

What does 'good' educational research look like?

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These are notes from the paper given at this conference, and are taken from current work on a forthcoming book for Open University Press, 'What does good educational research look like?'

I've been teaching courses on research methodology for a long time; been president of AARE; examined theses and judged best theses; and this year I'm a member of the 'Expert Advisory Committee' for the social, behavioural and economic sciences on the ARC. I'll begin by summarising what I'm going to say in this talk in three brief points:

1. People disagree about what is good educational research.
2. That's because good research is not just about methodology – it's about what questions are important – and that changes in different contexts.
3. It's helpful to think quite pragmatically about what outcomes you are aiming it – who the research is being done for; who they are; how they will judge it.

A. Can we have a single definition?

I want to begin with an attempt at a definition of good research from the current Director of the Australian Council for Educational Research. It is a definition that does seem to have general appeal, especially at a conference like this which is about learning:

The purpose of medical research is to create and disseminate knowledge and tools which can be used to improve human health [...] The purpose of educational research is to create and disseminate knowledge and tools which can be used to improve learning.

The improvement of learning is the objective that drives (or should drive) all educational research.

(Geoff Masters, ACER Newsletter No 94, 1999)

This is a very appealing definition, but I don't happen to agree with it, partly because of my own research interests (inequalities) and partly because it hides what is contentious. I think the analogy to medicine is misleading and even dangerous.

(1) The definition has an appeal, but leaves out questions that I think matter –

- schools sort and select (we can improve the learning of all without changing the fact that in relative terms some will fail – to some extent this is what the current debate about the boys is about)

- students learn things other than what is taught and it is important to investigate patterns of effects of school culture and systems, which is what I have been doing in a recent '7 Up' style study of young people from 12 to 18.

Both of these issues apply strongly to museums: your customers may be happy and learning, but it may be a very class-biased success, with many others totally untouched by what you do; and not all the answers to whether people learn or not are to do with what the exhibition designer or museum educator does – there are broader social processes that affect who comes and how they see what you do, and investigating these is a legitimate research task.

(2) As well, the definition hides what is contentious even in its own terms: what counts as learning. In fact this is highly debated and contested, not just as a sideline ideological debate but quite centrally. (for example, consider the difference between Premier Carr's emphasis on learning as knowing things about our history with the literature on the new worker which emphasises learning as process and orientation – lifelong learning, the portfolio personality, and so on).

This too is clearly a central issue for museum educators: what do you understand by learning?

Educational research is also historically contextual and nationally contextual. This is why research on matters such as the value of single-sex versus co-education schooling come up with conflicting findings: they are not studying the same 'thing' – cultures change, schools change, who students are is not static. Who your customers are is not static – research answers do not hold good for all times.

So, there is not a single definition of good research for education – its questions and objects of study change and are debated, and this is part of its core field concerns, and one of the things that differentiates it from straight physical science research.

B. Part 2. Taking it empirically, or pragmatically

I do not want to argue that we should be cynical about research – I think it is important to be doing good research, and that good research matters, and most of my work is involved with trying to develop good research and researchers. Nor do I want to argue today about what particular research you should be doing, to give you my own view on that. Instead, I want to use the points I have made in my introduction, that there is difference and disagreement about what good research means, to suggest that you should pay at least some attention the more pragmatic elements of how research will be judged, rewarded or reach its intended audience. 'Good research' is not the same thing for all contexts, times and audiences, so

We need to think of 'what is good research?' not as a philosophical question but as an empirical one: we need to treat it as an empirical examination of the places where judgements about good educational research are made, about the people making the judgements, and, related to that, the textual strategies of the work that is successful.

Whether it is a thesis or a journal article or a grant application or a consultancy for a school, we need to think about **who** will be judging the successfulness of this as a piece of research, what are their **criteria**, and what will they be going on when they judge it (relates to the **textual evidence** in the writing itself).

The attached handout [Ed. see end of paper] is an initial draft of a table where I have tried to think about some different arenas and the different criteria they set up. Today, I will take one example:

Getting money for research

Money for research tends to come in two main ways – (1) applying to an external body in a competitive funding program, such as the ARC or the Australia Council; or for university funds; (2) persuading the body you work for or another body that they need some work done – ie accepting money or a contract to do a consultancy project.

1. Competitive funding schemes– how does good research get judged by bodies like the ARC:

- almost always a mix of specialist and non-specialist: your research has to appeal to a general educated ‘common sense’ that this matters and that you are expert enough to do it; but usually also someone in the field judging that you do seem to have an appropriate track record of experience to do this.

So, when you are writing an application, show it to friends and colleagues and get their feedback – seek out critical reactions.

- following the guidelines and instructions precisely is essential – these bodies almost always have many more applications than funds available, and are looking for ways to throw things out. If they say 7 line summary, they mean just that.
- applications are often read at great speed:

if your 40 page application that has taken 6 months to craft can't be read and appreciated in 3 minutes – forget it!

So spend a lot of time getting the short summary right

- expertise and track record is judged, but slightly differently in different programs. Eg ARC Discovery program, conventional academic publications, prizes and position matters enormously – it's just not worth applying for unless you have a lot of these. But the ARC Industry Linkage program, though it also looks at these, gives credit for your involvement with that industry partner and your history of working together. In some other programs, being a well-known public figure or well known in your education or museum system will count for more.

So think about your track record and where it will have most capital.

- there is a hierarchy of funding programs – national competitive funding programs such as ARC are the toughest – all the universities are in it. Methodology and expertise and judging contribution to knowledge are judged against a very high hurdle. Smaller programs such as university ones, use similar formal criteria but don't expect a cure for cancer every time.

2. Consultancies (including getting funded by your own workplace) are a bit different:

- those commissioning the work are interested in outcomes – how it will look for them – needs to be ‘sexy’ or something that can fit their own accountability tasks
- they are looking for people they can rely to do what is asked and deliver on time

See ‘implicit criteria’ on table:

- Here personal contacts and relationships are often more important than the final text. (eg in my experience, though government bodies have to formally advertise tenders, they often pre-advise the main ones they’d like to see get it, and you don’t have a lot of chance if you just read it in the paper at a week’s notice.)
- Competitive grants are often more open in the questions you can ask and the lines you can take up – but harder to get and often more meagrely funded. Consultancy can be easier money but at a price of directly having to take a line congenial to those commissioning the work.

**What does a good piece of research look like?
Some starting points...**

Arena	Judges	Explicit criteria	Implicit criteria	What does it <i>look like</i>?	Common failings
PhD	Licensed academics; university committee	literature methodology 'original' contribution	-can self-consciously locate relative to academic community; -mastery of conventions plus potentially publishable addition; -clear aims, boundaries; -critique important - mastery of English important - thesis intro and concl of disproportionate importance	-formal language -precise conventions (front pages, referencing) -hyper-correct grammar, error-free presentation -voice: modest but authoritative - claims: neither over-sell nor under-sell 'contribution'	-looked sloppy - aims unclear -not 'systematic' -'poorly presented' -ignored X or X's theory
Academic journal	Editor, academic referees	-methodologically sound -contribution to knowledge -appropriate for journal	- 'voice', writing style -ratio of article quality relative to size of backlog -timeliness -recognisable citations	-literature refs are prominent - writes as equal in the literature -usually sequence of 1. where-this-is-coming- from (incl previous work); 2. why-my-approach- is- authoritative; 3. my findings or theory and why they matter -carries journal's house style ('voice' as well as citation conventions)	-neophyte voice - not linking to that journal's previous articles/ authors - not demonstrating succinctly contribution being made
Academic book	Editor (academic) Referees (academic) Editor (publisher, commercial) Publishing Board (commercial)	- sufficient readership - adds/ fills gap - academic quality - literary quality - appropriate for that book/series	- potential sales - location of author - track record of author - timeliness or fashion	-preface and cover calls up the identified readership -more varied formats than thesis and journal articles - specific citations reduced, but bibliography remains	- being Australian - writing about Australia - at end of cycle on that subject - clash between author's and publisher's vision of readership
ARC grants	'Disciplinary panel' (Education one member out of 10) Referees (academics)	- researchers' track record - 'significance' of project - design and methodology - 'national benefit'	- researchers' recognition in networks - writing well to task set - conventional career	-headings mirror assessment criteria - follows all instructions precisely	- track record not recognisable - not addressing task - writing too much for

	(2 local; 1 overseas)		rewarded - 'to those who have shall be given'	summary written for non-expert reader - emphasises knowledge of field, past achievements, contribution this will make	insiders (jargon)
Consultancy and partnership grants	Bureaucrats; sometimes academic referees	- track record: ability to deliver - cost effectiveness - quality of proposal	- bureaucrats' personal knowledge of researchers - methodology and details ideologically in harmony with commissioning body - ideas for methods or publication forms that would be 'sexy' with the public	- headings mirror assessment criteria - follows all instructions precisely - de-emphasises jargon - translates into achievements whose utility is readily understandable by general reader	- deemed politically unsympathetic - others are favoured more - too much 'pure research' emphasis rather than outcomes that meet partner's needs
The Press	journalist, editor	- timeliness - strong position by researcher - researcher has established profile as commentator	- researcher on databank or previous contact with journalist; - available when called; - will take position journalist looking for (if seeking debate)	- short, sharp summary version - highlights controversy - removes qualification and tends to exaggerate 'factual' or incontestable status of finding/claim	- researcher's findings too 'middle of road'; - researcher can't speak succinctly to general audience
Schools	teachers, principals – sometimes department adviser	- applied potential - addresses issue of concern - not too complicated	- supporting resources or conditions accompany - issue has high public profile with parents or for career advance or school profile with department	- more often conveyed by word of mouth than print - key idea important - if print, uses illustrations and guidelines lavishly	- conditions for take-up not available - research not conducted from implementation perspective.

This table is taken from a forthcoming book to be published by Open University Press.

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