



IMP Scholar Profiles – Laura Farrell

1. Tell us a bit about your scholarly work/areas of scholarship interest.

I've just finished my Masters looking at feedback in the ambulatory setting where I was focusing on using goals to create a relationship with students and engage them in feedback in brief settings. I did my Masters working with CHES and through the University of Dundee. I'm trying to carry on the work I started in my Masters with faculty development by creating a group of faculty that will work on using goals in feedback. This group will meet in a longitudinal fashion over 6 months to try to improve how they engage in feedback; I will collect some data on their evolution both so that I can compare it with my own and also to describe a full approach to giving feedback.

2. How did you get involved in education scholarship?

In residency I had a mentor, Kevin McLaughlin, with whom I wanted to do a research project. We looked at clinical reasoning, doing a think aloud project in which I interviewed residents and gave them a couple of questions (MCQs, short answer and long answer questions) where they had to think aloud. We looked at their clinical reasoning for each type of question and how that was reflected in their answer.

When it came time to write up the paper, Kevin ended up doing most of the writing because I didn't have the background and the theory behind it. That's what got my interest going- wanting to carry on and get more knowledge in that area. So I decided to do a Masters – and of course, since teaching is such a big part of Internal Medicine, that's what I wanted my career to focus on. I developed an interest in this particular topic (feedback) as a result of working in a teaching clinic in Victoria where you only get students for half a day; I felt we weren't doing a good job of giving feedback and could improve on it. I spoke with Glenn Regehr over at CHES, and we talked about different methods we could use. He recommended an autoethnographic approach and it basically took off from there.

3. How did you go about developing the skills needed to pursue education scholarship?

The biggest way was enrolling in the Masters Program. I chose the distance program at Dundee because it allowed me to go at my own pace. The typical Masters program is 1-2 years- it took me 6 years to finish, which was actually a good thing because over that period of time I did a lot of teaching and, depending on what course I was taking, I was able to integrate what I was learning into my teaching practice. As time went on, because I was doing the Masters, I got

involved with other people who were doing education scholarship who helped me along and opened doors, broadened my skill set and helped me get to where I am today.

4. What do you see as some of the particular joys and challenges of education scholarship?

Seeing things work in practice: thinking about the theory, discussing it with people, then going out and using it, and seeing those “aha moments” with students and residents is definitely a joy. Being able to go and discuss what you found with other people doing education scholarship is also a joy – you get so much from those conversations. It also forces you to think about your own teaching practice; for me, that’s been a big thing. It’s also almost like a hobby for me, to be able to go away and think about things from a different perspective than clinical practice.

In terms of challenges: especially at the beginning, I felt I was doing it on my own, so one challenge was to find a community of other people interested in education scholarship. It’s built up over time, but it was definitely not easy. Another challenge is that I don’t have a big research background, so for my Masters, figuring out how to do qualitative research was a challenge. I don’t think I’m there yet. Feeling that I have enough knowledge to contribute to the conversation so writing a paper, for me, that’s a challenge. When the reviewers come back and ask “what did your research actually contribute?” then I ask myself “What did I contribute?” “Who am I to be writing this paper?”

[Editor’s note: Dr. Farrell’s first paper was accepted for publication in Medical Education; she is currently working on a second paper]

5. Have you done research in other domains (e.g. clinical, basic science)? If so, how (or is) doing education scholarship different?

I’ve done both clinical and basic science research. My undergrad was in Microbiology and I did a coop program. I did HIV research where I was doing bench work; I also did research in MS where we were looking for pathogens that might incite demyelination and I did research using a spectrometer trying to isolate a (substance) that might treat HPV. In basic science research there was a lot of emphasis on making sure the technique was correct; you ended up with very concrete/more black and white data and you wrote that up.

In med school I did clinical research looking at secondary malignancies in patients with Hodgkin’s lymphoma; that was a retrospective analysis using a data base. So again, very concrete, almost black and white. It was easy to do the data analysis, in fact I didn’t do the data analysis myself because we had a group of analyzers who would do that for us in a robust, technical way. So... moving to education research where you’re trying to do your own analysis, in my case qualitative analysis, it was very different. It wasn’t a realist approach, it was interpretivist, where reality is different for everybody and the way you analyze the data wasn’t necessarily the way other people were going to analyze the data so there was a big struggle in that for me – was it really research? Particularly since my research, autoethnography, was so

qualitative.

You didn't mention funding as a challenge. Do you see funding as a challenge going forward?

I never tried to get funding for my Masters since I was doing autoethnography, so something I was doing in practice and I couldn't see what I would use the funding for. Going forward with the longitudinal group, I applied for a grant and got it. I think it might be a challenge if I was doing different, bigger projects that needed more research assistance. So far, it seems as though there are a lot of places I could apply to. My impression is that if you have a robust study, the money is there.

6. What do you see as opportunities for education scholarship in the IMP/areas we are particularly well placed to study?

The fact that we're opening a new simulation centre- we can set it up from the beginning to collect data or to look at specific research projects. I think that as a smaller site, it's almost easier to do cohort studies. I also think that with curriculum renewal there is a great opportunity to do a form of ethnographic study on change and on how change is implemented and how we look at goals and renegotiate those goals and co-construct those (curriculum renewal) goals with faculty and students as we move forward with the change.

7. What advice do you have for potential or new education scholars? Is there anything you know now that you wish you would have known when you first started doing education scholarship?

I think it's important when you're looking at what you might want to study, that you look at things in your own practice, because you'll be more motivated and passionate about what you do. It's not to take on other people's projects, although I think that the work I did in residency was really helpful in getting me started. Making sure my Masters project focused on something that I actually did made doing the research so much easier because the research was part of my day-to-day practice.

Kevin McLaughlin told me "Don't just look at Dundee because it's well known" and that there were a lot of other programs out there. I did know that, but looking back that was such good advice: don't just do the program that other people have suggested to you, look around and see what fits your clinical practice. I did end up choosing Dundee because of the flexibility, because I knew what my practice and my life were going to be like.

All the way through (my Masters) I wondered if it was worth it; I know now that it was, but it would have been nice to know that back then.

CHES was set up as I was starting my Masters. It would have been nice to know about CHES; although I think I got in early, it just wasn't there when I started. That's another thing that's

important: to look around and see who else is doing the same work and form or join a group. Find a community right away so then you won't feel like you're practicing in a silo, and then maybe you won't be asking yourself if this will be worth it in the end.

8. What do you see in your future in terms of education scholarship?

I'm not sure where it's going to go. I think I would like to continue to try to do research. In terms of my future, because of my new position, looking at change and studying change in curriculum renewal would be interesting. I hope that I would have time for that, and that that would be a priority, but I'm not sure yet. I would have to negotiate that (*laughs*). I see that I would stay in the qualitative realm of education scholarship because I like that, I like the point of view that things aren't black and white, looks at things from different angles and that takes into account the perspective of other people.