FOCUSING YOUR RESEARCH

PART I: CRAFTING YOUR RESEARCH QUESTION
FOCUSING YOUR RESEARCH

The next 3 sessions of doctoral training move you towards your revised research proposal

1. Crafting your Research Question
2. Research as Dialogue
3. Research Ethics
RESEARCH QUESTIONS OVERVIEW:

➤ Direct the design of your proposed research
➤ Require reflective and interrogative processes
➤ Require a process of ongoing revision/scrutiny which should be used throughout your research
➤ Give your examiners the criteria by which you want to be judged
[Research questions] provide focus by defining what the project is about and, equally importantly, they provide boundaries about what the research is not about. [...] They guide your:

- literature search
- decisions about research design
- what data you should ‘collect’ and from whom
- they shape the way that you will analyse the data and the way that you write up the research.

-J. Pryor in Thomson and Walker (ed.s), 2010
Good questions do not necessarily produce good research, but poorly conceived or constructed questions will likely create problems that affect all subsequent stages of a study.

(Jane Agee, 2009)
Research questions are also useful for:

- Participants of your research (or not?)
- Readers
  - Examiners (contribution to knowledge made clear/ hinted at in the question?)
  - Practitioners in the field (is the language accessible to your intended audience?)
Therefore, creating research questions is about:

➤ technical research craft
  ➤ cultural-
  ➤ professional-
  ➤ artistic-
  ➤ social-
  engagement
RESEARCH CRAFT:

➤ Focusing your research questions is a complex process

➤ Crafting research questions goes hand-in-hand with methodological and theoretical considerations

➤ Coherence between questions, methods, methodology and theoretical frameworks will be expected in your research proposal, at upgrade and final submission
MOVE FROM GENERAL TO SPECIFIC:

Empirical field/general field of practice

Empirical setting/ your practice

Specific research question
Wider field

Related concepts and ideas

Research focus
Exercise

Draw the shapes in the previous slide on a piece of paper

The page represents your research project.

Fill in the shapes with your research ideas so that:

➤ Centre: your research focus (original knowledge/insights that you are creating)

➤ Inner Rectangle: related concepts and ideas

➤ Outer Rectangle: part of the field, but outside the scope of your study
Generate questions from your diagram as:

➤ A SINGLE overarching question that captures the basic goals of your research

➤ Not more than 3 RELATED sub-questions

➤ Sub-questions should narrow the broader focus and be more specific. They often guide data collection (and can emerge as you go along)

You can also use this diagram as a basis for discussion with your supervisors and...

➤ Rewrite it after further discussion (again and again)
“Writing and re-writing research questions encourages researchers to ask important questions about purpose and clarity and to learn from this process. Wrestling with our questions, through reflecting and writing, ultimately helps us to become better researchers.”

Jane Agee (2009)
The tendency of the undecided doctoral researcher is to avoid making decisions over the exact research focus by:

➤ including lots of sub-questions not related to or coherent with the single overarching question.
EXERCISE

Aim:

1. to interrogate research questions for methodological and theoretical implications
2. to check for coherence across research questions
3. to check for coherence across research design
This research seeks to discover primary school teachers’ perceptions of musician-led workshops in schools. It will answer the questions:

• What does the current literature say on this topic?
• What are primary school teachers’ perceptions of musician-led workshops in schools?
• How do primary school teachers’ perceive the efficacy of musician-led workshops in schools?
• How do primary school teachers taking part in workshops position themselves in relation to the musician workshop leaders?
• How do musicians make sure there is a legacy to their workshops?
• What changes in policy might support musician-led workshops in schools?
• What do children learn from musician-led workshops in schools?
“Often, when doctoral students write a proposal, they are drawn to grand theories as a beginning point. For example:

- a researcher may be drawn to social justice issues and therefore choose a critical theory framework, writ large, in the initial stages.

As the design develops,

- the researcher may decide to focus on questions about a particular aspect of a social context, such as social interactions.

At this point,

- the theory might be narrowed to discourse analysis, and research questions about discourse and the positioning of individuals in a discourse would follow.

Jane Agee (2009)
Go back to your own research questions and sub-questions. Check for:

1. coherence

2. your intentions: do you want your research to be:
   ➤ Exploratory
   ➤ Explanatory
   ➤ Descriptive
   ➤ Emancipatory

3. Look at the Petelin checklist to help you become more specific with your wording
It is not just ‘the field’ that renders a project worthwhile; who is asking and in what circumstances is equally important in figuring out ‘what’s worth asking?’…, and ‘why?’ is as much an issue of the extent to which it is answerable in personal, practical and situated terms, as it is a matter of the state of knowledge of the field of research.

Andrew Brown in Thomson and Walker (ed.s), 2010
“Changes in questions should also emerge from researchers’ capacities to examine their own roles and perspectives in the inquiry process, especially how they are positioned in relation to participants.”

Jane Agee (2009)
PRACTICAL CONSIDERATIONS

SMART analysis:

➤ Specific
➤ Measurable
➤ Achievable
➤ Relevance
➤ Time-related

How might you define these criteria for your revised research proposal?
1. What would be an appropriate strategy (or form of practice) for . . . (you as a specific individual with a particular history and social membership), in order to . . . (produce some effect), in relation to . . . (certain circumstances in a given time and place)?

2. How can (a certain form of practice) (respond to, comment on, or discover) (a particular phenomenon), given that . . . (certain circumstances that may constitute a difficulty or contradiction in a specific context)?

3. What would be the necessary qualities of a set of works in a given medium, in a particular context, in order to . . . etc.?
Recommended reading:
