

Mixed methods and triangulation in history education research: Introduction

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This special edition of HERJ (number 16.1) sprang from an international symposium in Salzburg, Austria on 11 and 12 May 2017, called Triangulation in History Education Research (H-Soz-Kult, 2019). It includes 12 articles on mixed-methods research and triangulation in history education research from seven different countries: Australia, Austria, Germany, the Netherlands, Portugal, Switzerland and the United Kingdom.

Articles reflecting triangulation and mixed methods in general

Udo Kelle (Germany), Christoph Kühberger and Roland Bernhard (Austria) give a brief overview of triangulation and mixed-methods research design developments in social sciences and as they are reflected in the field of history education research. After reviewing the theoretical and epistemological debate concerning qualitative and quantitative research, the authors show how the 'war' between these paradigms was overcome by promoting triangulation and mixed-methods designs as a new 'third' way for research. However, the question of a consistent typology of mixed-method designs is a work in progress. With regard to history education, especially in German-speaking Europe in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, the authors conclude that there has been a noticeable increase in the use of triangulation and mixed-methods designs, even though conscious methodological reflections on this are very rare.

Manuel Köster and Holger Thünemann (Germany) point out the usefulness and benefits of mixed-methods approaches for history education research by discussing two German studies, one with a more qualitative approach, the other with a more quantitative approach. The authors describe how the limitations of both studies could have been remedied if they had taken into account the other approach, that is, either the quantitative or the qualitative. However, Köster and Thünemann point out that the use of mixed-methods design is still not common in German history education research, attributing this to reasons such as lack of methodological skills and knowledge, or simply lack of resources.

Terry Haydn (UK), on the other hand, raises the general question of whether the use of different approaches necessarily enhances the validity and reliability of educational research. In his reflections on some studies from the UK, he argues that although the use of different approaches has made its contribution to the validity of research in many projects, the more important indicator of the quality of educational research is still the orientation, academic knowledge and critical intelligence of the researcher. Specifically, Haydn states that besides the use of mixed-methods research, what is needed is a better understanding of ethical and practical issues concerning the outcomes of educational and historical research.

Going one step further, Heather Sharp (Australia), in her theoretical reflections on mixed-methods design, discusses it from the perspective of bricolage as a pragmatic research approach. Here, bricolage is presented as an alternative to mixed-methods research in its comprehensive combination of interdisciplinary methodologies and theoretical underpinnings that epistemologically complement each other. By reflecting, among other things, on the role of disclosure by researchers, myopia (that is, tunnel vision) and limitations of monodisciplinary research, Sharp emphasizes the benefits of bricolage for history education research.

Studies using mixed-methods designs

In addition to these general reflections on mixed methods and triangulation in history education research, other articles present recent or continuing studies that employ different types of triangulation (two papers) or mixed-method research designs (five papers).

Roland Bernhard (Austria) presents an example of a research project based on a mixed-methods design. The study focuses on how to deal with the complexity that researchers encounter in investigating history teaching and the beliefs of history teachers. To do this it uses different methodological approaches in a sequential qualitative–quantitative triangulation design (mixed methods). Combining a qualitative (interviews, observations) and a quantitative (surveys) strand, Bernhard shows how they were mutually informative and enabled clearer understanding of history teachers' beliefs and practices than was possible through using a single approach.

In discussing the concept of historical perspective taking in history education, Arie Wilschut and Koen Schiphorst (the Netherlands) present a quantitative–qualitative mixed-methods study referring to a theoretical framework based on history education as well as social psychology. By using the strengths of both, the authors raise the two questions of how 'progress in the skill of historical perspective reconstruction can be determined' (standardized measure) and 'how students experience their activities in this respect' (short essays and learner reports). Again, the authors underline the benefit of mixed-methods research, reflecting that while the quantitative approach proved unreliable in itself, in combination with the qualitative approach, it enabled understanding of 'what is going on' when students adopt the empathetic perspective of a historical agent.

Christopher Wosnitza and Johannes Meyer-Hamme (Germany) present a three-phase mixed-methods design study in their article. By focusing on students' written essays (as historical narratives), the authors implemented a sequential quantitative – quantitative/qualitative – qualitative design to reveal aspects of historical thinking embedded in students' written narratives. The authors argue that the mixed-methods approach is especially appropriate because it makes it manageable to analyse large data sets by reducing them in size. This enables consideration of the different contexts of the narratives and deeper insights into young adults' historical narrative patterns.

Bodo von Borries (Germany) reflects on a mixed-methods study from 2002 about the use and understanding of history textbooks, which employed first quantitative (closed surveys) and then qualitative approaches (written essays and interviews). Although Von Borries states that using triangulation and mixed methods can help to interpret data against the background of a broader context, he remarks critically that excessive methodological debates can lead to novice researchers' discouragement and demoralization. Von Borries emphasizes that first-class research has always included mechanisms of control and reflection on the chosen approaches.

Monika Waldis, Martin Nitsche and Corinne Wyss (Switzerland) used a mixed-methods research design to study the pedagogical content knowledge (PCK) of future teachers. The authors developed a test design based on a video survey with three integrated clips from history lessons, followed by open-ended writing assignments (qualitative) and closed questionnaires (quantitative). Waldis *et al.* show that these two data sources helped not only to validate the different approaches and their potential to identify the PCK of future teachers as reflective practitioners, but also that the triangulation enabled a comprehensive interpretation of the findings and their implications.

Studies using triangulation

Mariana Lagarto (Portugal) reports on the results of research carried out in Portuguese history classrooms with the aim of providing further understanding of how historical thinking is being developed and assessed by teachers. Data were collected through direct observation of classroom interaction (followed by interviews with teachers) and paper-and-pencil tasks (performed by students), focusing on change in history learning and metacognition. Inductive analysis and triangulation of the data helped to understand possible relationships between questioning in the classroom and thinking in history.

Christoph Kühberger, Christoph Bramann (Austria), Zarah Weiß and Detmar Meurers (Germany) present in their paper a multidisciplinary case study employing triangulation mixed methods using different quantitative approaches. By combining three different disciplinary concepts of complexity (domain-specific, general and linguistic), the authors focus on how a domain-specific analysis of task complexity leads to deeper level understanding than drawing upon one or two disciplinary concepts. Because data analysis revealed only a few correlations between the evaluated complexities, the authors argue that for reliable results there has to be further research into the use of such multidisciplinary triangulation to understand the concept of historical learning complexity.

The paper written by Gloria Solé (Portugal) on mixed-methods and triangulation methodology focuses predominantly on qualitative data. Arguing that an understanding of time (chronology) is an indispensable concept for history education, the author presents a case study on first- to fourth-grade (6- to 10-year-old) primary pupils' historical understanding of time and how to develop it more fully. Solé's mixed-method research involved different qualitative approaches – explanatory triangulation, investigator triangulation involving two researchers, and longitudinal investigation based upon a two-year log/diary. The paper concludes that the quality, depth and sophistication of teachers' overall professional content knowledge is crucial, drawing on appropriate teaching strategies and challenging teaching protocols (lesson plans and their schema). A detailed recommendation is that teachers' professional content knowledge should focus on students working with historical sources to develop their temporal understanding.

Notes on the editors

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Reference

H-Soz-Kult (2019) 'Triangulation in history education research'. Online. www.hsozkult.de/event/id/termine-33490 (accessed 14 January 2019).