

Editorial: Making a Difference in Educational Research

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DOI: 10.26907/esd.16.3.01

In my last editorial, I addressed the different forms that a scholarly paper might take (Rushby, 2021); in this issue I want to take a more over-arching view of the research process and the integral role of the papers that come out of that process. In doing so I will revisit (without apology because it is important) a tool that I described in an editorial four years ago (Rushby, 2017). A research paper needs to address three questions:

- What is already known about this subject?
- What does my research add to what is known?
- What do I want people to do differently as a result of my research?

The publications that arise from research should not be an afterthought – something that happens once the research is completed; they should be an integral part of the work. They are conceived at the beginning of the project, grow as the work progresses and are then shown to the world as the project reaches its conclusion.

Central to a research project is the “research question.” This needs to be set out at an early stage in the project. It follows from an understanding of what is already known about this subject – and what, therefore is **not** known and is yet to be discovered. A common complaint from reviewers is that the research question is not sufficiently clear. The research question follows from the first of the bullet points set out above: what is already known about this subject? Our research is almost inevitably built on the work of others (see John of Salisbury, 1159) and when we write our papers, we need to make that explicit in the literature survey (Hartley, 2008. P87). The question gives a clear focus to this section of the paper: it should not be a list of all the papers that might have some bearing on the topic but critical analysis of those that set out what is already known.

Another common criticism made by reviewers is that the research (or at least the paper describing the research) does not take us beyond what is already known about the topic. Your research needs to add something to what is already known. This might well be a negative result. Knowing that the study disproved the obvious can be a very helpful outcome. *Education & Self Development* publishes articles with negative results. What is not so helpful are outcomes that are ambivalent – where no significant difference is found because the sample size is too small, or the methodology is flawed. If your research does not add anything to the body of knowledge then the reader (and the editor) is permitted to ask, ‘why publish this?’ You must be able to set out what your research adds to what is already known.

The third question asks what you want people to do differently as a result of the research. This may be to change their behaviour, to change their methodology, to pay more attention to some aspects of the learning process. There are many possible changes. But there should be something that you want them to do differently or the research - and the paper - are pointless.

I started by stating that the written papers are an integral part of the overall research process. The three questions are not just to guide you in writing the paper but can also help throughout that research process. I suggest that, in the very early stages of the project

you take a sheet of paper and write down the questions with a series of bullet points for each. Initially the list will be very incomplete but it can develop and be updated as the project progresses. If you pin the sheet over your desk it will serve as a constant reminder and help to focus your work.

When you come to write your paper, you could either include these three questions and the updated bullet points in the abstract or (as in the practice in some journals) include them as a separate section after the abstract. *Education & Self Development* would welcome either approach.

References

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