

Chapter 4

Researching Teaching in Higher Education: Grounded Theory Concepts

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ABSTRACT

Grounded theory, since Glaser and Strauss conceived of it, has been applied to myriad research situations. Variation characterises the use of grounded theory, and the landscape of grounded theory is 'messy' and difficult to navigate, especially for novice researchers, and subsequently, many existing studies lack transparency and detail, employing only loosely grounded theory methodologies. The authors argue for the value of grounded theory research in education, especially for teacher researchers, but this value can only be realised if researchers attend in-depth to articulating clearly their methodologies and justifying how the methodology can be considered grounded theory. In the chapter, the authors aim to provide a primer on grounded theory, and to stimulate discussion around grounded theory as a research method in teaching, especially in higher education, for the purpose of generating knowledge as a basis for improving the quality of university teaching.

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INTRODUCTION

The aim of the present chapter is two-fold: To provide a ‘primer’ on grounded theory, and to stimulate discussion around the usefulness of grounded theory for research to inform the development of teaching frameworks, models and strategies, especially in higher education. Teaching in higher education has been selected as the context of focus for three reasons: Firstly, there is a growing institutional emphasis on improving the quality of learning and teaching in higher education; to remain competitive in a highly globalized, pressured economic environment, learning and teaching quality is pivotal to both the student experience of the institution and student success – both factors of which are crucial to institutions in their struggle to attract students. Secondly, learning and teaching in higher education, although it is gradually transforming, is apparently lagging behind the teaching developments in formal schooling. The reasons for this are numerous but mostly because the teaching context of higher education is uniquely complex with many stakeholders, and faculty who although may be experts in their disciplines, may lack the knowledge and experience in pedagogy. Secondly, education teaching and learning is a particularly complex teaching context, with a diversity of stakeholders. Thirdly, it is proving difficult to overcome the inertia of hundreds of years of ‘classical’ university lecture models. Academics are oftentimes bombarded with professional development but there may be a disconnect between the tools and approaches presented to them and the actual needs of the discipline context is poorly understood. Furthermore, teaching faculty members are strongly encouraged or even required to take action to improve their teaching based on evidence (of which there are plenty in the form of observations, formal evaluations, informal conversations with students etc.), but these forms of data may not be analysed systematically to understand learning and teaching activity.

The authors of the present chapter posit that grounded theory is a method of research which can be applied by both teaching practitioners and researchers to improve the quality of their teaching and learning in their classrooms. The authors favour the view of grounded theory as ‘mindset’. Grounded theory thinking is conducive to the exploration of multiple sources of qualitative data and the approach aligns with principles of constructivist teaching, participatory course design, and teaching for authentic learning. Used iteratively, grounded theory has potential as a basis for in a process of continual improvement grounded theory provides fertile ground for reflection, and insight leading to innovation. However, as we point out in the present chapter, although grounded theory has potential for rich generation of knowledge, the grounded theory landscape is messy and difficult to navigate – a situation exacerbated by existing, poorly detailed empirical grounded theory studies. The authors argue that it is therefore necessary for any researchers adopting the grounded theory mindset to develop an understanding and knowledge of grounded

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