Editorial:
Advancing the methodological frontiers of research into teaching in higher education

Method and pedagogy

When it comes to advancing knowledge, pedagogy as an object of study is 'hard-to-know' (Nind, Curtin and Hall 2016, 3). By extension, there are significant challenges in researching teaching in higher education. Different pedagogies lead us in different methodological directions. For example, in researching teaching, investigators might be addressing something conceptualised as an art, a craft or a science, and this changes what counts as worth knowing and how the researcher might know it. As Nind, Curtin and Hall (2016, 50) discuss, how we position pedagogy impacts decision-making, including: 'What do we, as researchers, look at? Where do we look? How do we look? What is visible and invisible from different points of view?'. Much of the everyday work of teaching in higher education is so familiar to researchers that how it is experienced and enacted, even how it is articulated (see Nind et al., 2016 for these distinctions) recedes into the dangerous waters of assumed common sense. Such familiarity can draw researchers to particular methodological approaches that can become common in the sense of Brinkmann's (2015) 'Good Old-Fashioned Qualitative Inquiry (GOFQI)' and such familiar common sense that they barely require mention in empirical-type journal papers (Wald, Harland and Daskon 2024).

The problem of the combination of the familiar - substantively and methodologically - makes the topic of method/ologies for researching teaching in higher education a pertinent topic for a special issue of *Teaching in Higher Education*. Indeed, the journal has a long history of publishing papers that engage with methodological approaches, as well as the teaching of research methods. As the editorial team, we were interested in new and different ways in which researching pedagogy (or just teaching) were being adopted or developed to make the familiar new to us, and to make the 'implicit' (pedagogical values and decision-making) 'explicit' (Lewthwaite and Nind 2016, 417), so that the 'private practice of teaching' becomes visible (Ferrie and Greenwood 2023, 1) and knowable. The range of methods discussed in the special issue are interesting in this respect.

Our focus in the special issue is not restricted to what is new, but includes what methods and designs best fit the authors' chosen theoretical stances and pedagogical contexts in researching teaching in higher education. Just as one's choice of pedagogy 'is never innocent' (Bruner 1996, 63), nor is one's choice of methodology – both communicate the values held and assumptions made. In studies of pedagogy/teaching more widely, it is common to adopt an ecological model to penetrate how teaching is embedded and mediated within cultures, systems and discourses (Luke 2006). A

sociocultural approach is also common in recognition of the ways in which the lived realities, experiences and perspectives of teachers and learners are relevant and how teaching interweaves with the social and cultural aspects of identities, power, interests, agenda and practices.

Our stance is that pedagogies and methodologies interact in interesting ways. As special issue editors we were interested in researchers' critical reflections on the established approaches they use to explore teaching in higher education as well as innovations in methodological approaches. We wanted researchers to go 'behind the scenes' (citing Sharlene Hesse-Biber discussed by Lewthwaite and Nind 2016, 422) of their conducting of research to a greater extent than is typical in substantive papers, making the research skills, processes and values more visible, thereby supporting a broader community dimension of reflexivity and capacity building. Deepening our insights into the connections between theory, research, teaching practice and learning can only benefit our ongoing efforts towards robust enquiry into higher education teaching.

Taking a sociocultural perspective ourselves, we acknowledge the broader methodological landscape, which is arguably ever-changing and doing so at a pace driven by technological advances and political responses to the world's urgent challenges, including internationalisation, globalisation and the development of a knowledge economy. We would expect our field to be impacted by the attention being given to data-driven methodological developments (Zhang et al. 2020), taking research away from theory. Simultaneously, we would expect to see developments in our critical relationship to knowledge and research including in attention to ethics, critical discourse analysis, critical race theory, feminist theory, critical realism, indigenous, decolonising, Global South, post-humanist and queer methodologies. Brown (2023, 158) reflects on the significant changes in the social sciences landscape of recent decades as scholars are required to 'identify unique and innovative contributions' and thereby to 'continually adjust and adapt existing methodological approaches', generating 'a linguistic and narrative turn (Atkinson, 1997), a participatory turn (Cornwall and Jewkes, 1995), a reflexive turn (Foley, 2002), a creative turn (Kara, 2015) and a turn towards the sensory and embodied (Pink, 2015)', as well as ontological and relational turns. While Brown (2023) is interested in how researchers may also become 'advocates, allies, activists and practitioners in the context of their research' (159), higher education researchers are mostly already practitioners in their own contexts providing a distinct dynamic.

Looking at our field in particular, Wald et al. (2024, 93) note that 'higher education researchers constitute a loose and diverse community that accommodates different ontologies and epistemologies, as well as approaches to conducting and writing research'. Their argument is that qualitative higher education journal articles would benefit from less space given to methods to make

way for deeper conceptual engagement and discussion of findings. This is based on a premise that our methodological literacy has matured such that mostly methods are familiar to readers; they can be taken for granted and they require little explanation (Brinkmann's (2015) GOFQI appearing here again). This leads us to Harland's (2012, 703) proposition that the study of higher education is an 'open-access' discipline servicing higher education. The proposition here is that there is no real need for foundational knowledge to be able to contribute (a position also held by Tight 2003 and Macfarlane 2011), with many researchers of higher education coming from careers in other disciplines, where they may still reside, with different methodological traditions. Harland's (2012, 706) argument extends to the methods used in the discipline and how competence in them is acquired:

> If I compare how I learned to do science with learning higher education research, the former was characterized by highly specialized knowledge and techniques that took me nine years to master. In higher education, I found that I could contribute with virtually no new training.

He describes learning by emulating and through immersion with guidance from mentors, but cites a different Harland (2010) discussing whether formal training might be needed for the teacher-as-researcher to do proper research in the field. Certainly, the study of teaching in higher education will gain from the methodological curiosity, exploration and depth shown by the authors in this special issue.

One aspect of teaching in higher education that has gathered research momentum on recent years is the teaching of social research methods. With the support of Economic and Social Research Council and National Centre for Research Methods in the UK, there has been a concerted effort to build the pedagogical culture in this previously neglected arena (see e.g. Nind et al. 2020; Nind and Katramadou 2023) with some parallels internationally (see e.g. Essence 2014). Ferrie and Greenwood (2023) remind us that research is 'an emotionally-driven practice' (Forrest and Ferrie, 2023, 91), especially with the skills needed in the social sciences undergoing change (Ferrie et al., 2022). The culture around research methods themselves can be emotive and have the punitive element that Lather (2013) has described coming from US federal government in its efforts to 'dictate "gold-standard" research methods via the "scientific based research" movement' (Taylor 2016, 311). According to Taylor (2016), the empirical post-qualitative research movement is acting against this instrumentalist kind of honouring of big data and regulation around qualitative research practice. It is noteworthy that in this special issue, whatever their induction into methods for researching teaching, the contributing authors have responded to our call for papers and gone beyond 'methods as usual' (Taylor 2016, 312) to pursue novel methods grounded in theory, values and/or skills.

While the teaching of methods has gathered pace, there is an ever-present danger of falling into the easy assumption that research proceeds smoothly and linearly towards a coherent conclusion.

Several of the papers in this special issue address the 'messiness' of research in the field and the need to react and dynamically adapt as surprises, challenges, dilemmas and disappointments present themselves. Indeed, it is these accounts that arguably afford us the most critical engagement with methodology, where researchers are compelled to reflexively re-examine the epistemological and axiological bases of their work.

In preparing this editorial, we have organised the eleven papers into three distinct themes, albeit recognising that this is somewhat artificial and that several papers cut across these themes. The first focuses on robust interconnections between theory and methodology, with the former shaping clear epistemological frameworks for collecting and analysing data. The second relates to the development of ethical values and procedural techniques to expand the range of voices that can be 'heard' in research. The third interrogates the use of novel arts-based approaches in pedagogic research, thereby broadening the methodological palette available.

Theory and method

Theory in this special issue plays an essential role: Legitimation Code Theory[1], activity theory, practice-led research (PLR) and network analysis are discussed to offer new ways of exploring educational research. Each paper demonstrates the importance of theorising practice as the focal point of research activities. Theory has the potential to drive knowledge creation at both individual and institutional levels, playing a significant role in the empowerment of teachers and development of more effective teaching practices.

In Morton's (2024) paper, theory plays a crucial role in shaping research methodology in several English Medium of Instruction (EMI) contexts as it guides knowledge-building practices. Morton (2024) states that EMI can be seen to be conceptually elusive (Macaro, 2018) with unclear purposes, undefined roles for lecturers, ownership issues, and potential negative impacts on other languages. In response, Legitimation Code Theory's (LCT)'s capacity to make knowledge-building practices visible, to conceptualize their organizing principles and to explore their effects (Maton 2014, 3), enables applied linguists and disciplinary specialists to work together using a shared language, thus breaking down potential barriers that linguistic metalanguage may cause. Morton (2024) also shows how LCT's toolkits may be employed to combine existing conceptual/methodological frameworks such as Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) and Multimodal Conversation Analysis (MCA). In this paper, he

[1] Legitimation Code Theory (always capitalised) or LCT is an explanatory framework or conceptual toolkit, rather than a meta-theory or any specific substantive account generated by enacting concepts from LCT.

also shares methodological challenges, for example, when using text corpora annotation software, and MDA.

To demonstrate the enabling capacities of Legitimation Code Theory, Morton (2024) provides several examples of past and current research practices. The paper presents a working version of translation devices for Semantics in an EMI computing study. Semantic density, for example, reveals how technical and everyday words can code complexity of meanings in disciplinary teaching. Morton (2024) also reveals the application of the LCT dimension, Autonomy, to enact a Chemistry lecturer's knowledge-building practices. In this example, he demonstrates how researchers can map the educationalist's knowledge practices onto an autonomy plane, identifying the autonomy code that best represents their pedagogical approach.

Colasante's (2024) paper discusses the use of activity theory, increasingly known as 'cultural-historical activity theory' (e.g., Engeström and Glăveanu 2012; Engeström and Sannino 2012), for analysing teaching practices as developmental processes. In the context of the paper, activity theory is used to explore the structure and dynamics of the digital teaching activities of anatomy lecturers within an Australian university. Teachers examine activity-related data and activity theory frameworks which not only enhances understanding of the interplay between theory, research, and practice but fosters a proactive learning environment for teachers. Unlike top-down approaches, and similar to Morton's (2024) focus on autonomy codes, activity theory interventions focus on transformative agency involving teachers centrally in idea development. With both Morton's and Colasante's theorisation of practice, teachers are enabled and become attuned to apparent contradictions within or extending from their activity. The contradictions could emerge as conflicts or dilemmas (Engeström and Sannino, 2011) in a teacher's practice.

Colasante (2024) argues that activity theory has the potential to deepen links between theory, research, and practice for research purposes, and to foster an agentic learning environment for teachers. However, there are key challenges, inviting further critique and adaptation, five of which are discussed. Examples of challenges are researcher subjectivity, and impositions on networked university activities such as ethical conditions for the design of Change Laboratory interventions.

Hamilton and Hansen's (2024) paper also explores teacher activity, in particular the theoretical underpinnings of practice-led research (PLR) within the field of open educational practice (OEP) in Australia. Like Morton (2024) and Colasante (2024), Hamilton and Hansen (2024) emphasise the need to bridge theory and practice, seeking to understand and improve both within complex and evolving research contexts. Open education is recast within a New Materialist framework and explained using

a Deleuzian philosophy of *Becoming* (Deleuze and Guattari 1994) as well as a focus on Paulo Freire's (2018) *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. These philosophical perspectives are used to explore the emancipatory and active potential of *Punk Rock pedagogy* (Kahn-Egan 1998). As such, the authors conceptualise OEP as an emergent educational project in *becoming*, involving 'more than human' modes of educational encounter, and foregrounding social critique and the politics of everyday life.

PLR is theoretically-grounded as a methodology that goes beyond traditional quantitative, qualitative, or mixed methods approaches because it focuses directly on the researcher's professional practice performativity. As with the other papers, challenges associated with this research approach are discussed. Hamilton and Hansen (2024) make explicit two such challenges. They argue that PLR, if employed, needs to have solid theoretical grounding to avoid unsupported claims based solely on practice outcomes. Additionally, it should not be enacted as reactive opposition to other, more traditional, research methods. PLR is a performative paradigm, which works from the unknown towards the known through creative action.

Hayes and Garnett's (2024) paper also focuses on teaching practice from a bottom-up perspective. It emphasises the importance of incorporating theory into the measurement of teaching excellence in higher education institutions. The authors argue that traditional methods for assessing teaching excellence are limited. They fail to capture the complex and relational nature of the teaching excellence concept. The paper calls for two epistemological shifts. The first, drawing on relational turn theory (Selg and Ventsel 2020), is to understand teaching excellence through relational structures and transactions, moving away from current frameworks that reduce it to proxies and benchmarks. The second involves designing measurements that are developmental, integrating them into the teaching and learning process. These shifts can be facilitated through network analysis.

Network analysis is a 'statistical lens through which higher education institutions can articulate their own process of striving for teaching excellence, and how it is constituted in their own contexts' (Hayes and Garnett 2024, pp.). It is a variable-centered approach that maps how groups of items (nodes) are organized into clusters and how these nodes are interconnected through correlational relationships. By examining the centroids, or centres of clusters, within networks, the methodology presents what happens in the process of striving for excellence in an institution and how this is shaped by that institution's knowledge beliefs, or 'epistemic frames' (Shaffer et al. 2016, as cited in Hayes and Garnett, 2024). This leads to a focus on process-oriented evaluation emphasising the understanding of excellence as a dynamic and evolving concept rather than a set of static benchmarks. This is why network analysis can be seen as *inner facing*, centred on how institutions perform to their own specifications. Additionally, analyses can be compared over time, to ultimately provide more broad-

based outward facing conceptualisations and a platform for more generalised discussion of what constitutes teaching excellence across institutions.

Voice and power

Several of the special issue papers specifically address issues of voice and power in higher education research, drawing from complementary perspectives. At its heart, the purpose of much empirical research in higher education is to access the experiences and inner worlds of those engaged as learners, educators, managers and so on. This is inexorably entangled with important issues of whose voices are sought, how they are heard, who hears them and how meaning is made from them.

Timmis et al. (2024) draw their methodological insights from a large-scale study focusing on the university experiences of rural students in South Africa. Marginalised even within the post-apartheid era, this is a diverse group of learners whose voices have been largely neglected and effectively silenced within the pedagogic and policy literatures. The study sought to 'foreground the social and cultural capital of students in rural contexts and how they are shaped by their home, school, and community' (pp.). Central to this was the involvement of 65 student co-researchers who led on data collection within their own social networks, as well as interpreting the accounts that emerged and moulding the stories that were ultimately told. The authors reflect on the methodological, ethical and wider philosophical issues encountered while implementing this participatory approach. As they note, while this is not novel in higher education research, there are few examples where the participants are marginalised students rather than educators or other practitioners. The value of the approach, they argue, is that it provides a sound epistemic foundation to disrupt colonial legacies and power imbalances, avoiding extractive practices and the misappropriation of knowledge.

With much in common, Moitra (2024) makes a compelling case for new reflexive methodological approaches to research the lived experiences of educators, learners and university administrators from indigenous communities. Identifying herself as not sharing this heritage, her doctoral work engaged with members of the Adivasi within the state of Jharkhand. Often referred to as 'Scheduled Tribes', the Adivasi are a heterogenous group of tribal communities that have long been socially, economically and educationally marginalised. While more recent efforts have been made, they remain notably under-represented within higher education (Varghese 2021). This setting within India is particularly engaging. Like most countries in the Global South, India continues to grapple with a historical legacy, with many of the pernicious colonial-era logics persisting in contemporary society, even after nearly 80 years of independence. Moitra (2024) argues that the Adivasi continue to be

subject to discriminatory beliefs about their 'otherness', limiting their voice and power within higher education.

While we might have included it within the following theme, we have elected to introduce Anuar and Mun's (2024) article here, reflecting its primary focus on questioning Western-centric knowledge systems around sustainability education. The authors argue for 'critical dialogue as meta-method' (pp), discussing how the combination of two elements of practice constructed a novel and generative space for learning, dialogue and understanding. Specifically, a workshop on making 'zines' – visual texts created within a disruptive and do-it-yourself ethos – was seeded with traditional proverbs from Malaysia and Kazakhstan, allowing the participating students to develop and share new connections and insights. The article comprises the authors' reflections, focusing on two epistemic 'tensions' that arose from the workshop.

Thus, these three articles all foreground the importance of *decoloniality* in the conception and pursuance of their studies, the former using it to frame the challenges and contradictions inherent in 'confronting and undoing the privileges of European worldviews [and] western methodologies' (Timmis et al. 2024, pp) in pursuit of an 'epistemic reciprocity' (Fricker, 2007). Similarly, Moitra (2024, pp) positions her work as disrupting 'colonial myths … that Tribes resist adoption of new ideas, are homogenous across communities and are undifferentiated and unstratified', while Anuar and Mun (2024, pp) seek to 'forge decolonial connections that recognise how various forms of knowledges, though particular, reflect shared concerns of humanity that trouble the knowledge hierarchies of civilised coloniser and savage colonised'.

Within this ethical-political framework, Timmis et al. (2024, pp) advocate for the importance of narrative and multimodal methodologies with 'less reliance on text [that] can be particularly helpful for participants who are not using their first language … thus offering increased opportunities for equitable participation'. Moitra's (2024) contribution is mainly normative, emphasising the methodological role of storytelling 'as a legitimate method to understand how institutional constraints hinder Tribal agency' (pp) in higher education. However, she also acknowledges the tensions that result from seeking stories from marginalised communities who may experience 'discomfort' about the possibility of their culture being misunderstood, diminished or ridiculed or their knowledge being misappropriated. She concludes that while there is a pressing need for allyship through research practice, this requires a commitment to collaborative agency at all stages of the process, from inception to dissemination. The question of appropriation also looms large for Anuar and Mun (2024), questioning whether the use of proverbs as cultural artefacts risks shallow tokenism and

‘romanticising the past and essentialising non-Western cultures in the process of foregrounding them’ (pp).

Through their candid reflections, Timmis et al. (2024) recognise and acknowledge the limits of their efforts towards ‘rebalancing’ the research process away from seeing students as mere ‘data providers’. Using Fraser’s (2009) normative social justice framework of *redistribution*, *recognition* and *representation*, they discuss how a commitment to ‘ensure that students were able to make choices over participation and to be in control of their own data’ (Timmis et al. 2024, pp) led to critical and challenging questions from the co-researchers about parity of esteem within the study’s academic outputs.

Lewis and Quinnell (2024) approach issues of voice and power from a diametrically opposite perspective to the first two papers discussed in this section. Rather than considering how ‘outsider’ researchers engage with marginalised educators or learners, their focus is on the challenges associated with researching the local and familiar as an ‘insider’. They do this through the reflective exploration of two research ‘moments’ from their own experience, centring the complex entanglements when ‘the researcher is also in the research and the research relationships’ (Lewis and Quinnell 2024, pp). They argue that this leads to a ‘crisis of representation’ (Flaherty et al. 2002) due to the tensions between the desire to share authentic and contextually rich findings and the duty to obscure identities and ensure no ancillary harm ensues from participation. Importantly, they contend, this necessitates action beyond simple actions of procedural ethics (e.g. producing pseudonyms) to focus on a feminist ethic that foregrounds ‘safe participation, honouring voice, declaring positionality, and respecting intersectionality’ (Lewis and Quinnell 2024, pp).

In their first reflection, Lewis and Quinnell (2024) discuss how Jungian archetypes were used as a narrative device to present colleagues’ authentic accounts about academic identity formation. Being highly personal, sharing these accounts posed a professional risk to the participants. Through partial fictionalisation, this identifiability risk was mitigated while maintaining the essential integrity of the agentic voice. This, they argue, served to protect the persisting relationships that had been (re)formed through the research process, sustaining harmony within the workplace. The second reflection references the reuse of data from student evaluations of teaching and questions the common assumption that secondary data is exempt from ethical considerations. They contend that ‘there is a difference in who is telling the tale’ (pp) and the meanings ascribed as a result. In particular, researchers may be exposed to decontextualised comments that could undermine colleagues by questioning their professional practice – when they have no opportunity to set the record straight. They navigated this by consciously positioning colleagues as indirect participants in the study and

affording them ethical consideration as such, including involving the relevant colleagues as co-researchers to provide agency and enrich analysis.

Lewis and Quinnell (2024, pp) conclude by stressing the intimacy that exists within academic communities and the need for 'trust, reciprocity, and the honouring of "rightful voice"' when undertaking insider research, advocating for a feminist culture of care to consider dilemmas and guide decisions. There is much in common here with the *decoloniality* advocated by Timmis et al. (2024), Anuar and Mun (2024) and Moitra (2024). Indeed, all four papers draw extensively from deontological understandings of research ethics, with a clear duty of thoughtful care towards participants, co-researchers and others.

This shared focus on ethics is a useful cue back to Timmis et al.'s (2024) conclusion that there is an inherent tension between the expectations of research funders for a predefined project plan that is immaculately delivered and the open-ended evolution of studies that are truly co-created with indigenous communities. Research foregrounding voice is expensive, ethically challenging and often messy, meaning that it does not fit comfortably with the deeply-ingrained – and arguably hegemonic – expectations of funders and western universities. They end with a warning that true methodological parity necessitates conceptual, ethical and bureaucratic leaps.

Arts-based approaches

Aside from Anuar and Mun (2024), introduced above, three of the other special issue articles report on emerging creative research methods, namely arts-based research approaches that draw on fiction specifically, and on a visual research method. Dobson and Clark (2024) focus on the professional doctorate in education (EdD). They argue that in using a traditional PhD template as a reference point for an EdD, there is a chance that the EdD will be constrained by understandings of research methodologies, and research writing that are not fit for the requirements of research that essentially seeks Mode 2 knowledge creation, that is transdisciplinary knowledge that is situated within the context of application (Gibbons et al. 1994). EdD researchers are often insiders, researching their own professional contexts, which 'creates a complex entanglement between research and practice, the workplace and the academy, the researcher, participants and audiences' (Dobson and Clark 2024, pp), a research relationship discussed in the Lewis and Quinnell (2024) paper introduced above. Understanding these entanglements requires the development of critical reflexivity, with implications for doctoral pedagogy. The authors posit that engagement in arts-based research can support students to create Mode 2 knowledge, and to embrace hybridity. Dobson and Clark (2024) make their case through their own hybrid submission, which outlines the theoretical similarities between an EdD

and arts-based research, followed by a scoping review which analyses six articles that report on the use of arts-based research in the context of EdD programmes. Their scoping review highlights the affordances of engaging in arts-based research, which include supporting reflexivity and identity transformation, developing awareness of alternative perspectives, and impacting wide and diverse audiences. They begin and end their paper with two pieces of creative non-fiction. The authors co-constructed their pieces to capture their lived experiences as those who supervise and support EdDs. Drawing on Leavy (2018), they argue that creative non-fiction can distil research and present it in a way that is more engaging for audiences outside of academia, the audiences whose practice could well be impacted by EdD research. The opening extract from a playscript, of a research seminar roundtable discussion, demonstrates the challenges that researchers can face in using arts-based approaches, here the use of poetry to explore pupils' lived experiences, when faced with resistance to methodological innovation. The final piece, a monologue from one of the characters in the initial playscript, reflects back on their experience of being part of the roundtable discussion, and how that experience led them to also engage in a creative approach, developing a playscript, where the voices of the young people in the research are loud, alongside other voices of those who might be moved change their practice as a result of watching the play.

Cunningham and Mills (2024) also use fiction, but in a very different way. Rather than the production of fiction, they take fiction as data, and the act of reading a form of enquiry. Their approach, which they describe as an alternative approach to fiction-based enquiry, is not to analyse the fiction (as is the case in, for example, Symes (2004), who analyses campus novels in light of policy changes in Australian universities; or the work of Henderson and Reynolds (2023) and Bulaitis (2020), referenced in the paper), but to make meaning through reading, bringing to the fore the process of creation and interpretation and using fictional texts as the research data. They draw on Maclure's (2010) notion of 'glow', that is, something in the data that calls to researchers, 'that make their hearts soar' (Cunningham and Mills 2024, pp). In the process of reading, readers (researchers) re/create the texts as they notice different things, and create different connections. Readers can be differently positioned within the enquiry as research subjects, research participants, and as researchers. Identifying what glows within the fiction-as-data is dependent on readers' own positionalities and experiences, and in the paper Cunningham and Mills (2024) share something of themselves, and their backgrounds as literary scholars who have moved from their original fields into education, before sharing their readings of Bernadine Evaristo's (2020) novel *Girl, Woman, Other*. Having mapped their technique, they offer quality criteria for both fiction-based research, which is re-visioned for the reader-based research they propose and is aligned with established frameworks of research criteria. This decision seeks to demonstrate how this approach with 'its exploratory and playful nature, can make sense of learning and teaching' (Cunningham and Mills 2024, pp), anticipating, perhaps, the kind of dismissive

reaction to innovative approaches from characters such as Professor Russell, who features in Dobson and Clark's (2024) playscript introduced above. Cunningham and Mills (2024) provide guidance for those who wish to experiment with this approach, before offering an example of reader-based research through readings of *On Beauty* by Zadie Smith (2005), which includes extracts of their discussion of the text, and how their readings of the text enabled exploration of their own practices within higher education. As they develop this approach, Cunningham and Mills (2024) are keen to explore texts in other languages, and from different contexts to see how they can further develop understandings of higher education globally, and perhaps also offer the invitation for others to do the same.

The third article sits within a different sphere of art-based research, that of visual research methods. Tidy et al. (2024) introduce a framework, exemplified through two case studies, on the use of memes and meme-making as a research tool within higher education. Memes, humorous pictures and videos that spread across the internet, play a role in contemporary culture and have been used in other research contexts to study society. There is, however, little evidence, the authors note, of their use in higher education research, although there are examples of how they have been used to enhance higher education teaching. Memes, as a research tool, sit within a suite of visual research methods, and Tidy et al. suggest that the more established visual methods of photo-elicitation and photo-interviewing can provide insight into how memes can be used within research. As with the use and creation of photos in research, memes as a research tool, Tidy et al. (2024, pp) argue, rely 'on an image to elicit from participants dimensions of their understanding', with the research participant positioned as meme creator, in a participatory approach to research. The authors posit that meme-making as a research method provides a safe space for expression, where anonymity can be retained and where participants are empowered by ownership of their creation; memes are familiar, particularly for higher education students, and they can be used across different disciplines; they can make research more inclusive, offering ease, flexibility and adaptability; and memes can inject humour into the research process. To support researchers who want to use memes as a research tool, the authors offer a seven-step approach to guide, and then share two case study examples to show their application with staff and student participants. In the first case study, memes are used as a means for students to express their emotion in relation to assessment, and in the second how memes were used to explore the professional identity of early career academics. As a research tool, memes offer an alternative way to access experiences and stimulate discussion in an accessible and familiar way. More generally, as Timmis et al. (2024) discuss, visual methods are well-positioned to enable researchers to traverse or transcend barriers of culture or language, although Anuar and Mun (2024) caution about the commodification of artefacts that are primarily intended to be political or expressive.

Advancing the methodological frontiers of research into teaching in higher education

As a special issue, the collection of papers provides a flavour of some of the ways in which researchers of teaching in higher education are adapting and advancing methods and approaches. What we see here is largely driven by the authors' passions, values, theoretical stances and disciplinary roots rather than by the challenges posed by researching this particular sector and focus. Thus, the special issue is more about what is possible than what is necessary, although we do recognise the imperative to grow decolonial methods and ethical and responsible approaches to research. It shows that what we do – and where and how we look – as researchers in higher education is somewhat personal, and in these examples at least, resistant to the pull to any kind of assumed gold standard. Indeed, returning to the assertion from Harland (2012) discussed earlier, what we show through this special issue is that the methodological palette to research teaching in higher education is continuing to broaden and deepen. While the initial barriers to engaging with enquiry within the discipline may be relatively low, researchers are clearly rising to the challenge of developing new ways of knowing with criticality, rigour and lucidity, albeit that 'messiness' inevitably persists. Our editorial thematic analysis of the collection is just one view of what the special issue contains and speaks of; readers will find their own resonances and connections between the papers which take us behind the scenes of methodological decision-making and action.

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