

An account of research on an English and drama teacher

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ABSTRACT: The following narrative is a personal account of one teacher's journey from classroom practitioner to teacher-researcher. It discusses the current status of teacher-initiated research in England and some of the dilemmas confronting teacher-researchers, particularly in relation to the validity of research findings and methods of dissemination.

KEYWORDS: teacher-researcher, teacher research.

OPENING THE DOORS OF PERCEPTION

I still experience a frisson of excitement when I hear myself talked about as a researcher. It seems like I have some kind of alter ego whose actions are a complete mystery to me. Yet in truth, research is now embedding itself firmly into my teaching and my professional persona.

I have not always been interested in research. Initially, I was highly sceptical of the concept of teachers as researchers. Who would have the time? I wondered. What good would it do? Who would listen? The answers to these questions still, to some extent, elude me. As I have gained experience, my vocabulary has changed and now I conceptualise these ideas in terms of generalisations, validity and reliability. I am reassured to understand that these questions underpin all research and it is finding ways to resolve these issues that makes research so compelling. I have to confess that I have become somewhat addicted to researching and surprisingly I do find the time. The importance of research to me was brought home when I reviewed my research journal.

Anyway I have had to do a lot of re-evaluating in all areas of my life (after sudden death of my mother) and my research was part of it. Interestingly, even when I felt like I couldn't cope I NEVER thought of not doing the research! I suppose that means it is important to me! It is interesting how important though – I hadn't ever thought about it in those terms before (Research Journal: 07.03.03).

Some may question my sanity and others may wonder how giving myself more work to do can be so precious to me. The answer for me lies in choice and power. I have chosen to investigate something that interests me and will benefit my teaching. It has not been imposed upon me. Power comes from having the knowledge to make decisions about my teaching, rather than being undermined by the criticism of others. It comes from a sense of collaboration and sharing ideas within a safe, supportive environment.

Others recognise this emancipatory aspect of research. "Research is neither chore nor ego trip. Arguably, it is therapy. It is a powerful form of professional development" (Campbell, 2004, ¶ 4). Certainly, the benefit of my own work was primarily to me: my career development, job satisfaction and self-esteem.

WHERE DOES RESEARCH SIT TODAY IN SCHOOLS?

There is a long history of teacher research, dating from the 1960s. Over the decades the type of research and its purpose has undergone significant changes. For a short halcyon period at the turn of the millennium, teachers in England were encouraged to undertake funded research through the Best Practice Research Scholarship (BPRS) project under which a grant of approximately £2000 was awarded to successful proposals, allowing teachers to buy cover and to pay for mentoring. It was through the BPRS that I first became initiated into the art of practitioner research. The BPRS provided a real impetus into undertaking research but, sadly, was withdrawn in April 2004 (the final reports to be submitted in December 2004) and funding devolved to schools, though with no imperative for money to be used for research. Some see this government decision as “detrimental to the development of teachers as researchers”, and that “schools will hardly notice the small amount of money which is devolved to them from a global budget” (Campbell & Jacques, 2004, p. 86). They also see it as bringing into question the future of teacher research, as some schools may prioritise funding for other uses. Alternatively, research may become a requirement of performance management in schools.

THE DILEMMAS

Teacher research can be seen as a way of “professionalizing” teaching but it could also be seen as a method of control – a good teacher being one who researches as part of their practice or as a requirement of Threshold, UPS progression or retention of management points. This approach concerns me as I believe that the teacher should instigate research and remain in control. It is the autonomy that raises self-esteem and sustains motivation. While the future of teacher research may be questionable, I still believe that the benefits both personal and school wide outweigh the difficulties.

I would not wish to imply that research is trouble-free or simple. For me, it was a steep, and at times downright scary, learning curve. Even formulating a question was a challenge. I had only very vague ideas about what I wanted to investigate and less about how to go about it. I was concerned about the delivery of the drama element of the National Literacy Strategy for English. As an English and Drama teacher I was well positioned to see both the limitations of facilities and curriculum and the benefits to be gained from teaching it well. I decided to explore the effects drama might have on writing empathetic answers in SATs questions. I used observation of a class, questionnaires to the whole cohort and interviews with six students. I also sampled their work before and after the intervention.

Collecting data was relatively straightforward. I had an excellent return on the questionnaires (students were supervised at form time and staff bribed with a draw to win wine), but even when I felt I was able to draw some conclusions from my findings, I doubted that I could “prove” them. I hoped that cross-referencing between several different methods of data collection would make my findings more convincing. Many teachers would identify with this. One BPRS researcher was reported as being, “worried that she had no ‘proper’ data. Findings were based on her

observations only. There were no formal measures of achievement. She did have (the students') work but did not feel that this was valid research evidence" (Bartlett & Burton, 2003, p. 114). She too doubted the validity of the data sources. In my own study I referred to student work but lacked confidence in my findings in much the same way. I believe this was because we, as teachers, are driven to question our professional judgement through doubting the reliability of our marking. We need SATs to balance our Teacher Assessment levels and GCSE coursework is limited to 40%, suggesting that externally marked examination results at 60% have greater reliability. In such a climate, it is understandable that assessment of student work is considered "subjective".

The teacher quoted above clearly did not value her observations as reliable data; this is not an uncommon belief as Burnaford, Fischer and Hobson (2001) demonstrate: "The study is richer if there are multiple means of collecting information that include both observational techniques and non-observational strategies" (p. 55). This suggests that observation alone is not totally reliable. I find it interesting that in a profession where observation is integral to both the development of the teacher and a frequently used classroom tool, we should question its validity as a research method. Yet I too fell into this trap, needing to support my observations with another method; I used a targeted questionnaire later in the project as it reinforced my observations. This implies that there are many obstacles and preconceptions to be overcome to enable teachers to both find appropriate research methods and to trust their findings.

WHAT DID I FIND?

I gained confidence both in my results and in my ability to research through the process. This, of course, took time but it meant that I enjoyed the discovery.

My results suggest that the drama exercises we used had very little impact on the students' written work, although they had enjoyed them! This was disappointing and left me feeling like a failure both as a teacher and as a researcher. However, as I investigated further, I discovered that the students had only a very limited understanding of the drama activities and strategies. They concentrated so hard on managing these unfamiliar ways of learning that they found it difficult to focus on the characters they were exploring. This clearly demonstrated the need to explore what drama knowledge students were gaining at KS2 and the early part of KS3. It suggested that we were assuming greater proficiency than the students had.

Initially, I was critical of my findings and the methods used to gain them. I became painfully aware of how easy it could be for findings to become skewed. I trusted my findings at the end, but was not sure I could convince others of my results. Jungck describes one teacher as: "Although confident in the knowledge she had produced, she appeared less confident in the legitimacy of her way of knowing. Her colleagues, experienced teachers and newly published researchers themselves, were not so sure either" (Jungck, 2001, p. 335). This implies that my experience is not unusual. I believe it is this lack of confidence in the validity, not only of the findings but also of the methods used to achieve them, that puts many teachers off research.

Many teachers and academics believe that for your research to have validity, it must be made convincing to its audience. However, selecting an audience can be problematic. My audience was provisionally BPRS but it could also have been the Drama Department, the English Faculty or the school. Some may be daunted by the thought of sharing results. Certainly, there needs to be a supportive culture of collaboration to make teachers feel comfortable reporting to others. Many, though, delight in sharing their new knowledge as it often confirms previously held ideas or raises interesting questions, which may lead to the development of new practices.

As the funding for BPRS has disappeared, my mentor group has evolved into the University of Cambridge, Faculty of Education, English Teachers' Research Group and we continue to recruit new members. In June this year we held our first conference, the key issue of which was the dissemination of our work. This initiative is one supported by, for example, MacGarvey: "Mini-conferences could also be held locally to offer rehearsal space before teachers disseminate their findings to bigger audiences. If such initiatives receive widespread support, we could enter a new and exciting era in classroom practice" (2004, ¶17). Within our group we provide each other with an interested and engaged audience, and spoken presentations are an effective means of communication. We also share materials and teaching strategies. However, with little or no funding, such conferences can reach only a relatively small audience. Our challenge in the future will be to widen our audience. "The current wave of school-based research calls out for innovative methods of collecting local knowledge and drawing from it messages that can be shared with a wider audience. New ways to research and disseminate information are also needed" (MacGarvey, 2004, ¶14). Many schools have created similar supportive groups that provide valuable support for researchers and create Learning Networks with other schools.

SO FINALLY....

Through researching I have learnt how to structure an inquiry and to reflect on my own practice; I have gained perspective that comes with this analysis. It has provided me with the tools to find out what successful teaching and learning involves. I have also benefited, gaining access to a higher degree, for which I would not have considered applying prior to BPRS. I have rediscovered a love of learning and the enthusiasm for excellence in my own practice. If the aim was to create dynamic, enthused reflective practitioners I would consider myself a "research success".

I have made new friends and gained confidence from finding I can participate and learn along with those whom I still consider to be cleverer than me! Research has opened many doors for me. It has allowed me to see that becoming the professional I would like to be is achievable. Most importantly, it has made me realise that those doors were always there, standing open, I just thought they were closed. After all, if I can complete one research project, I can do another (and better); if I can participate in one conference, I can do another, and if I can take on an M.Ed ...I can do anything! So can you.

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