

Introducing students to Ontology and Epistemology through Research

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Research Oriented: Learning about key research perspectives through a situated pedagogic mechanism enabling students to interpret and critic their own and others' studies.

Students often struggle to conceptualise and give meaning to research perspectives and this can result in them developing long held misconceptions about the research process. Here, I present an example of how research is used as a situated pedagogic mechanism to explain research perspectives and associated research decisions. The case employed is taken from an online research methods module on a Public Administration (MPA); all students are mid-career public sector professionals, the majority of whom are domiciled outside the UK and Europe.

Throughout, the module draws on two ontologically and epistemologically different research projects, utilizing them as living examples of research, the purpose being to de-mystify the topic and introduce meaning to what might otherwise be seen as abstract research decisions. Following an initial introduction to research, the module introduces students to the notion of social reality and how ontological positions reflect different ways of viewing and interpreting the social world; ontological positions are likened to guides on how we might approach research problems and develop research questions. Specific examples from each project are then provided and critiqued through video. From this, the students are presented with an unmarked formative exercise that asks them to consider how the fundamentals of each research project have been shaped by underlying positions on social reality; this activity engenders student-led enquiry and learning. The module then progresses to a discussion on epistemology and how it aligns with ontology. In doing so, it returns to the two research projects and provides video discussion on their epistemological positions. Again, the students are presented with an unmarked formative exercise, here, they are asked to reflect on how ontological and epistemological positions align and shape the two respective research projects; students are then directed to a peer-reviewed article that introduces social science terminology and conceptual relationships.

A short summative assignment (5% of overall grade) then asks students to watch two more videos that explore the research approaches of each project. Set questions ask the students to develop a short 200-300 word post that 1) explains why the approaches are – or are not – suitable to address the stated research problems and aims; 2) whether the research approaches are – or are not – in line with their respective ontological and epistemological positions. To facilitate student interaction and critique, students are also asked to comment on two other posts.