

Fieldwork Projects in the Sociology of Religion and the Development of Employability Skills: Findings from a Small-Scale Study

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Background

Readers of *The Times Higher Education Supplement* may have noticed in the 23rd May 2003 issue a supplement published by 'Palgrave' about learning skills in higher education. Among the articles in the supplement there was one about employability skills and how they might be measured and another about fieldwork projects (though mainly in disciplines such as geography, town planning, and language courses). These respective articles on fieldwork and employability skills reflect two of my current teaching interests and they underpinned a new course that I developed for undergraduate

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students in Religious and Theological Studies at Cardiff University called 'The Social Context of Religion' during the academic year 2002/3. This article explores how fieldwork projects in the sociology of religion might help students to be more 'employable' at the end of their studies. It also aims to make the case for the sociology of religion as a particularly suitable area of the Theology and Religious Studies curriculum in which to integrate employability skills through fieldwork. This is because fieldwork gives students an opportunity to immerse themselves in their subject in the 'real' world outside academe and helps students' 'experiential, cognitive, reflective and affective learning—the transferable skills so valued by employers' ('Rocks or a hard place', Pat Leon and Rob Butler, *THES*, 23rd May 2003).

According to one of the contributors to the Palgrave supplement article on employability, the word 'employability' might mean several things, such as rendering graduates 'fit for purpose' in the world of work, or the ability of individuals to present themselves effectively to potential employers. I understand 'employability' in much the same holistic way as the Centre for Employability at the University of Central Lancashire as: 'a set of skills, knowledge and personal attributes that makes an individual more likely to secure and be successful in their chosen occupation(s) to the benefit of themselves, the workforce, the community and the economy' (cited by Val Butcher, in 'Style over substance?', *THES*, 23rd May 2003). In addition, I place emphasis on the ability of students to critically reflect upon and articulate what they have learned and achieved.

As part of their assessment for my new course at Cardiff, students were required to undertake a fieldwork project as a way of developing skills of conducting and presenting social scientific research with a view to the acquisition of skills that might be useful to them in future employment settings. Twenty-two students chose to take the course and enrolment was deliberately 'capped' to ensure that students had the tutor support that they needed for their fieldwork projects. The kind of projects undertaken included some of the following:

- A case study of a Muslim school in Cardiff
- Wicca in Wales: an in-depth interview with one Wiccan practitioner

- Religions professionals today: participant observation at a Christian monastery in Oxfordshire
- The relationship between Welsh language, religion and identity: a questionnaire-based study at Dewi Sant Church, Cardiff
- A comparison of the Eucharist in Roman Catholic and Evangelical churches: an observation of ritual
- Responses to the death of Diana, Princess of Wales through interviews
- Women priests in the Church of England: a comparison between two women at the start and end of their careers based on in-depth interviews
- Spirituality and practice of yoga: a questionnaire survey among Cardiff University student

The students were prepared for fieldwork over the course of 6 lectures, covering methodology, data analysis, resources and contacts, and, crucially, ethical issues. A guiding principle for the fieldwork projects was the British Sociological Association's 'Statement of Ethical Practice' which covers issues of professional integrity, and relationships and responsibilities towards research participants.

The module handbook specified the employability skills that students could expect to develop during the course, and included the following:

- An ability to produce work for dissemination in a variety of forms, including written and oral
- Facility in presenting work using audio-visual resources
- An ability to present work to peers both formally and informally
- The capacity to exercise judgement on a topic and to substantiate your arguments
- Self-critical awareness of personal conduct in relation to external organisations and individuals

At the end of the project students had to write a report of 3,000 words and make a 10-minute seminar presentation to their peers, with each presentation being chaired by a fellow student. Amongst other things,

reports and presentations had to address two key issues, and students were asked to reflect upon:

- *Your role as a researcher*: what worked, what didn't, what you would do/not do next time if the study was repeated, how it 'felt' to do the research, how you overcame any problems, recognising any power dynamic etc.
- *What you have derived from the study as a student/researcher* e.g. more confidence in approaching people, better skills of observation and/or listening etc.

It is near impossible to make a reliable, objective measurement of attributes that students might acquire as a result of fieldwork projects. They could not be given marks for becoming more confident, self-reliant, or better at networking or time-management. However, marks were awarded on the basis of the degree to which they were able to self-critically reflect upon and articulate their own self-development as learners.

With support from the PRS-LTSN, I drafted a short questionnaire that required students to consider how their empirical research might have specifically contributed to the development of their employability skills. This exercise was designed to compare their perceptions with my own as the course tutor, and to raise their awareness of the skills they had acquired. The questionnaire took the form of open-ended questions, and took no more than 15 minutes to complete. Two students 'piloted' the questionnaire prior to its use with the whole class. The questions revolved around the following themes, and this paper examines each in turn:

- The most and least enjoyable aspects of the fieldwork project
- Skills acquired through setting up, conducting, analysing and presenting data (especially communication skills)
- Personal development as a result of the fieldwork (e.g. self-confidence)
- How new skills might be used in future employment

The results were analysed using the data analysis programme 'Idealist', a programme that allows for the rapid evaluation of open-ended questionnaire data.

Findings

The more and less enjoyable aspects of fieldwork projects

Many students clearly enjoyed the experiential aspects of learning from the people they met. Preconceived ideas were shattered and unexpected findings emerged from some projects. For those students who arrived at unforeseen conclusions, I was genuinely surprised to find that this was, for them, the most enjoyable aspect of their fieldwork project! They genuinely appreciated the opportunity to see social life from a different viewpoint. For other students, the fieldwork project gave them a legitimate reason to investigate areas of social life that are often sensitive, closed or hard to penetrate. The 3 days spent at a Benedictine monastery in Oxfordshire was a life-transforming experience for one student, and it was the task of conducting a fieldwork project that gave her the pretext to approach the monastery. Another student used family connections to do a small-scale investigation of how the Thames Valley Police Force has tried to recruit more Muslim officers into the service. This project involved the sensitive gathering of data from Muslim and non-Muslim, individual and organisational, perspectives. Some less able students initially found the prospect of doing a fieldwork project difficult. For them therefore, the enjoyment of the exercise was in facing an unfamiliar challenge and seeing successful results as an outcome.

Many students used a limited number of interviews as their main source of data, and departmental recording equipment was made available to students in order that they could use the recording as an *aide memoire* after the interview. It is either a reflection of their enthusiasm, or their reluctance to take advice, that many decided to do full transcriptions of these interviews, although this was expressly not requested. Not surprisingly, some students regretted undertaking this time-consuming task, and it became a less enjoyable aspect of their project. Many students reported that while they derived satisfaction and enjoyment from the actual *doing* of their fieldwork, they found the

writing-up stage difficult. Their particular frustration revolved around searching databases, to identify other similar research and then relating their findings to these studies. I am still trying to find ways of enthusing students in relation to databases (beyond the library catalogue), and research journals in particular. Many fail to see these resources as relevant to them. Even in an electronic age, the idea that picking a book off the library shelf is sufficient as a basis for research is still hard to dislodge.

The students did however have one legitimate reason to find the writing-up of their fieldwork projects a less enjoyable aspect of their work. Unlike the familiar format of 'the essay' as a means of assessment, the idea of writing 'a report' was new to nearly all the students. Despite very clear instructions as to the kind of headings they should use to structure their reports, many wanted a black and white hard copy example they could emulate. With nothing more than suggested headings and clues as to the kind of material they should include under each heading, many students were hesitant and stressed about the idea of presenting work in a new way. One student felt herself 'in at the deep end'.

Having been presented with a new and unfamiliar task, what did students feel they had derived from the exercise? What did they feel they could now do (or do better) as a result of the fieldwork? Over half the students reported that their confidence had grown as a result of doing fieldwork, mostly in relation to dealing with unfamiliar situations and people. In their own words:

I was quite shy on the first interview but by the end [I] felt quite confident in what I was asking.

More confident to approach people I don't know.

I feel that doing the project has given me more confidence in my ability to do things.

Feel more confident in approaching a different situation to my own and asking people questions about themselves.

This last quotation is particularly revealing of what I regard as especially valuable about fieldwork projects as a teacher, and as a tool in developing employability. Many projects undertaken by students

involved dealing with issues of ‘difference’. Interviews were undertaken with people who were different to the students in terms of gender, age, faith, socio-economic background, and so on, or they had to gather data on topics/situations with which many of them were unfamiliar (e.g. conversion, extreme poverty, monastic life). Students had to engage with these differences, and the most ‘successful’ projects came from those students who had managed to glimpse, reflect upon, and share with fellow students the worldview of another person or section of society. This must surely be a key skill of value to employers.

As a teacher, it was gratifying to hear from some students that they now felt more able to turn ideas into reality. In many cases, students initially came with suggestions for projects that were vastly over-ambitious. It took considerable time to turn good ideas into manageable and researchable small-scale projects, *without* interfering to the extent that students lost a sense of ‘ownership’ of their ideas. But by the end of the course, a number of students had a better idea of how, in future, abstract ideas could be shaped into a practical project that is necessarily constrained by time and resources. Such skills of planning must count heavily as an attribute of employability.

Skills acquired through the fieldwork projects

Students described a range of different skills acquired through the different stages of setting-up, conducting, analysing and presenting their fieldwork. At the set-up phase in particular, students mentioned some of the following skills:

- The need to be organised
- Responding gracefully when people decline the invitation to co-operate/take part in research
- Recognising the time involved in organising interview dates/times
- Making a good first impression with gatekeepers/interviewees
- Explaining the research project to non-specialists clearly and concisely

- Deciding on the most appropriate methodology for a project
- How to write survey questions and layout a questionnaire schedule

A number of fieldwork projects involved students writing letters of introduction about their research and requesting co-operation from potential interviewees and organisations. The standard of many first drafts of these letters was surprisingly low with serious omissions of information, incorrect forms of address, poor layout, and so on. It was clearly only as undergraduates that some students acquired the formal letter-writing skills that one would have expected them to learn at school. In terms of employability, it was a case of ‘better late than never’.

In the conduct phase of their research, unsurprisingly many students indicated an improvement in their communication skills. This evidently went beyond the task of merely asking interview questions, but also developing a sense of when to stay silent, when to probe/prompt interviewees, and how to use probes and prompts ‘without being pushy and seeming to want certain answers’. For one student, the development of communication skills also involved the physical business of ‘the way I behaved and presented myself [with] consideration for the participant’. A number of students mentioned the need to be sensitive to informants/respondents, this including matters such as appropriate dress in places of worship, keeping agreed appointments, and necessary pre-interview etiquette. As an employer, I would regard this kind of awareness as essential.

Some students failed to heed warnings about being over-ambitious in their data gathering, and consequently spent too much time trying to organise and analyse their material. This turned out to be an important learning exercise however, and some realised the importance of ‘not asking too many questions in the first place—otherwise too much data’. For all the students there was a need to exercise skills of organisation of data, and discrimination between relevant and irrelevant material. While some of their data was clearly fascinating, they were forced to consider whether it answered their research question. Furthermore, they had to learn how to make creative use of interview notes or questionnaire data, and incorporate

it into their reports. In short, their skills of evaluation, judgement and critique, interpretation and analysis were sharpened in many cases.

If the students found the business of report-writing unfamiliar, many were similarly apprehensive about giving a formal, 10-minute (unassessed) seminar presentation to their peers. Most of them had never had to undertake such an exercise before. Although a seminar had been devoted to helping students to think about presentation skills, many of them learnt something about preparing, pacing, structuring, illustrating, and generally delivering data orally in a professional manner¹. They also had to be ready to think quickly during a 2-minute ‘question and answer’ session. In short, the capacity to face questioning, engage an audience and overcome nerves, must count as the kind of skills that a potential employer would value. For one student, the experience of giving a presentation was ‘a taster of what teaching may be like’, and clearly helped her to reflect on her own future employment.

Personal development

As part of the questionnaire survey, students were asked to reflect upon the extent to which they felt they had developed as individuals as a result of the fieldwork project. The word ‘confident’ was mentioned repeatedly in responses, and many answers suggested that students felt gratified that they had faced an unfamiliar challenge successfully. This comment from one student was typical: ‘more confident ... was dreading the whole thing but rather enjoyed it in the end’. Confidence in approaching people, giving presentations, and asking sensitive questions all emerged as dimensions of personal development. One student reflected: ‘since school I have not really done much in the way of presentations so this has really boosted my confidence as a whole ... given me self-discipline/reliance and motivated me to work’. For one student, her growing confidence emerged from some of the tasks related to doing the fieldwork:

¹ Students were given individual feedback on their presentations within 24 hours via e-mail. Question and answer sessions also included an element of feedback from peers.

Confidence has grown! I drove to Oxford and back (a place I had never been to before) and stayed with people I have never met!

Such responses to a question about personal development complemented the answers to a similar subsequent question which asked students to reflect on what, if anything, they felt they had learnt about their own worldview as a result of doing the fieldwork project. Nearly all the answers could usefully be recorded in full, such was the extent of self-reflection. However, the key theme that emerged was the realisation that matters of religious belief and practice are rarely 'black and white', and the consequent need to be open-minded and tolerant. For a number of students, it was clear that the process of doing fieldwork opened up and broadened their worldview.

The experience of doing their own fieldwork was a powerful way of helping students to realise that the 'ideals' in relation to religious belief and practice that they read about in textbooks on religions might be very different to the lived reality of religious life. Some students clearly felt that they had got behind 'appearances' and understood something far deeper by: 'trying to understand people's *motives and reasons* for doing things—to try to understand them better' (emphasis added). A future employer would surely value a person whose preconceived ideas have been realised and challenged, someone who has recognised that statistical data many omit important dimensions of human experience, and someone who is open to new avenues of thought and interest. For one student, the most significant learning experience of the whole project was realising 'that it is important to think as an individual ... try not to follow the ideas of everyone else just for the sake of it'.

As a tutor, I was extremely impressed with those students who had understood some of the social, methodological, and power dynamics of doing fieldwork. For example, by the end of her study, one student whose interview sample had included both men and women, had realised that women might respond to interview questions in a different way to men. She reflected that 'women are more open to questions that contain 'what are your *feelings*'' (emphasis added). For another student whose key informant was a man much older than herself, the importance of confidentiality and trust was recognised as a concrete reality, and not simply as a matter of etiquette or professional practice. She wrote that 'confidentiality in interviews is *very* important

because the interviewee has placed a lot of trust in me by tell me their life story' (emphasis original). Many students appeared genuinely surprised at the extent of co-operation they received, and it seemed to teach them something important about social and research-based interactions. The kind of 'lessons' learnt included some of the following:

- Generate a relaxed/friendly atmosphere so interviewees feel comfortable to talk
- Be patient for replies to questions
- Dress appropriately
- Be clear and open about one's intentions

It is notable that this bulleted list is largely about *behaviour*, not knowledge, and this is apparently exactly what future employers are looking for, according to Paul Farrer, managing director of the Graduate Recruitment Company. He stressed 'that firms needed competences rather than degrees' (*THES*, 13th December 2002).

The degree of co-operation that the students in Cardiff received seemed to give them a positive experience of human nature, and suggested that they had in many cases implemented the kind of advice they had been given about approaching potential research participants.

'there are people always willing to help'
'if you give people the chance they will say loads about something, especially if they care about the subject'
'... people are very willing to help you'

Such comments helped students to make the connection between professional conduct and the willingness of people to provide time and assistance with research. As a potential employer, I would far rather appoint someone who has made such a realisation than someone who had not.

Using skills in employment

Towards the end of the questionnaire, students had to bring some of their reflections on their experience and learning together, to consider how they might use them in future employment settings. It was clear from their responses that the chance to 'have a go' at doing a presentation was extremely valuable to nearly the entire class, though this finding becomes less surprising given the number of students who indicated future plans to train as teachers². Many of them saw the ability to speak to groups as a skill they would almost inevitably need to use again, and so far, few of them had had an opportunity to practice 'for real', but in a situation where the outcome didn't really matter³. Given that the presentations were unassessed, I was extremely surprised and delighted at the amount of effort that many students invested in preparing simple illustrations, overheads, and 'props' to support their presentations. As a teacher, I am still weighing up the value of keeping the presentations as an unassessed task, over against the wish to give credit to those students who go to considerable effort to prepare stimulating presentations. Several students mentioned that they would be noting on their CVs their experience of giving a public presentation.

Besides the opportunity to present work orally, students reflected upon a range of skills that they felt they had acquired, and which would help them in the future. An ability to identify informants, plan and organise research, talk to people different from themselves, read 'body' language, take responsibility for their work, and so on, all came through as newly acquired or honed skills. However, I sense that for many students the ability to 'take responsibility' for their work

² The findings from a very short questionnaire distributed to students at the start of the module asking them why they had chosen it, and what they hoped to gain from it, showed that some had specifically been attracted by the opportunity to do a presentation (particularly those anticipating a career in teaching).

³ Some students found the prospect of giving a public presentation extremely nerve-wracking. Had the presentations been a formal part of the assessment of the module, some students would have found the experience extremely stressful, and I would feel uncomfortable about down-grading presentations marred by extreme nerves. This suggests the value of having unassessed presentations at level 1 or 2, and assessed presentations as perhaps part of some level 3 courses.

was in many ways much more about having a *sense of ownership* of their efforts and being self-sufficient. Rather than relying on other people's 'data' from books, their own skills and efforts were generating the material necessary to write their reports and pass the module. Students appeared to take pride in their very individual fieldwork projects, and I hope that they have learnt something about themselves in terms of what gives them satisfaction and motivation. I would estimate that three-quarters of the class ended the module with a stronger belief in themselves and their own capacity to produce, organise and undertake tasks effectively.

For some students, the topic for their fieldwork project had directly related to their future career plans:

... the fieldwork project should help substantially since my research concerned poverty [in Wales] and this is what I want to do as a career [as an aid worker]. My project has given me an insight into deprivation in this country which I did not have before and also showed me the kind of projects that can be established in combating poverty.

For those students who did not feel confident enough to tackle independent research as part of the 'Open Choice Dissertation' module⁴, the opportunity to do a project on a smaller scale was more inviting.

Most students felt able to articulate and self-reflect on the kind of skills they had acquired or developed as a result of the course. However, it was clear that the simple act of completing the questionnaire was, for at least half of them, the activity that brought these skills consciously to mind. Future careers and employability do not feature prominently in most departmental courses, although the module taught by Professor Stephen Pattison, 'Using Theology and Religious Studies' is an exception (see p. 136). It is clear therefore that there would be considerable value in teachers giving time and explicit attention to the employability skills that could be derived from their modules, perhaps as part of the assessment of the course. A simple questionnaire exercise, perhaps followed by discussion in pairs/groups, could help students to reflect more deeply on their non-

⁴With appropriate tutor support, this module allows a student to undertake independent research resulting in a dissertation of 8,000 words, in place of a taught module.

curriculum learning ... or as in the title of another *Times Higher Education Supplement* article, 'whatever you learn, learn about yourself' (*THES*, 13th December 2002). Self-knowledge is precisely the kind of attribute that the Personnel Manager at the clothes retailer 'Next' values (*ibid.*), and the process of completing a reflective questionnaire about their fieldwork projects clearly helped students to identify aspects of their self-development and knowledge as individuals. An ability to think about what they have done and how it has helped them as people turns out to be, in many ways, as important as doing it in the first place.

Conclusion

Public and private sector companies and services are looking for individuals with 'drive, empathy, adaptability, [and] communication skills' (*ibid.*). The findings of my small project on employability skills and fieldwork in the sociology of religion clearly demonstrate that this part of the curriculum has the potential for helping students to develop exactly the kind of skills that will help them in future careers. Independent fieldwork requires strategic thinking, self-motivation and management, communication and data-handling, and helping students to identify and 'market' such skills and attributes to future employers is an important dimension of 'employability'. A paper by Dawn Lees on graduate employability (LTSN Generic Centre, October 2002) lists 39 aspects of employability (personal qualities, core skills, and process skills) based on Knight and Yorke (2001) and Bennett et al (1999). Based on my research findings, I would claim that at least 25 of these skills and qualities were acquired or developed as a result of most of the fieldwork projects⁵, these being:

⁵ The extent to which these skills and attributes were acquired or developed clearly varied according to the type of research carried out (e.g. qualitative or quantitative, within our outside individual faith traditions etc.)

PERSONAL QUALITIES

- Malleable self-theory (belief that attributes [e.g. intelligence] are not fixed and can be developed)
- Self-awareness (awareness of own strengths and weaknesses, aims and values)
- Self-confidence (confidence in dealing with challenges that employment and life throw up)
- Independence (ability to work without supervision)
- Emotional intelligence (sensitivity to others' emotions and the effects that they can have)
- Stress tolerance (ability to retain effectiveness under pressure)
- Reflectiveness (the disposition to reflect on and evaluate the performance of oneself and others)

CORE SKILLS

- Numeracy (ability to use numbers at an appropriate level of accuracy)⁶
- Information retrieval (ability to access different sources, technologies and media)
- Self-management (ability to work in an efficient and structured manner, to deadlines)
- Critical analysis (ability to 'deconstruct' a problem or situation)
- Creativity (ability to be original or inventive and to apply lateral thinking)
- Listening (focused attention in which key points are recognised)
- Written communication (clear reports, letters etc. written specifically for the reader; appropriate responses to different audiences and contexts)
- Oral presentations (clear and confident presentation of information to a group)
- Explaining (orally and in writing)

⁶ Some students chose to do quantitative surveys which required the gathering, analysis and presentation of numerical data.

PROCESS SKILLS

- Computer literacy (ability to use a range of software)
- Ethical sensitivity (appreciates ethical aspects of employment and acts accordingly)
- Prioritising (ability to rank tasks according to importance)
- Planning (setting of achievable goals and structuring action, organise sub-tasks)
- Applying subject understanding (use of disciplinary understanding from the HE programme)
- Ability to work cross-culturally (both within and beyond the UK)
- Acting morally (has a moral code and acts accordingly)
- Coping with ambiguity and complexity (ability to handle ambiguous and complex situations)
- Decision making (choice of the best option from a range of alternatives; delegating)

Finally, at a time when information and resources are so easily acquired from the Internet, there is something to be said for summative assessment tasks that cannot be plagiarised, and which require considerable independence of thought and action.

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Notes

- York, M. (2001), 'Employability in the First Cycle Higher Education' A working paper for the 'Skills plus' Project. Liverpool John Moores University
- Bennett, N. et al (1999) 'Patterns of Core and Generic Skill Provision in Higher Education' *Higher Education*, 37, 71-93.