assumption that research will involve 'participants' - that supports our argument of the clandestine preference for the collection of primary data and empiricism - 'ethics' here concerns merely the behaviour of people in interpersonal interaction. Similarly, given the empirical preferences of Thomas, it is unsurprising that he devotes a lengthy chapter to 'Project Management, ethics and getting clearance' (Thomas, 2013: 28-56), that also offers advice to students when 'gaining consent', seeking 'access' to participants and completing the requisite ethics procedure form. He concludes: 'However, ethics *will not be a matter of concern* if you are looking at matters that do not involve individual people - such as policy issues of data that is in the public domain' (ibid. p.41 our emphasis).

We believe the advice is ill-conceived. The idea that ethical considerations are of 'no concern' in judgements concerning 'policy issues' seems to us profoundly misguided and illustrative of instrumentalism in that it reduces ethical concerns to issues of

politeness and appropriateness during processes of personal interaction. We do not deny the importance of care in dealing with others when carrying out empirical research. However, we do question the assumption that ethics in educational research is *reducible* to interpersonal issues and notions of confidentiality and care. We have attributed this to a legacy of British empiricism that casts values as emotive, dependent upon individual passion and deemed un-guidable by reason and argument. While for Hume, as we have seen, 'Tis not contrary to reason to prefer the destruction of the whole world to the scratching of my finger' (Hume, 1976: 416), for Marcuse, as a Jew who escape the holocaust in a terse denial of English empiricism, declared that 'the real empirical world is still that of the gas chambers and concentration camps' (Marcuse, 1972: 147). His point is that empiricism deals inadequately with the broader political and social backdrop to value judgements, or appears relaxed or incapable of dealing with issue of what *ought to be*.

What ought to be is ultimately unavoidable in educational enquiry:

> The importance of finding answers to some empirical questions in education is clear. Empiricism, however, involves the idea that our only access to understanding is through the gathering of evidence or data. In fact, what is to count as evidence or data already presupposes non-empirical considerations of some kind, and there are a great many questions—including the most important questions for education—that cannot be settled in this way: for example, epistemological, ethical and metaphysical questions. It is a characteristic of questions of this kind that they are not amenable to definitive resolution. Yet, in enquiry into education they are unavoidable. (Standish, 2007, p.161)

Take, suggests Standish, a student wishing to focus their dissertation on the subject of 'educational achievement and poverty'. They will, quite probably, need to concern themselves with 'facts', like data on free school meals, that will need rigorous 'interpretation'. They may also have come to the decision to interview, for example, a Headteacher in order to understand the perspective of a school manager, and so will need to plan appropriately for the ethical challenges that this will involve. However, says Standish, sooner or later 'someone somewhere will need to face up to the

question of what *ought* to be done', to look at the broader ethical considerations that become 'at some point unavoidable' (Standish, 2010: 8, 7). While reductionists would advocate that human reason was incapable of coming to convincing judgements about such matters, others would claim that reasoned argument about ethical propositions is an essential, connected and yet a rarely developed or explicitly taught preparation for undergraduate dissertation writing. We have argued that this is implicit in the reduction of ethics to an instrument of empirical research, but it raises much deeper issues concerning the *purpose* of writing a dissertation that we have no space here to develop.

Here the ubiquitous *Research Ethics Approval Form* that dissertation students are often required to negotiate and sign is of relevance. While assiduous in its quest to assure that such things as interviewees' anonymity is preserved, we would argue that it is a juridified instrument concerned merely with the technical-politeness aspects of interviewing or the preservation of delicate information *post hoc*. There is no comparative 'approval form' to indicate to a tutor whether a student realises what normative or ideological platform their dissertation is set upon, nor what ethical or political issues the study seeks to identify or attempts to elucidate, nor, indeed, whether there is the will to declare how it would seek to make the world a better place. These broader purposes are *also* of ethical concern. (See, for example, Fairclough who advocates that the research method called Critical Discourse Analysis should originate from the identification of 'a social wrong': Fairclough, 2009: 167. Similarly, but from very a different tradition, see Koopman, 2009, who argues for educational inquiry as a 'meliorist transition').

**Teaching argumentation as a prelude to research methods**

We arrive at a position in which, while a preference for tea or coffee may well be deemed a personal decision, the idea that weighty questions of value that underpin education are ultimately subjective is problematic. To use Standish's example above, concerning whether educational provision *ought* to compensate for poverty, the only way of answering it is to elevate it to a matter of public debate so it becomes part of a discourse where values and judgements are open to contestation and, in principle, refutable. A century ago Mill had argued:

There is the greatest difference between presuming an opinion to be true, because, with every opportunity for contesting it, it has not been refuted, and assuming its truth for the purpose of not permitting its refutation. Complete liberty of contradicting and disproving our opinion is the very condition which justifies us in assuming its truth for purposes of action: and on no other terms can a being with human faculties have any rational assurance of being right. (Mill, 1969, p. 145)

There is, in other words, no test for the adequacy of a claim to truth other than the force of better public argument: 'The steady habit of correcting and completing his own opinion by collating it with those of others, so far from causing doubt and hesitation in carrying it into practice, is the only stable foundation for a just reliance on it' (ibid. p. 146). While Mill deals inadequately with the social power of contenders (see Gibson, 2009), the point that judgement in such matters is not mere whimsy or personal but part of the social and political fabric is key, and underpins Pring's accusation of unfounded dualism. Moreover, the Quality Assurance Agency's guidelines for Education Studies in England clearly place these philosophical assumptions about the need for argumentation at the heart of the undergraduate programme that climaxes in the final-year dissertation:

2.4 Graduates are able to participate in and contest changing discourses exemplified by reference to *debate about values*, personal and social engagement, and how these relate to communities and societies. Students have opportunities to develop their critical capabilities through the selection, analysis and synthesis of relevant perspectives, and to be *able to justify different positions* on educational matters.

4.1 All programmes in education studies will [...]

encourage students to engage with *fundamental questions concerning the aims and values of education* and its relationship to society [...]

develop in students the ability to construct and sustain a reasoned argument;

5.7 [...] *construct and communicate oral and written arguments.*

7.7 On graduating with an honours degree in education studies, *students*

*should be able to organise and articulate opinions and arguments* in speech and writing using relevant specialist vocabulary.

(QAA, 2007 *our emphasis*)

How Education Studies undergraduates might acquire the attributes of argumentation is less clear, but we proffer suggestions. Burke conceptualises its role within academic communities by means of a conversational metaphor, likening it to a crowded room where a dialogue between experts has been going on for some time before the advent of new arrivals (see McMillen & Hill, 2005, p. 6-7). As doctoral students enter they begin to make valid contributions to specific conversations; masters' students initiate plausible but hesitant offerings; and undergraduates, to a greater or lesser degree, report on conversations they have already heard. In short, undergraduates need to know where they are in terms of the broader web of existing arguments before they can start to question received wisdom. Much of this growing awareness of how arguments work and of their content within specific academic fields is learnt inductively by students entering exchanges in tutorials, seminars and assignments throughout the period of their degree. Arguably, it could also be taught deductively through explicit attention to formal logic and syllogistic reasoning, although we are unaware of its inclusion in any Educational Studies programme in England. The limitation of the inductive approach is that it too readily becomes subordinate to the subject matter that forms the focus of the teaching or assessment, while deductive argument is not only rare but is easily dismissed as sterile or irrelevant (see Nussbaum, 2011).

For these reasons we would suggest that undergraduates should be taught about argumentation explicitly before they begin their research. Given its philosophical prescience within the subject benchmarks for Education Studies, and the limitations associated with inductive or incidental approaches to achieving these ends, we would suggest that students need an explicit and scaffolded introduction to the processes and structure of argument. Many models exist to which we cannot do justice here (see Andrews, 2010), but from what has been said previously we favour not the form of argument that would attend merely to syllogistic reasoning and the rigours of premise and logic, but what Walton (2007), Nussbaum (2011) and others describe as

argument as a process that emerges from dialectical engagement. Toulmin's model of argument (Toulmin, 1958/2008), originally devised as an attack on the limitations of formal logic where values and truth claims were said to be sequestered beneath seemingly valid syllogisms, is one we have used successfully with students in our own institution. The model posits six aspects. Its core structure consists of a *claim*, with *grounds* and *warrants* that back it, while around the periphery are staged concerns that involve the possibility of *rebuttal*, *scoping* and *backing*. For undergraduates we would suggest that the claim they make in their title and introduction should be read as a claim for understanding. Recalling the conversational metaphor, a successful claim would thus report an on-going situation represented in research literature with greater or lesser sophistication expressed through a claimed *scope*. The *grounds* ('facts' 'data' 'empirical' evidences) that they may draw upon would be judged for their credibility according to their place in the academic discourse and method of their generation.

This would then open up what is being *claimed* as credible evidence in an argument. Some grounds may well be generated empirically through the usual methods, but others will be arrived at by way of axiological inquiry. Hart, for example, suggests that 'claims of fact' are 'statements that can be proven to be true or false' (Hart, 2002, p. 90) and are thus reminiscent of Hume and Ayer's principle of verification. Equally, a student may be persuaded to make a claim of *value* (a 'judgement about the worth of something'), a claim of *policy* (a 'normative statement about what ought to be done'), or a claim of *interpretation* ('about proposals on how some data or evidence are to be understood') (ibid., p. 90). Credible arguments would link *what* is being claimed with the facts of the matter, and this is the role of the *warrant*. Toulmin's model thus not only makes it possible to make useful distinctions between the qualities of arguments but, by implication, *between different assessment grades* that might be supported by the sophistication of a *scoped claim*, the quality of the *grounds* and how, in the warrant, there is an incisive *rebuttal* of alternative interpretations of the evidence. On the key issue of rebuttal, or in Mill's terms of knowing from whence your enemy may come, Kaufer and Geisler's model of argument is valuable in getting students to identity their claim, or a series of cumulative and directional claims, that will form what they call the arguer's 'main path'. 'Faulty claims' are those that fall outside their perspective, but which must be known and dealt with, while 'return paths' are those

where the student will summarise 'what lessons they will take with them from the *rejected* position to incorporate into their own' and so 'help readers see the limitations in faulty-path claims' and return them from these paths 'putting them securely back on course' (Kaufer & Geisler, 1991, p. 117-8).

## Conclusion

We have argued not against empirical methods in the undergraduate dissertation but for its pre-eminence to be questioned, its tendency towards epistemological empiricism, and for its relocation within a broader framework that would enhance explicit attention to values that avoided reductive social scientism. We have argued that students need to be made aware of the tendency in empiricism to generate reductionist accounts and set them over and above normative enquiry, a procedure in which ethical considerations become reducible to mere technical-instrumental concerns. We have also suggested that this would require a broader framework associated with models of argument that would enable a writer to move beyond the fact-value dichotomy and focus on a claim that may be normative in nature. While we have recommended Toulmin's model, for it provides clarity for understanding the genre of argumentation, its limitation is that it avoids epistemology and thus needs allying with a critical or pragmatic understanding of the central importance of a claim to truth as a commitment to future action. We have therefore suggested that argument should become used as a purposeful instrument, employed for the achievement of wider social goods and that argumentation in Education Studies programmes should explicitly advocate meliorism as an end-in-view, be it immediate or deferred (see Koopman, 2009). Following from this, we have implied that understanding the structure and purpose of argument should exist prior to any taught *method* of educational enquiry that would then become subsidiary and selected more purposely depending upon the claim a student was choosing to make.

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