The Use of Drawings to Access Lecturers Conceptions’ of Research: An Added Value?

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1. Theoretical framework

In the last decade there has been a growing debate about the relation between teaching and research in university and non-university higher education (Brew, 2006; Elen & Verburgh, 2008; Griffiths, 2004). For non-university higher education, where research is relatively new in comparison to the traditional universities, research might be an even more complex and sensitive issue in comparison to universities (Kyvik & Skodvin, 2003). To fully understand the relationship between teaching and research it is necessary to learn how lecturers perceive research (Brew, 2001; Robertson & Bond, 2001; Rowland, 1996).

This study builds on research about academics’ conceptions of research (e.g. Akerlind, 2008; Brew, 2001; Prosser, Martin, Trigwell, Ramsden, & Middleton, 2008; Visser-Wijnveen, 2009). Brew (2001) interviewed senior university researchers and identified four qualitatively different ways in which research is understood (trading, journey, layer, domino), according to (a) whether they have an external product or an internal process orientation and (b) the extent to which the researchers’ personal concerns influence their research conceptions. Visser-Wijnveen (2009) interviewed by means of metaphors academics about their research conceptions. She distinguished five categories of research (disclosing patterns, searching for patterns, explaining patterns, pointing out patterns, creating patterns) similar to the categories identified by Brew (2001).

A major limitation of these studies is that they are fully based on verbal expressions by means of semi-structured interviews or with the use of metaphors. This direct approach presupposes that lecturers are able to communicate their research conceptions in meaningful spoken ways. Nevertheless lecturers do not always have the language to describe their conceptions or may not be willing to describe them (Visser-Wijnveen, 2009). Furthermore, leading questions or metaphors might prompt respondents into a specific direction (Briell, Elen, Depaepe, & Clarebout, in press).

Due to these restrictions and as a novel alternative to purely discourse based research approaches we explored the added value of using drawings to elicit lecturers’ conceptions of research. Briell et al. argue that drawings may give respondents the opportunity to express their beliefs in less confined and perhaps more creative ways. As far as we know, drawings are only used in a few studies to elicit conceptions of knowledge with children (Alexander &
Dochy, 1995; Maggione, Riconscente & Alexander, 2006) and students (Briell et al., in press).

The leading research question is: provides the use of drawings an added value to the research about conceptions of research? The subquestions are: (1) are lecturers able to express their conceptions of research by means of drawings, and (2) are drawings a productive entry to start a meaningful conversation with lecturers about their conceptions of research.

2. Method

Data were collected by focus group interviews with a drawing activity as opening task. Lecturers were asked to draw individually “a research activity” during five minutes, and to explain their drawings to the other participants once it was finished. These explanations allowed the moderator to ask more about the research conceptions, details of the drawings, etc. and act as a triangulation for the interpretation of the drawings. In the next phase categories of drawings were identified and labeled. Then participants were asked to rank the categories according to the importance for their students’ careers. The focus group concluded with a discussion about the lecturers’ approaches to integrate research in the curriculum.

49 Lecturers from five different non-university higher education programmes participated. Each focus group consisted of four to eight lecturers from the same programme.

The data analysis for this paper consisted of three phases. First, two researchers individually ordered the drawings according to similarities. These groups were compared and a common categorization system was developed. Secondly, the drawings were re-coded referencing participants’ explanations. This coding was then compared to the consensus previously achieved. In a third step, these categories were compared with the existing literature on research conceptions.

3. Results and conclusions

First analyses reveal that drawings provide insight into how lecturers conceive research. Three categories of research representations were identified. The first category labelled research-steps are drawings of research as something that consists of different steps to undertake. This category consists of two subcategories: (a) drawings identifying one or more separate steps without conveying their relatedness and (b) drawings identifying the interconnectedness of multiple research steps. The second category is called condition, because the drawings are referring to conditions for doing good research, which are mostly characteristics of the researcher. A final group of drawings represent research as something important for the studied reality. This importance category addresses the importance of research especially to
improve, change or understand reality in a more appropriate way. We can conclude, as Briell et al. (in press) mentioned, that the use of drawings has proved to be an alternative, creative route of expression for participants.

Moreover the drawing technique resulted in creative drawings reflecting the personal research conceptions, with respect to their complexity. Due to this, it was easier to comprehend the research conceptions, to discuss them and to grasp the underlying assumptions or beliefs.

As Kyvik and Skodvin (2003) emphasize, research is a sensitive topic for non-university higher education. The use of drawings increases the accessibility of this topic. Lecturers indicated that they did not feel pressured when discussing their own research conceptions through their drawings. Their drawings act as an intermediary artefact, since lecturers do not speak directly about this topic but work through a material go-between. Drawings proved to be a good way to start discussing research conceptions with lecturers of non-university higher education.

4. Scientific significance of the study

The use of drawings has proven a useful way of investigating lecturers’ conceptions of research. Comparing to the categories of Brew (2001) and Visser-Wijnveen (2009), the drawing technique generated qualitatively different ways in which research is understood, elucidating different aspects of research: research steps, conditions for doing good research, and the importance of research.

In further analyses comparisons will be made between the retrieved research categories, the perceived importance of these categories for students’ careers and the integration of research into the curriculum.

References


