

From: John Hall
To: Martin Boddy
Cc: Martin Belcher

Date: 14 March 2001

Re: ESRC Green Paper on Archiving (2)

I have today sent by land post the papers I promised, plus an abstract from my publications listing various papers on computing, data-processing, statistical computing and user-documentation. There are also one or two reports based on secondary analysis, but I'm not sure if I can still lay my hands on some of them.

I refer to, but do not include, the booklets and worksheets relating to my post-graduate evening course Survey Analysis Workshop. These were developed over many years, starting with the SSRC Summer Schools in Survey Methods which we used to run at Oxford and latterly at Reading. When the SSRC closed the Survey Unit in 1976 I continued the course at PNL in the form of a part-time evening course. I taught the computing side and John Utting the statistics. When we started in October 1976, we were sending hand-written sheets over to computing for punching up and running, so the students didn't get their results until a week later. (It was incidentally the very first evening course offered from the Ladbroke House site: we had to buy and make our own coffee etc. You can check with Peter Glasner at UWE what the place was like: it was his evening B.Sc. Sociology which forced PNL to open a coffee and sandwich bar in the evenings several years later)

When I left we had our own computer lab with 16 terminals with four very fast servers to the Vax, two local line-printers and a very user-friendly interface to SPSS written by Jim Ring (SPSS didn't delete its log files, so students immediately ran out of space) which enabled us to run semi-interactively with helpful prompts and which allowed us to correct errors instantly in the current line without having to start all over. The effect on student motivation and progress was amazing.

Although the course looks deceptively simple, it did in fact enable complete beginners to progress rapidly to quite advanced analysis and left them in very good stead for progress to more advanced courses and to work independently. Many of them got (better) jobs on the strength of their training at PNL. Whilst academia (ie "proper" universities) was loath to acknowledge this, the voluntary and not-for-profit sectors, local and central government and even commercial research firms were more than ready to recognise the value of the training received at PNL (extending to undergraduate students who received a scaled down version of the same course) which the Market Research Society accepted as a qualifying component for their Dip MRS.

I think the main advantage for students was being taught by senior practitioners. Our sister course Survey Research Practice was taught entirely by practitioners from not-for-profit and commercial research organizations (eg Nick Moon, NOP; Barry Hedges, Bridget Taylor [SCPR, now NCSR]; Jean Martin, Roger Thomas [NCS Survey Division] Alan Marsh [PSI]). It may be significant that they refused to carry on after I left. I like to think that they only came to PNL on wet Tuesday evenings when Arsenal were playing at home because I was there, but I suspect they also couldn't wait to leave because of PNL's appalling management reputation. It was certainly the case when, although I was instrumental in setting up the first British Crime Survey, for which Roger Jowell and I submitted a joint bid, the Home Office gave the fieldwork contract to SCPR, but refused PNL (on political grounds from "upstairs") the data-processing and analysis contract. (There was a sublime irony when Mike Hough later came cap-in-hand to ask me to prepare the user documentation!) Professional and disciplinary jealousies later intervened to prevent PNL involvement in later waves, but by then I was past caring.

Another factor, which may have implications for ESRC policy, was that most of my colleagues elsewhere were specialists in sociology, statistics, computing or survey research, but rarely in more than one of these. Things may have improved since my time, but then it was rare. There were a bunch of people from the old Quantitative Sociology Newsletter, Study Group on Computers in Survey Analysis (now Association for Survey Computing) and UK SPSS Users' Group plus odd centres at Surrey, Southampton or LSE, but they rarely covered more than two of these specialties. Exceptions were Peter Halfpenny at Manchester (a convert from Chemistry) the late Cathie Marsh (to whom I gave her first job) Colin Brown at PSI (ditto), Tony Fielding (Birmingham) and Randy Banks (not quite sure where he is now, but it was the Archive at Essex). Others may well have covered the fields and been equally at home, or at least able to hold their own, with single field specialists, but most of the ones I met had their own (careerist or political) agendas rather than a vocational disposition.

In my experience, in the UK, physical scientists share things (mainly), but social scientists seem to spend most of their time shafting each other, especially when they referee grant applications, whereas my old USA colleagues (on sabbatical at the SSRC Survey Unit or on vacation, but visitors to PNL), the late Angus Campbell (ISR Ann Arbor, Michigan), Bernard Blishen (ISBR, York, Ontario) and Jim Davis (Harvard) were invariably open and helpful. I like to think I trained my students towards the USA rather than UK model in respect of their professional practice.

To return to the topic of training and documentation: had I stayed on at PNL there were a number of developments I should have liked to see. Some were in the development of further modules in the post-graduate training courses (eg Attitude Measurement), but given the rapid expansion of the Internet and remote learning resources, I always hoped to make my teaching materials available to others, not simply on paper, but also on-line. Although they were developed for use with a mainframe, I had always hoped to develop them for the PC version. (We did once try SPSSPC, but students don't seem to be able to keep their fingers off the keyboard and in next to no time they were all in different parts of SPSS with no hope of return to base and, being a new implementation with the usual complete lack of staff retraining time, no-one to help them get back either!)

At that time the PC version had severe limitations and the commands were not standard between the mainframe and PC versions, but what I did hope to do was to have my teaching notes in some kind of file that was not specifically geared to SPSS, but would have the same underlying logic and structure so that worksheets could be substituted for alternative software (eg BMDP, Quantum) and data sets through the computer equivalent of interleaving or loose-leaf files. I don't know if anyone has subsequently tried this, but I would be more than willing to be involved in the attempt and to make my materials available, subject to copyright protection.

Most of them are in WordStar4, but my brother-in-law Raymond McDowell, Lecturer in Marketing at UWE Business School r.mcdowell@uwe.ac.uk has managed to get some of them into MSWord format. Parts of them were facsimile copies of bits of questionnaires or of raw data files, but I'm sure it would not be an insuperable problem to get them into manageable format for PC use, although it might be better to use more recent data than the 1989 BSA series. Do not underestimate the time needed to prepare a major survey data set with associated documentation and to find appropriate and interesting examples to illustrate substantive and statistical properties: I remember one of my evening sessions (3 hours class contact) took 19 hours of preparation when the Dean's draconian formula allowed only half an hour.

I should be grateful to receive any feedback or observations in due course.