

**PLACING PSYCHOLOGY: A CRITICAL EXPLORATION OF RESEARCH METHODOLOGY
CURRICULA IN THE SOCIAL SCIENCES**

by

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ABSTRACT

Current literature on teaching research methodology in the social sciences points to the changing nature of our world in terms of its complexity and diversity and how this affects the way in which we search for answers to related problems. New ways of approaching research problems that relate to the demands of practice need to be explored, which is in contrast with the 'either-or' world we coach our students for, that is to be either qualitative or quantitative researchers. Also, educational policy reform in South Africa has sought to address the issue of real-life relevance of curricula, and specifically, reformists have turned to proponents of Mode 2 knowledge to inform initiatives for change. This means that tertiary institutions will have to adjust the way in which they deliver education to future generations of South Africans. The aim of this study was to map the content of undergraduate research methodology courses at South African universities and to explore the beliefs held by some academics that inform the way in which these courses are constructed. Critical theory allowed the researcher to search for unequal distributions of power and is defined in this study in its oppressive role, that is, its productive ability to bring about inequalities and human suffering. As some critical social theorists embrace specific, and at times divergent, methodologies, a pluralistic approach, based on Habermas' idea of the relative legitimacy of all theories and methods, was used to. The study revealed that there is a heavy reliance on the methods that are traditionally linked to the positivist paradigm. It also revealed that alternate paradigms focusing on philosophies that dictate the use of qualitative methods are increasingly included in methodology courses and juxtaposed against or used to supplement positivist approaches to research. As academics may struggle to let go of traditional paradigms, they may find a compromise in presenting both. By acknowledging the limitations of past curricula, academics actively seek to change these discourses, but by doing so they may be instituting new hegemonies. One of the findings of this study is thus that distinctions about the content of research courses are being made on a methodological level instead of also acknowledging the epistemological and pragmatic grounds for making choices. Moreover, it is argued that the consensus achieved regarding the curriculum for a research course is the result of conversations held between academics in an ideal speech situation that excludes other significant voices. The lecturers' dominance over the students is maintained in the dialogical activities that they undertake with colleagues that confirm their position of authority in academic society. Students recognise this authority and consent to it. It is proposed that the way forward for curriculum construction lies in establishing academic communities of practice that should be viewed as the type of university that Habermas would advocate: where academics need to share power and be open to the challenges that they face such as negotiating what is accepted as knowledge.

KEY TERMS

Research methodology, critical theory, Habermas, praxis, under-graduate teaching, philosophy of science, academic community, globalisation in education, tertiary education policy, outcomes-based education, South African Qualifications Authority, National Qualifications Framework

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Current literature on teaching research methodology in the social sciences points to the changing nature of our world in terms of its complexity and diversity and how this affects the way in which we search for answers to related problems. Also, educational policy reform in South African has sought to address the issue of real-life relevance of curricula, and specifically, reformists have turned to proponents of Mode 2 knowledge to inform initiatives for change. The aim of this study was to map the content of undergraduate research methodology courses at South African universities and to explore the beliefs held by some academics that inform the way in which these courses are constructed. Critical theory allowed the researcher to search for unequal distributions of power and is defined in this study in its oppressive role. The study revealed that there is a heavy reliance on the methods that are traditionally linked to positivism. It also revealed that alternate paradigms focusing on philosophies that dictate the use of qualitative methods are increasingly included in methodology courses and juxtaposed against or used to supplement quantitative methods. As academics may struggle to let go of traditional paradigms, they may find a compromise in presenting both. By acknowledging the limitations of past curricula, academics actively seek to change these discourses, but by doing so they may be instituting new hegemonies. One of the findings of this study is thus that distinctions about the content of research courses are being made on a methodological level instead of also acknowledging the epistemological and pragmatic grounds for making choices. Moreover, it is argued that the consensus achieved regarding the curriculum for a research course is the result of conversations held between academics in an ideal speech situation that excludes other significant voices. It is proposed that the way forward for curriculum construction lies in establishing academic communities of practice that should be viewed as the type of university that Habermas would advocate: where academics need to share power and be open to the challenges that they face such as negotiating what is accepted as knowledge.

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