

Chapter 11

Undertaking Commissioned Research and Scholarship in Education: Do Research Paradigms Matter?

Kay Livingston
University of Glasgow, UK

ABSTRACT

The place and challenges of identifying and working with paradigms in the context of commissioned research are addressed in this chapter. The characteristics of commissioned research activities are discussed and considered by drawing on Boyer's view of scholarship as discovery, integration, application, teaching, and engagement. The role of Invitation to Tender (ITT) documents in commissioned research is explored using a conceptual continuum from looser to tighter specification of parameters as an analytical frame. Consequences for the selection of a research paradigm are considered in the context of multiple realities of the researcher and the commissioning body. The chapter concludes with an imperative: Communication to develop understanding of each other's perspectives needs to be better recognized for its value to all parties in meeting their intended purpose in engaging in a commissioned research undertaking.

INTRODUCTION

Universities are not immune to the challenges and pressure of performativity. The lexicon of targets and outputs now defines the work of many academics. Boyer's view that the standards of scholarship in the 1990s in colleges and universities in the United States (US) were becoming increasingly restrictive remains pertinent today in universities beyond the US. His argument that research and publication had become the primary means by which most professors achieve academic status resonates with the current emphasis on publication of outputs derived from research, in high factor peer-reviewed journals, as a key objective for career-advancement to the professoriate, particularly in

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-7998-1001-8.ch011

the UK. Boyer (1990, p. 1) described the challenge facing universities as the need “... to define the work of faculty in ways that enrich, rather than restrict the quality of campus life”. He argued that scholarship functions beyond research as discovery of new knowledge should be recognized. Yet, adding to knowledge remains the dominant emphasis in many academics’ work, particularly those aspiring to the professoriate. A broader understanding of different forms of research as scholarship and the potential they have to make a valued contribution within the university and in society is required. The focus of this chapter is to reflect on paradigms related to research and other forms of scholarship, commissioned by governments and government agencies. Researchers undertaking commissioned research need to have a better understanding of the nature and challenges of the scholarship in which they are engaging and how they can demonstrate its value and legitimacy. Boyer’s more expansive view of scholarship functions that “...respond more adequately to the urgent new realities both within the academy and beyond” (Boyer, 1990, p. 3) is helpful in stimulating reflection on the challenges and potential of different forms of scholarship. His recognition of scholarship as discovery, integration, application, teaching and engagement and their overlapping functions, is discussed in this chapter in the context of the supercomplex realities of today.

In the first section, the characteristics of commissioned research are explored. The difficulties caused by lack of conceptual clarity and different views about the relationship between epistemology, learning and teaching are addressed. Using a conceptual continuum from looser to tighter specification of parameters set out in Invitation to Tender (ITT) documents as an analytical frame, examples drawn from experience of commissioned educational¹ research and scholarship are discussed to illustrate potential differences in opinions that can arise in views about whether research paradigms have a place in commissioned research and evaluation. Examples are also used to explore reasons for different views about the purpose of research and scholarship in order to confront implicit messages, and sometimes contradictory messages, which are communicated in the commissioning documentation prior to the research or scholarship activity and in the subsequent research reports.

In the second section, the different realities of researchers and commissioning bodies are addressed. Different views about the purpose and outcomes of commissioned research are also discussed, as are some possible reasons for the lack of attention given to research paradigms. This discussion is framed by consideration of different ways of viewing reality (ontology), differences in views about the nature of knowledge and processes of knowing (epistemology) and differences in values, beliefs, motivations and intentions (axiology). In the third section, the potential matches and mismatches in understanding the concepts that underpin commissioned research are discussed. The challenging contexts in which policy officers within government work and their need to provide research findings that support or challenge particular government policy agendas are considered. Similarly, the challenging contexts in which researchers’ work is assessed within the university and through Research Assessment Framework (REF) in the UK, are discussed. The increasing opportunities that the inclusion of the assessment of impact of research in the REF offers for a broader view of the functions of research and scholarship are explored. In addition, the distinction between scholarship of discovery as research and evaluation undertaken within the other scholarship areas of application, integration, teaching and engagement (Boyer, 1990, 1996) is discussed. In the concluding section, the paradigm of supercomplexity (Barnett, 2015) is considered for its potential as a way of opening up opportunities for scholars generally and researchers undertaking commissioned research in challenging and shifting circumstances that are impacted by multiple influences.

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