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The Unloved Curriculum: teaching research methods and 'demonstrably alive' sociology

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Abstract

The Unloved Curriculum reflects our experiences of developing a more sociable approach to teaching qualitative methods. Through a set of examples drawn from our teaching practice, from our shared development of a sociable qualitative methods curriculum for MA students to the production of the *Fieldwork Fables* films, we explore these possibilities practically in the classroom context as a way of fostering a 'demonstrably alive' sociological craft. In contrast to those commentators who fear that digital culture poses an existential crisis for our disciplines, we suggest that this new informational environment also affords unprecedented opportunities to re-imagine the contours of sociological craft itself and how we bring this to life in the classroom and for a sociable mode of sociological teaching that is based in the classroom but not confined to it, which embraces the possibility to expand our pedagogical tools.

Keywords

Teaching sociology, qualitative methods, research as practice, fieldwork fables, research methods

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Introduction

Teaching research methods is the unloved part of undergraduate and postgraduate sociology curricula in the UK. Given this special issue's focus on *Teaching Sociology*, it is particularly opportune to ask why this is the case and how research methods might be taught and studied differently. Together we share a genuine enthusiasm and excitement about teaching research methods. And we know that we are not alone.

In many ways, this article reflects and continues an ongoing conversation between us, which started when we were at the Department of Sociology at Goldsmiths. From 2013 to 2017, Les and Michaela regularly taught together on Theory, Concepts and Methods of Social Research I & II, the core qualitative methodology modules at the heart of the MA Social Research – where we met Maisie, when she joined the cohort as a student. These modules offered advanced training in sociological research design, contextualizing this in respect to sociological theory and concepts, and introducing students to a range of established and innovative (mostly qualitative) methods for doing research and analysis. We also taught undergraduate students on core first- and second-year methods modules, and practice-based optional modules. Through our teaching experiences, we developed ways of showing and telling sociology in our teaching practices.

In this article, we offer a diagnosis of what's wrong with the way qualitative research methods are taught, situating this in the current conjuncture in UK Higher Education—a period of significant reform across the sector, consequences of which include a loss of jobs which is having a pronounced impact on the social sciences, streamlining of curricula, and risk aversion with implications for pedagogical innovation, with implications for how we teach—and in response to the continuing 'empirical crisis' in sociology, which identifies digital culture and the rise of 'big data' as an existential threat to sociology, and has led to calls for a reconsideration of the discipline's strengths and values in beyond its claims to methodological expertise (Savage and Burrows 2007). In doing so, we contribute to a decades-long conversation about teaching social research methods that have largely played out through the pages of the American Sociological Association's journal *Teaching Sociology*, but which has not been so prominent in the published record of how British sociologists consider their craft (see also Brooks and Ria Rowell, this issue).

Reflecting on our combined experiences of teaching qualitative research methods and using examples from our own teaching practice, alongside the methodological tools and resources we have developed, we make an argument for the opportunities that exist to teach differently. Specifically, we highlight that these opportunities call for a more sociable approach to teaching, preparing educational resources, and developing innovative forms of sociological communication, centring on instilling in students a sense of what it means to practice social research. Through examples drawn from our own teaching practices, we explore the prospects for fostering a 'demonstrably alive' sociological craft in and beyond the classroom.

To illustrate this sociability in more detail, we first reflect on our practice of making methods sociable with successive cohorts of students on the MA Social Research, before turning to the methodological film series *Fieldwork Fables* that we co-produced in 2016, a set of films in which actors restage research scenarios to bring doing research to life in the classroom. Through these examples, we reveal the prospects for a sociable mode of sociological teaching that is based in the classroom but not confined to it, and embraces a more expansive set of pedagogical tools. Before discussing our experiments and opportunities to teach differently, we want to first examine why teaching methods is so often unpopular for both staff and students.

Why are research methods courses so unloved?

There was a time when research methods literature was the grey literature of textbooks written often by grey men. As Howard S. Becker wrote more than fifty years ago: "Methodology is too important to be left to methodologists" (1970: 3). Indeed, this echoes a broader concern with the teaching of sociology highlighted by David M. Fulcomer in 1947 "colleges and universities have failed and are failing to prepare their students for constructive living in our day" (Fulcomer 1947: 154). His concern was that the limited ways that sociology is taught, where students learn passively to "copy, memorize and cram", overlooked the "tremendous" potential of the "motion pictures, radios and sound in teaching sociology" (Fulcomer 1947: 157), in other words, of bringing the new technologies into the sociological classroom.

In the case of British sociology, the back story to the discipline and its expansion in the 1960s offers further insights into why research methods (courses) are so unloved by staff and students alike. As Plamena Panayotova (2019) argues in their insightful history of sociology in Britain, the focus on sociology as a discipline that provided general education led to research methods being understood as generalist 'tools' rather than as requiring specialist knowledge, as in the case of

theory, which became predominant in sociology curricula. It seems likely that we are still dealing with the resonance of this within our curricula and in the ways that colleagues and students approach social research methods.

Over the past fifteen years, however, there has been many exciting agenda-setting books pointing to the opportunities to do research in new ways. Words like 'innovative', 'creative' and 'co-created' litter the covers of titles in how to do research often in conversation with other practices from arts and media production (see for example Lury & Wakeford 2012; Kara 2020; Coleman, Jungnickel & Puwar 2024). Additionally, the politics and purpose of research has been debated productively and interestingly from a variety of lenses being is critical disabilities studies, or decolonising methods or feminist and queer methodologies (Schalk 2017, Smith 1999, Ramazanoğlu & Holland 2002, Browne & Nash 2010).). The unpopularity of methods teaching today cannot, then, be explained solely by the predominance of dry and bloodless textbook knowledge on course reading lists.

The unpopularity of methods of learning and teaching for students may be that their starting point is one of confusion about what research constitutes and / or they do not see themselves as researchers-in-the-making (see also Deem and Lucas 2006). This is further exacerbated by the seemingly bloodless and abstract way research methods is taught, which curbs any enthusiasm and excitement for enquiring into social life. As Hood (2006) argues, the reliance of those teaching methods on textbooks—the aforementioned grey literature by grey men—mystifies the research process, generating myths about the doing and value of research and placing it out of the reach of undergraduates. In other words, the democratisation of knowledge about doing research—which is at the heart of many new texts on methods (see for example O'Reilly 2025)—is far from the norm in methods texts.

An associated problem is that we teach research methods in a vicarious way. Students read and learn about how others have done research rather than learn how to do it themselves. Therefore, the doing of research is accessed by the beautifully written and carefully crafted descriptions of others, often established scholars reflecting on their own practice, at a much more advanced level than the students taking their own courses (Behar 1996). Such polished accounts produced after the fact, results of reflection, editing and rewriting by their authors. As such they tend to erase the messy reality of doing social research—features of the research which might otherwise find their way into published papers on reflexivity (see for example Benson and O'Reilly 2022;

Finlay 2002) or what happens when research doesn't quite go to plan (Hughes et al. 2025)—which can help to further demystify the research process, reminding students that qualitative research is a social process and that even changes of direction in the course of research can reveal valuable insights into the social world.

Such vicarious knowing is also at the heart of methods courses structured like a 'methodological mix tape', where staff come and give talks about the methods they used in their own research. This lacks relevance to the tasks, skills, and challenges the practicalities that students face, be it how to formulate questions in a way that does not already presume the answers or how to analyse an interview. In short, students do not learn the skills that develop the expertise and confidence they need to do research at their level. In consequence there is a risk that they don't acquire skills that can be used within their studies, or which can be used to address the specific challenges of their assessments and projects.

A related problem is that established researchers often write methodologically to exorcise or reckon with interesting difficulties experienced in doing research after the fact. We often reflect on agony, an interesting ethical conflict, or scandalous political revelations. These often make for the most interesting reflections on the social life of doing research. However, they can sometimes fill students with apprehension and methodological fear. For example, reading the eloquent reflections by an anthropologist on the difficulties and loneliness of participant observer and being a 'professional stranger' as Michael Agar put it, can leave students thinking, "that sounds painful and hard. I never want to do an ethnography!" (Agar 1980).

Another dimension of this is that students can approach methods thinking, both quantitative and qualitative, with a pragmatic 'just pass for now' sensibility rather than building skills and tools that can be developed in the future. Whether it is multiple regression and using R, or thematic analysis, the lack of practical application can leave students feeling "I just need to learn enough to pass".

A final aspect of the limited ways we approach teaching research methods is limited to propositional modes of assessment. Courses are very often examined by asking students to write a literature review for a research topic of their choice and/ or a research proposal. This is not to diminish the value in the craft of writing a coherent and convenient proposal. However, it does not help students practice the tools of the trade and students during their social science careers

can end up with a kind of 'proposal fatigue', having worked and reworked their ideas at each step of the undergraduate and postgraduate careers without ever doing an interview or collecting a piece of research data.

The real challenge we face as teachers is how to bring the *social dimension of doing research* into the classroom or learning environment. Elizabeth D. Scheel put this up well in her phrase "learning by doing" as a way of ensuring that we are "making the methods course memorable" (Scheel 2002: 153). As we reflect in the following section, there might be limitations on what we can allow students to do and what they can engage with, but the first important principle is for students to see themselves in the curriculum. Students should not view the doing of research as something that only others who are more qualified do. As such, a starting point in rethinking how we teach research methods is to focus on the practical challenges that student researchers face and what it means to do research and create ways for them to make those movements of imagination for themselves.

Teaching at yet another turning point

The lacklustre approach from (some) staff and students towards this area of the curriculum, is not due to a lack of imagination. The conditions of UK Higher Education, past and present are also significant. This includes how training for HE teaching is generic, designed and assessed by a national provider (Advance HE); as well as how the disciplinary community and our professional association considers teaching. It also relates to perennial political discussions about the importance or not of the relationship between teaching and research, which by now have a decades-long history. Simply put, these shape how we teach and structure what is and is not possible inside and outside the classroom. Working under such conditions has also influenced the value that is placed on teaching by academic colleagues around the UK today.

These conditions contrast markedly to how teaching is considered by the sociological community in the US. Viewing this from the outside it appears that teaching and pedagogy are a more central concern within the American Sociological Association (ASA) than they are for the British Sociological Association (BSA). The resources and infrastructure on offer from ASA to support sociological pedagogy from the include the dedicated quarterly peer-reviewed journal, *Teaching Sociology*, published by the national subject association, and TRAILS, an online peer-reviewed library of high-quality teaching resources. This is, in part, a response to a job market where it is the norm for applications for an academic post to include, as standard, a teaching

portfolio demonstrating teaching philosophy; course outlines and lesson plans; student evaluations and reflective statements on teaching practice alongside evidence of teaching experience and accomplishments.[1]

We do not have anything like this in the UK, which may be explained by the fact that teaching and pedagogy have long sat outside the remit of subject associations. In earlier iterations, the Higher Education Academy (HEA – now Advance HE) was organised through networks that brought together scholars from cognate disciplines in conversations about teaching and learning, including the network for Sociology, Anthropology and Politics (C-SAP). This was established in 2000 and led to the publication of several monographs and edited volumes through which these conversations could be shared more widely. However, within Advance HE priorities have shifted, and these subject networks have been replaced with a broad social science cluster. The publications produced through these original networks have now sunk without a trace, even though their contents offered essential reflections on how the changes to HE ongoing at that point in time impacted on learning and teaching in these discipline areas (see for example Carter and Lord 2006).

The absence of these structures matters, whether to accredit teaching contributions within the discipline, or to make the time and space for collective conversations where ownership over sociological pedagogies might be encouraged and sustained. It is important context to why this Special Issue is significant in a context where conversations about pedagogy have become largely disconnected from conversations about who we are as a sociological subject community.

On a more immediate level, the conditions in which we teach and institutional constraints have also played a role in shaping teaching and learning of research methods. Changes across the sector including the shift towards providing education at scale, mean that colleagues teaching research methods might find themselves teaching very large groups of students. In the context of ongoing changes within UK HE, research methods teaching at both undergraduate and postgraduate level might be delivered to students from a wide range of social science disciplines. There is a danger with such shifts that the intellectual signature of disciplines gets erased, new modes of teaching embracing thematic areas divorced from disciplinary ways of thinking and doing.

In some institutions, the shift away from the large lecture / small(er) seminar configuration—previously a stalwart of British university teaching—towards large group lectures, accompanied by a reduction of additional teaching support, has had additional consequences for how we teach. Such trends are even more pronounced in the current context, where institutions across the UK HE sector, often at the behest of management consultants with limited prior experience of the sector (Shore 2024), are engaging in 'size and shape' exercises that allow them to reduce their running costs and deficits, our approaches to pedagogy expected to adapt to these as lightning speed.

On a more mundane level, timetabling, room layout, the technology available (and working) in the room, all shape what can be done in the classroom. We have all been there, whether trying to play a short audio clip, video, and finding that the technology doesn't work, or hoping to introduce interactive elements to our teaching that require students talk to one another, to find that students are having to contort their bodies to be able to engage in conversation.

Universities' ethics committees are increasingly risk-averse when it comes to students participating in the social world as a way of studying it which, as we discuss in the following section, is one of the ways in which people have brought research methods to life in the classroom. As applying for ethical approval has become ubiquitous and centralised within universities, as risk assessments have been introduced by health and safety, colleagues need to jump through an increasing number of hoops in order to allow students to experiment with doing research for themselves. These processes add complexity and time to the process in ways that may deter staff and students from taking research methods outside of the classroom, or which induce ethical hypochondria.

There is far more that we could say here about the conditions in which we are writing, and which undoubtedly contribute to why research methods are so unloved by academics and students. In recounting the above, what we have sought to make clear are some of the institutional conditions that place sociological craft out of reach of students. These run counter to our best efforts as educators to democratise knowledge and understanding of research methods and in guiding students in the practices through which they can become sociological researchers. Perhaps unsurprisingly, these considerations result in a situation where once more, we end up encouraging students to do meta-studies of social life, their raw materials confined to the library or the exegesis of policy reports, rather than engage in the world around them.

How to Bring Sociological Craft Alive in the Classroom

We are hardly alone in arguing that we need to bring social research alive in the classroom. A review of the literature on teaching research methods revealed it as one of the most common themes concerned teaching methods and techniques (Earley 2014). Yet, our observation of this literature is that when it comes to sociology, and in particular sociology in the UK, there is less coverage in peer reviewed journals.

However, the same is not true on the other side of the Atlantic. *Teaching Sociology* has a rich seam of papers that foreground the importance of active learning in research methods provision. The earliest example of this is Clifton's article which elaborates on how to encourage students to actively participate in research through the use of a field manual focussed on basic data collection and analysis.

> '(I)f the teaching of sociology does not include student involvement in social research, it may mislead students about the discipline's method of inquiry. It is not enough to assert that sociology is a science, instead students need to be directed in the practice of sociology as a science'. (ibid 1976: 139)

The *doin soc* manual he describes in the paper was designed to offer a route map guiding students through the exploratory, descriptive and relational dimensions of research. What is particularly inspiring about this piece is that it demonstrates that doing sociology requires a specialist set of skills, what we refer to in this paper as sociological craft. Unfortunately, the only trace of the manual is the journal article, pointing to the importance of infrastructures and archives where teaching resources can be shared with a wider community.

Other contributions to *Teaching Sociology* highlight the value of integrating student research projects into undergraduate and postgraduate training, including 'learning by doing' (Takata and Leiting 1987), the lessons learned from speaking to instructors and students who participated in a student research project in a local community setting, and living-data exercises (Rohall et al. 2004), in which students experience the research process through roleplay, their reflections of these different roles used to scaffold their understandings of research in practice. What these different interventions offer is a combination of experiential and reflexive learning.

In our own teaching practice, we have included practical exercises that get students out of the classroom and into the social world, encouraging them to complete a series of practical tasks from small exercises in attentiveness and observation and making field notes to writing questions, conducting interviews, collecting visual data or collecting quantitative evidence.

Taking social research off the page and out of the classroom

While there is a good deal of debate about the importance of 'immersion' and spending time in 'the field', we have often been amazed by how much can be done by groups of students in one hour of ethnography, or observant participation, whether in the queue at the campus coffee shop or at a local bus stop. These kinds of activities can give students an experience of what it means to live a sociologically attentive life. Harvey Molotch (1994) calls this the gift of 'going out', and it is particularly apposite to learning research methods.

This ethos was at the heart of the groupwork Les and Michaela ran while co-teaching at postgraduate level at Goldsmiths. Our postgraduate teaching, delivered to a group of 15-20 students each year, included a student-led and instructor-supported urban ethnography in areas close to the college. This involved careful planning to avoid it becoming something close to an intrusive 'sociological safari.' We selected sites where we had previously conducted our own research that we were able to share with the students. Students worked in small research teams to first design, and then conduct and report on a group ethnography pilot study.

The research design phase which took place over three weeks included: (i) structured discussions within groups about preconceptions, experiences, preferences and prejudices that might influence an individual's engagements with the fieldsite; (ii) an initial scoping trip to the fieldsite; (iii) work to negotiate the roles within the team for team members; (iv) the development of research questions, aims and objectives; (v) identifying the practicalities of conducting the ethnography—what methods, tools and devices they would take into the field, and who would do what; and (vi) the development of a code of ethics relevant to the project designed. This phase culminated in a 20-minute team presentation of the research proposal, and follow up questions.

The second phase involved using the research proposal as a starting point for a two-week team ethnography. The output from this was a poster and 5-minute presentation, prepared and delivered by the group, that offered a clear and concise message about the research that communicated the research questions, data and methods, and 2-3 findings from the research supported by examples.

The teaching team provided formative feedback to each team at both stages. Throughout the process, the students were also encouraged to individually reflect on their experiences in a reflexive learning journal. These exercises allowed peer support in the development of the skills and confidence needed to write a research proposal and to give them first-hand experience of being a researcher.

Just getting out of the classroom and into the social world encourages students to understand the social dimensions of being a researcher and that we are inside and part of the things—that is culture, history and society—that, as sociologists, we are trying to understand. For example, on one occasion, a student asked: "But what should I wear for the fieldwork exercise"? There was real concern in her voice. It was a serious point. Like all forms of social interaction, acting as a researcher involves 'impression management' to use Erving Goffman's phrase (Goffman 1959). What to wear was only one part of the researcher's self-presentation or what we have called the social dimensions of research.

While self-selecting into the programme, the students who took the MA Social Research have predominantly gone on to work in social research, whether continuing their studies to doctorate level or working in the public and third sector. In 2025, Les and Michaela contacted some of their former graduates from the programme to ask for their reflections on how we taught research methods.

James Green studied with us from 2016 to 2018. He went on to complete a PhD in Sociology, and is now a lecturer. As he reflected in an email: "One moment that has stayed with me is the walking ethnography exercise in Catford (South East London). Wandering through everyday streets with a researcher's lens - notebook in hand, conversations with locals unfolding - was my first real taste of ethnographic fieldwork. The social research course didn't just teach me how to do research - it taught me how to see like a researcher."

Livia Dragomir was part of the 2014-15 cohort and now works as a social researcher, with experience of working in both the charity and public sectors. As she stressed, "Although I don't remember much about the facilities such as the library or course materials I associate that year with South East London and developing a more sociological eye for the world around [me]". As such, both Livia and James' reflections offer a powerful endorsement of the value of learning research methods through using them. Livia additionally highlighted the significance of the peer support built into the course to her personal development as she stressed, "I expanded my skillset and my perspective … I think that this was facilitated by my colleagues on the course as well as the quality of teaching".

As we have already noted, it is getting harder to gain approval for these kinds of exercises as universities become stricter about the risks of students doing activities outside of the classroom, and they are not best fit to working with large groups of students, but where opportunities remain finding ways to engage students in the practice of doing research can support their personal and professional development as sociological researchers.

Filming sociological craft in action: *Fieldwork Fables*

Under conditions where it is increasingly difficult to take students out into the social world, another strategy is to bring the sociability of research into the classroom. This was the logic behind the *Fieldwork Fables* project, which sought to produce resources that could make the teaching and learning of research methods interesting and fun. This project brought together Les and Michaela's experience of teaching research methods, with Maisie's experience as a professional actor, who was then retraining as a sociologist by taking the MA Social Research at Goldsmiths.[2] *Fieldwork Fables* dramatised research dilemmas faced by our colleagues in the sociological research community, reconstructing these on film. Drawing inspiration from work of Stan Cohen (1979) and Howard Becker (2014) the films offered *realistic sociological fictions*, demystifying the process of social research.

The scenarios were developed in conversations between Maisie, Les and Michaela, with Maisie preparing briefs for each. Following this brief, the professional actors role-played each scenario. We recorded two versions of each, in which the social dimensions of played out differently. These did not simply construct a 'bad/wrong' version in contrast to a 'good/right' but encouraged students to make relative judgements about the conduct of the researcher, in order to develop their critical and analytical skills. The fables included not only events taking place in

interview settings but also the unplanned encounters that surprise researchers with unanticipated challenges. The resulting short films bring the social life of doing research into the classroom, enabling students to watch the unfolding drama and imagine themselves as both the researcher and the person being researched.

In what follows, we describe and explain the rationale behind the four scenarios we produced.

Fable 1: 'It's not what you think…'

The most basic task of a researcher is to ask questions. However, this challenge is far from simple, easy or basic. Our aim with this film was to get students to imagine themselves in the role of a researcher and think about what is done well or poorly.

Under her stage name Maisie Bryceland, Maisie plays the role of Ellie, a student conducting a practice interview for her social research methods class. Her flatmate Sara is a dancer, played by professional actor Kellie Shirley. From the outset, it is clear that Ellie is fascinated by Sara's experience of one job she had working in a nightclub. As the interview progresses, how Ellie frames the questions about the 'strip club' reveals the sociological presumptions she has about the sexual politics and the sex industry, gender inequalities or the 'male gaze personified' as she puts it. Resisting these leading questions, Sara repeatedly stresses the mundane and an unspectacular nature of her experience to demonstrate that the experience was not how Ellie is imagining and interpreting it.

The film explores how to ask questions in a way that enables the people being questioned to centre what is important and meaningful to them, organised around the idea of active listening. It also focuses on the dangers of asking questions in a way that is laden with values or where the researcher runs the risk of presuming that they already know the answers. Finally, it considers the risks of being fascinated with the dramatic or the spectacular or even salacious aspects of society and how this might limit what we are prepared to hear from those we are interviewing.

What we also wanted students to think about is how the way participants like Sara replied to value-laden questions might also be read as forms of 'moral defence' to the presumed stigma that is being imposed through the interviewer's questions. In this way, we wanted this fable to not only be an example of 'bad questioning' but also to raise questions about the analytical status we give what people say in interviews.

Fable 2: Benefit Blues

To do research, we often develop relationships to establish trust. But this also means having to manage expectations from the people we work with in terms of what we can offer and exchange. As researchers, we become entangled in the webs of the relationships we build, which are simultaneously essential for good participatory research but sometimes challenging. The 'Benefit Blues' research fable highlighted this tension, drawing from a scenario offered to us by Robin Smith based on ethnographic research with outreach workers in Cardiff (see for example Hall and Smith 2013).

Manish, played by Bhasker Patel, is doing a postdoctoral research project studying a team of six outreach workers who work with the rough-sleeping homeless. He is not just observing but also actively participating. While he is not studying the rough sleepers themselves and has not got informed consent to do so ethically, part of his work is experiencing the situations a 'real' outreach worker deals with day to day. This is how he meets Billy, a musician and rough sleeper, who goes on to ask Manish for help. He has missed an appointment with the unemployment agency, and his benefits have been stopped.

The fable brings to life the tangle of ethical dilemmas that researchers face not only in relation to the people they work with directly but also to the variety of people they encounter through their research. In this case, Manish isn't 'researching' people like Billy. However, Billy sees him as someone who is supposed to help him and asks Manish for money to help pay for a shelter. What the scenario does is try and help students see how the researcher's roles and boundaries need to be negotiated in circumstances that are often messy and complex.

There aren't simple solutions here, and this is really the lesson that we are trying draw out. A PhD student reflected after watching *Benefit Blues* in a workshop:

> I felt myself getting angry with the researcher in the film and thought to myself I'd never act like that but then I caught myself thinking 'but I can't be sure I wouldn't make the same mistakes'.

One thing is for sure: in conducting research, it is not possible to learn anything without making mistakes. Such realisations encourage students to develop a more realistic but also more forgiving approach to the inevitable mistakes they and others might make in the process of doing research.

Fable 3: Power Play

Social researchers are often concerned, and sometimes tormented by, the privilege and power that is bestowed upon them as the creators of knowledge. However, research encounters with wealthy or influential participants can trouble some of the assumptions about the power dynamics of research encounters. The scenario was offered by Michaela, inspired by her experiences of doing research for the middle classes and the city project (see for example Benson and Jackson 2013).

In this fable, Hayley, a young female researcher played by Maisie Bryceland, has arrived late and flustered to interview a middle-aged, established member of Highgate, a wealthy north London district. Timothy, played by Terence Booth, is unconvinced by Hayley's quite clumsy attempt to introduce the research by explaining her interest in class, 'elites' and community change. He asks her pointedly, "Which elite do you think I am?", claims that he is "unclassifiable", and refuses to sign the informed consent form.

Power Play foregrounds the things that are often presumed in the social dimensions of doing research so pointedly made by our student who asked what kind of outfit a researcher wears. Watching Hayley stumble foregrounds the importance of being on time, communicating in advance with potential participants in an organised and respectful way, and being prepared for the research meeting.

However, it also encourages students to reflect on the gendered and other power dynamics that play out through the research encounter. While researchers have often been encouraged to consider their power and privilege, the scenario presented in this fable shows how context-specific such considerations need to be.

One of the advantages of using these short films is that the whole scene can be captured with all its unspoken texture in just a few minutes. A participant commented on this after a workshop using this fable:

> The *Fieldwork Fable* films engaged me both emotionally and intellectually. It presents material in such a way as to elicit 'scenic understanding' (cf. Alfred Lorenzer) whereby we have to relate to the entire complex of a relations that compose a scene, including our own

relationship to it in terms of identifications and projections, both positive and negative. Plenty of provocations to unsettle and stimulate further inquiry into assumptions and feelings underlying the scene, which are hard to recognise and hard to articulate.

As researchers at any level of experience or expertise, we very rarely, if ever, get to watch ourselves in the fieldwork. The value of films is that they let us do this.

Fable 4: Is It Fair?

Social research is premised on empathy and understanding life courses, stories, opinions and the broader social patterns underlying them. This broad exposure can make it difficult for researchers to hear and tolerate language which can border on abuse or hatefulness.

In this last fable, we witness Amina, a PhD researcher played by Kiran Dadlani, conduct an interview as part of a broader project exploring Home Office immigration policing initiatives. The scenario was contributed by Yasmin Gunaratnam, inspired by research conducted as part of the Mapping Immigration Controversy research project (see for e.g. Jones et al. 2017).

Amina has been helping conduct interviews and focus groups with different groups of people – from refugees to established white British communities. She is committed to anti-racist initiatives and feels strongly that the government's hard line is only creating more fear and distrust. However, she feels it is also important to try and understand the social factors that drive racist and anti-immigration attitudes.

Some interviews have, however, been quite uncomfortable for Amina as participants can turn the questions back on her as the researcher, on occasion using language she finds insulting. The broader landscape of the hostile environment on immigration can become a part of hostility in the research interview situation. In *Is it fair?* we witness Amina's interview with Joanna, played by Maisie Bryceland, who has voiced her anti-immigrant concerns. Joanna starts to ask questions back to Amina and challenge her including whether it is fair that "infectious diseases are being introduced or re-introduced to the UK as a consequence of immigration". Amina flounders to Joanna's chagrin, who says bitterly, "You don't like it when I ask questions, do you?" Amina tries to talk about migration in a global sociological context of world poverty, Joanna says sternly: "That would be a university answer!"

The film uncomfortably challenges the implicit structure of empathy at the heart of interviews: the researcher asks the questions and listens empathically. The informant may be listened to but is not necessarily authorised to speak back. The uncomfortable challenge for Amina is that Joanna turns the tables. What should she do in the face of what she considers to be Joanna's racism? Perhaps this means that the 'structure of empathy' written into the sociological dialogue has limits. In moments like the one described in this fable, researchers must accept contrasting or incommensurable moral and political judgements. Sometimes, there is simply no potential for further dialogue while trying at the same time to learn something from how that line is drawn.

Fieldwork Fables on the Curriculum

Since producing these films, we have shared them widely within the UK sociological community as a free resource for colleagues to use in their classrooms. To date, they have been used in more than 80 courses, including those that we teach ourselves.

Due to cost and resource limitations, we have not been in a position to conduct a full evaluation of how these films have been received by the staff using them or the students watching them. But colleagues have on occasion shared with us how these they have been received and there have been other opportunities for us to solicit feedback. For example, Les has piloted the use of these films in the classroom at different institutions, running workshops where participants were encouraged to discuss the issues raised by the scenarios. As part of this, he solicited feedback from academic colleagues and students attending.

One PhD student summed up our aspiration in the following feedback:

> The session was very engaging and stimulating in the sense that it made the little but real and critical issues involved in making social research come alive. The phrase I have in mind is "from page to stage". It really gets you to not just read [but to] think about the real issues involved in research (ethics in action, practical concerns such as safeguarding vulnerable research participants and indeed the researcher, the complexities of social research in the sense that social research is not straightforward as the researcher is often not a neutral player in the drama, if s/he ever is, contextualising the field as a dynamic situation).

One of the problems we mentioned earlier is the vicarious quality of method teaching, but while the students watched the films in class as onlookers, they could also imagine themselves in the scenario in ways that are not as accessible as considering research on the page.

Aleksandra Lewicki used the films in the undergraduate qualitative research methods module at the University of Sussex. She was attracted to the films because they "highlight the significance of reflexivity across all stages of the research process" (pers. comm, 26 April, 2019). As part of the review of this course, she interviewed seminar tutors on the qualitative research methods module, generously sharing these with us with permission for reuse.

The responses of the tutors, shared below, are proof of the usefulness of the films as teaching resources:

> Brilliant material – good to show research in action rather than always working with text-based resources. Students were engaged and unnerved, in a good way - they could see how easily one can get it 'wrong'.
>
> The films triggered a very lively discussion among students – who discovered even more 'issues' in the material than I had spotted myself. I particularly appreciated the example of 'researching a friend' as this is something quite a few of them are trying out themselves.
>
> The films bring research to life, illustrating the value of ethical guidelines. Students could also see that ethics was much more than just a list of rules. Although some of the 'mistakes' researchers made were ridiculous, students could see how easily these are made. The films helped to shake up their confidence that they have 'it all covered'.
>
> I particularly appreciated how the materials enabled critical debate of the circulation of intersectional power dynamics in the field, and the significance of building of relationships … Everyone participated in the discussion in a direct way, and enabled students to imagine what doing an interview would actually look like.

What these responses demonstrate is the value of these films for staff teaching research methods, democratising knowledge of the research process, and leading to a greater engagement by students in understanding what they might encounter by doing research and put themselves in the place of the researcher.

Conclusion: centring the sociable in social research methods teaching

Our first point by way of conclusion is that *all sociologists should see themselves as methods teachers*. If we are all research practitioners involved in the craft of doing sociology, then that means we are all 'methods people'. In the appendix to *The Sociological Imagination* (1959), C. Wright Mills offers a summary of what it means to practice social science as a craft. More than fifty years later, we argue that the tools of our craft, as both teachers and researchers, have been expanded, supplemented and proliferated exponentially.

In the first instance, we encourage an understanding of methods teaching not as passing on a set of tools but rather as training future generations in attentive sociological craft. While we have restricted our discussion here to qualitative methods, this is as urgent in the case of quantitative research methods. A first line of defence against the reduction of research methods training to generic skills is to come together as a subject community to emphasise the value of a sociological craft that connects research training to the themes, issues and problems that researchers focus on. Reclaiming the unloved curriculum might require that we work together to displace the fetishization of tools and skills to consider instead the analysis that these enable and the knowledge that empirical research produces.[3]

In other words, it is time that we celebrate the broader skills that can be trained through an engagement with research methods. These are related to how we think, our research practices, what we do with the information that we're given or we've collected, how we approach organising data, and how we analyse and communicate the information to draw out particular narratives that can communicate complicated and complex social worlds. Understood this way, training in research methods is best understood as facilitating the development of critical and analytical thinking, a hallmark of sociological training and skills that is particularly valued by employers across a range of industries and sectors.

The current conjuncture in UK HE may make realigning our teaching with this agenda seem challenging, particularly when it comes to the limits that are placed on how we teach by our institutions. Yet, just as new technologies offer us the opportunities and affordances for researching the social world (Back and Puwar 2012), they also offer the prospect of coming together as a subject community and for engaging students differently with sociological craft.

The production of *Fieldwork Fables* was always intended as a way to produce resources that be shared and used beyond our own institution. Yet, this has not been without challenge. The original sharing of these with people via the cloud, resulted in these being deleted time and again.

This is a notable contrast with our experiences with podcasting, where we have been able to make use of commercial platforms and infrastructures to hosting, distributing and archiving.[4] Ensuring that teaching resources such as *Fieldwork Fables* are available to the wider community sustainably requires infrastructures beyond our institutions. As we highlighted earlier in the paper, compared with our sociological colleagues in the US, the infrastructures for this are largely absent in the UK. At the time of writing, we are exploring the prospects for hosting and archiving these videos with *The Sociological Review Foundation*, who host a collection of sociological podcasts, and the *Connected Sociologies Curriculum* teaching resource.

Our argument is that to make sociological teaching 'demonstrably alive', we need to create teaching resources that move beyond lecturers talking, and students reading. This kind of pedagogy fosters movements of imagination in which students not only learn how to 'do research' but come to see themselves as the makers of sociology and the authors of its future.

Notes

1. This is not to celebrate what is undoubtedly a gruelling and unforgiving process that offers further evidence of the neoliberalisation of the University, but instead to highlight how teaching is built into the system of academic recruitment and promotion, is central to the activities of the subject association (who have also taken on the role of 'accrediting' teaching via their peer-reviewed activities), and has therefore taken a more central role in the ASA so that it can best support its members.
2. The resources that we produced through this project were developed and supported through internal funds from the Department of Sociology (2014-15) and from the Goldsmiths Annual Fund (2015-16).
3. Thanks to Aaron Winter for this astute evaluation.
4. Both Les and Michaela have experimented with podcasting over the years, including *Recovering Community* and *Who do we think we are?*

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Michaela Benson is Professor in Public Sociology at Lancaster University and the Chief Executive of the Sociological Review Foundation. Her research has focused on migration studies and urban sociology with particular contributions to the fields of Brexit and migration, lifestyle migration and class, place and space. At the heart of her work is a commitment to engaging a range of publics with sociological research, from policy-makers to students and teachers, by producing and distributing outputs tailored to these audiences. Before coming to Lancaster, she was based in the Department of Sociology at Goldsmiths, Unviersity of London.

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