

Becoming an undergraduate researcher in English Studies': the troublesome epistemological and ontological journey of second year students on module *Dissertation Methods and Approaches* at Coventry University (UK)

Marina Orsini-Jones, English, Coventry University, UK

The trouble with English is that there are no answers. There are only evaluations and critical judgments backed up with evidence and strong argument. The ability to make a case through reasons, logical argument, and the ability to marshal evidence and to read widely in supporting literature is crucial. (English Professor, quoted in Donald, 2002:1)
I don't want to argue
(English Degree student, dissertation tutorial, quoted in Orsini-Jones, 2010:253-254)

The above quotations illustrate the type of discrepancy that can occur when dealing with subject-specific troublesome knowledge. The student's words highlight that engaging in the discourse of research in English Studies can present problematic issues that are both of an epistemological nature - incorrect link to the semantic field of 'arguing' in a daily context, rather than in its academic one - and of an ontological one - resistance to engage with change, with new concepts, stressed by the lapidary negative statement.

These tensions were encountered when implementing a curricular intervention aimed at helping students with 'becoming researchers'. In keeping with recommendations on the 'research-teaching' nexus in tertiary educational literature (e.g. Healey, 2005; Wisker 2009) a second year module was designed at Coventry University - *Dissertation Methods and Approaches* - that aimed at equipping students with the 'armoury', to put it in Perkins' words, of research skills necessary to complete their final year dissertation independently.

This study focuses on the outcomes of the evaluation of the first three years of the implementation of the module reporting on the second-year undergraduate research students' journey in academic years 2007-2008, 2008-2009 and 2009-2010 (a total of 209 students). The curricular evaluation is based upon data that is both qualitative (e.g. semi-structured interviews, analysis of students' research action plans and projects and module feedback) and quantitative (e.g. students' marks and pass rates).

There have already been studies aimed at identifying troublesome concepts related to 'becoming a researcher' at postgraduate level (e.g. Kiley & Wisker 2006; Wisker, Kiley & Aiston 2006; Trafford, 2008) and taxonomies of undergraduate research skills have been designed following the identification of troublesome research knowledge (e.g. Willison & Remenda, 2008; Willison & O'Regan, 2006). The distinctive features of this work are that it tries to identify threshold concepts at undergraduate level that relate to 'being an undergraduate researcher in English Studies'.

Many students were finding research planning 'troublesome' for both epistemological reasons (e.g. alien subject-related terminology and concepts) and ontological ones (e.g. fear of the solitary aspects of the research journey paired with a certain lack of confidence and unease about 'thinking like a researcher'). Students also found the peer assessment of their individual presentation of the draft research plan daunting. Part of the problem was due to resistance to engage in the 'rules of academic engagement'.

The tentative hypothesis formulated is that *analysing text* is the subject specific threshold concept that is emerging. However its understanding requires the grasping of generic concepts too (or 'thinking processes': Donald, 2002:284) that appear to be fundamental across all disciplines: i.e. selection, representation and synthesis.

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