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Rethinking practitioner research in education: not transcribing but reflecting and some reflections on the nature of practitioner research *(2nd iteration – Cambridge).*

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ABSTRACT

This paper is intended to provoke discussion regarding how different types of research, particularly practitioner research and arts-based research, can inform each other and develop their own rationale for collecting and analysing research data as well as for generating new knowledge. The authors have different backgrounds, one in practitioner research (James), one in arts-based research (Selena) and one in leadership research (Joelma). This paper explores the commonalities they have found, in terms of searching for alternative methodologies for themselves and for those they work with.

In this paper, we question some of the dominant approaches to qualitative research, including those that are highly influenced by grounded theory and that typically include creating new data through interviews, then transcribing and coding interviews. The pressure on teachers to find concrete strategies rather than investigate perceptions is discussed in the final section. The paper makes a case for original contributions and alternative approaches towards educational research freed from methodological conventions. It is intended to provoke discussion regarding where the boundaries of innovation may lie in terms of producing research that can still be seen as valid and useful to the researcher and to others. It is one of two papers written concurrently and delivered at conferences just a month apart. The other paper focuses explicitly on the dissemination of research and is entitled: Torn Between Expectations and Imagination: Alternative Forms of Communicating Educational Research (a short discussion paper reflecting on a workshop) (Yuan & Underwood, 2015).

This paper is the second iteration of this paper. The first version was presented at the University of Northampton on 26th June 2015 and was written and presented by James Underwood and Selena Yuan. The paper was then presented the very next day by James Underwood and Joelma Dia Lima, with further reflections added for this version by Joelma.

Introduction

In this paper we are presenting some reflections on the process of collecting and analysing data as conducted by practitioner researchers. These reflections are based on James' experiences as a teacher researcher, Selena's experiences in arts-based research and Joelma's experiences in leadership research and intercultural studies. It is also based for all of us on the process of supporting others doing research. Debate around the most appropriate methods for practitioner researchers to use, is very much alive so this paper is intended to contribute to that debate. We shall focus on three aspects of data collection and analysis, hoping to elicit further discussion. Firstly we examine the relevance of transcribing, followed by a discussion on issues around using found data. Next, we discuss how students find themselves drawn to studying perception rather than practice and the implications of this. Finally we introduce some ideas based on research into power distance. This final section was not included in the first iteration of this paper.

To reflect the nature of the topic under discussion, we have written this paper mainly by drawing on our reflective diaries, our day-to-day discussions, and our experience of running workshops that explore approaches to communicating research in alternative forms. Each section is slightly different in style and this patchwork article also reflects our interest in more informal ways of disseminating research, which can serve as prompts for scholarly discussion.

Thoughts on transcription

This first part of this paper is somewhat of a mismatch with the other sections. However, as it reflects the way that this paper evolved we have decided, as befits patchwork text conventions, to leave it at this stage in our writing process as it currently stands (Maisch, 2003). It is part reflection, part discussion of history and was written firstly in a reflective diary by one of the authors 'James' following a workshop where a small group of students explored online the origins of transcription and the reasons why they felt drawn to it.

Below are just two of the questions that have gone through our minds this past year, working with teacher researchers. No doubt when used in class these will be the questions that we

would first place on a board or powerpoint to open up discussion, therefore for the purposes of this section of this paper they can suffice as research questions:

- Considering the enormous time spent transcribing by many practitioners where did the presumption that this is good practice emerge from? And is it in fact good and useful practice?
- Considering the amount of reflection that practitioners do in their everyday life anyway, do they need to collect extra data at all or would they be better served by finding reflective methods to tap into the knowledge that they have already acquired? This question is referred to again in the second section of this paper.

Many times we have seen students push themselves to limits of exhaustion because of their determination to transcribe. This has especially been the case with the typical 'part-time student / full-time worker' working on their masters' degree at the weekend and in the evening. We have even known students who have told us that in the end they spent as long transcribing as they did writing much of their thesis. We have known far fewer students who have been able to tell us why this was a useful process. Often if pushed on this it is accompanied by a sense that it is just the professional thing to do or that this is just what real research looks like. However these are clearly judgments based on wanting to give a good impression not ones based on a strong justification in terms of the quality of research produced. Transcription has entered research culture as an established norm but the trouble with established norms is they are too rarely challenged. Actually this is a simplification, many people do question the wisdom of transcribing, Rubin and Rubin (2012) to name just one very good book that does, but these somehow gain less traction than the pressure to transcribe does.

Therefore in discussion with various students in a variety of contexts we decided to explore where this perception of why transcription is good practice emerged from. A quick summary of the history of how transcription embedded itself in academic culture goes as follows: the practice of transcribing came directly from the appearance of the methodological approach known as grounded theory, the emergence of which can be dated back to the publication in 1967 of 'The Discovery of Grounded Theory'. This is not to say that transcribing had not been done by sociologists before this. In fact both Glaser and Strauss had used this method in earlier works leading up to the publication of this book and others had before them. However, it was a minority approach and there was certainly no general assumption that all researchers

should always do this. Many teacher researchers we have worked with decide to transcribe but they make no reference to its point of origin in the methodological approach grounded theory. This illustrates just how embedded it is.

There are two reasons why grounded theory and therefore transcribing appeared in 1967 and swept across universities to embed itself as good practice: firstly, The Discovery of Grounded Theory is an exceptionally well written book that contains a compelling call to arms that the social sciences can and should be as respected as any other academic discipline. The second reason is simpler and it is money. In the mid-1960s, American and British governments were spending money on university based research on a scale that is unmatched at any other period of history. In the years 1961 – 1967 the UK government built (or reformed from previously existing colleges) 22 new universities. These plate glass universities had a distinct ethos that they would focus on rigorous and progressive subjects (Anderson, 2006). Meanwhile in the USA money was being poured into the sciences, with the development of NASA from a small body of scientists into a national institution as just one famous example. However, there was also money available for the social sciences in connection with the Great Society programmes in the USA and welfare reform in the UK. If university departments wanted some of this money, and they all did, they needed to be rigorous and more importantly to be seen to be rigorous (Jones, 1992). Grounded theory with its detailed processes of: transcribing, coding and sorting seemed to provide this rigour. It appeared at exactly the right place and time and as such ideas tend to do, it spread rapidly.

To summarise the paragraphs above: transcribing emerged as the staple process of qualitative research through the popularisation of grounded theory. The entire process: transcribing, coding, sorting data, saturating the data - provided a perfect solution to the problem of proving rigour in order to raise money for conducting qualitative research. It was an approach that justified large scale research teams, on many occasions with some poor souls just getting their first foot into academia actually doing the transcribing bit and best of all it was so rigorous that the conclusions were generalizable. This was all wonderful stuff if you were a major research team in the 1960s looking for generalizable conclusions to tell governments about. However, this is exactly what most practitioner researchers aren't doing. Practitioner research is almost always: small-scale, at most cautiously generalizable, reflective, and done in order to develop one's own practice and that of one's immediate colleagues. Using a method based on large-scale research and squeezing it to fit small-scale research is the opposite of rigorous, it is foolish and futile.

The alternative, and we would suggest that it is actually a much more interesting and challenging alternative, is to reflectively look at the study one is conducting then to look at oneself as a researcher and to say – 'OK what method fits this?' It could well be that there is no need to collect additional data at all. Based on conversations with our students we estimate that the average secondary school teacher after twenty years service has taught 20,000 different students and 5,000 different lessons. If one accepts the premise that one can observe oneself, it may be that there is no need to conduct further research. It may also be that you do want to collect data because you are focussing on something you haven't focussed on before in quite this way, but this could be collected just as you go about your daily work, data 'found' in real time, this is further discussed in the next section. A more interesting, relevant and (for this specific context) rigorous design could be a reflective process that taps into this experiential knowledge – in this paper we do not go into depth regarding concrete strategies but it could be: reflective diaries, the use of found data as prompts to recall the past, or artistic methods such as writing or drawing. These may elicit all that you need. It could equally be the case that some data collection in the form of interviews or focus groups is needed but as the goal of your study is not to generalise but is to provoke reflection in yourself and discussion in others, the isolation and presentation of interesting, provocative, enlightening quotes may be enough.

To conclude this section practitioner researchers (or indeed other researchers conducting small scale research) looking to transcribe should think very hard about whether this is the right thing to do for their study. We would suggest in the vast majority of cases it is not. Transcription grew out of grounded theory and grounded theory grew out of the conditions of a specific place and time. It was an innovative methodological design but it was also a pragmatic response to the challenges of raising money for research in the West in the 60s. Most practitioner research is rigorous but does not require this outward show of rigorousness. The rigour comes from the ability to tap into years of experience and to test your data against this. We would suggest that the only thing we should take from the story of how transcription emerged to dominate qualitative research in the social sciences, is to look at the way Glaser and Strauss saw a problem and created an innovative design to solve it. The method itself is not appropriate for most small-scale research projects, the spirit of creativity that led to it, is entirely so.

Finding data

The second theme that emerged from our reflections was the relevance of found data for practitioner researchers. The way that they rejected or were drawn towards using it, the ways that they felt nervous using it and finally once they had decided that its use was appropriate the challenges they faced in doing so. In terms of this section we are using the term found data to mean that data which exists in our workplace environment and which is not created for the purpose of research. Such data commonly could include: children's work, lesson plans, markbooks. It would not for example include research interviews, observations conducted for the specific purpose of research, questionnaires or surveys constructed for the purpose of research only. However, in the last paragraph we touch upon another form of data that can be seen to overlap these two primary forms of data: reflective diaries (Bochner, 2002). It is also a form of data collection that has formed the basis for this article.

Two obvious facts in terms of found data include the following: professionals live in a data rich soup of information. This includes classroom walls covered with displays, books filling with work on a daily basis and lesson plans made and endlessly reflected upon and remade every week of their working lives. A teacher has access to a depth of data that a full-time researcher would take years to collect. However, teachers often fail to see this as data. With almost every group of teachers we work with at an early stage of planning their research we have set the simple task of listing the data they could collect for a study and on almost every occasion they initially don't include in this list the data that surrounds them on a daily basis. In connection to the section above it seems to us that they are fixed in a view of research that requires newly created data for the research to be seen as real research.

The second reflection that we made on this theme was that once found data is perceived as useful, issues emerge for these teachers (Jasper, 2005). For the purpose of this discussion paper we are presenting just one here. This is regarding the ethics of using found data. If we ask students permission before we collect data: what should the teacher do if there is interesting data from mark books of two years ago, or from a display done in the past, or in a lesson plan taught to classes outside the research sample. These issues are for many troubling. This might prevent teachers from using found research because the sample boundaries are blurred and they are unsure where to position themselves in this regard.

Finally, in our own decision to use reflective diaries we have chosen to use a method that blurs the boundaries of found data and collected data. This is data *found*, documented and

identified as being relevant to ourselves as researchers. Again our thoughts are that considering the data rich soup that teachers work within this can be a method that would be very useful for teacher researchers. Yet teachers are surprisingly reluctant to use them. It may be that it is simply hard to write a reflective diary and that prompts and tools are vital for this to be successful. This is an area that we have explored in a series of workshops, particularly Selena's approach of employing arts-based approaches to reflection, which could have particular relevance for helping practitioners to develop reflection. These are referred to in the paper that we wrote to be read alongside this one (Yuan & Underwood, 2015)

Researcher's Perception

As with those issues raised above, studying the researcher's own perceptions as the focus of the research process is not a new proposal. Indeed it is reflected in highly developed methodological approaches framed within a variety of competing paradigms such as: interpretivist, social constructivist and others. However, it is not the purpose of this paper to address this deeper theoretical debate but to discuss our reflections on our experiences and the value of that to our research. What did emerge for us however, was that practitioner researchers were often drawn to the study of their own perception, whilst pressures upon them often pushed then towards something that was seen by others as being more conclusive. These outside pressures could often be something on the school action plan or a goal or target set by managers. To illustrate this: schools may want to know the answer to the question: *what is the best method of teaching high level writing skills at KS3?* However, teachers would find at an early stage that they wanted to move towards a question phrased as: *what do teachers think is the best way of teaching high level writing skills at KS3?* This was something that we had often noticed before in working with practitioners but keeping this reflective diary for this year illustrated just how common this development in thinking is.

The research for this paper is entirely conducted by personal reflection but that reflection also included discussion with teachers which illustrates the way that reflective and found data inevitably overlaps with data generated by interview and observation. Within these discussions with teachers it emerged that the reason for this movement in the structure of their research was a realisation that they did not want to begin to shape strategy until they knew what people's (and their own) perceptions around the issue were. Several things interested us about this perception. Firstly that at an early stage in the process of doing and

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learning about research it demonstrated what seemed to us to be a deep and sophisticated understanding of the limits of research. These practitioners had rapidly moved on from a perception that research can lead to simple solutions regarding practice. Secondly it also showed that these practitioners perceived themselves as being on a research journey. This desire to delve into 'perception' was phrased in terms of having a next step: this next step being to look at the issue with the intention of developing practice. Interestingly this was phrased in these terms even when in other conversations the teacher expressed no intention to continue with their research. In short they were envisaging a further hypothetical stage even when they had no intention of there being such a stage in reality. It should be noted that this is beyond a required convention that 'recommendations for further research' be included at the end of a piece of research, as this occurred at the start of the process before writing had begun or conventions for the layout of writing discussed.

Our initial conclusions on this one of the first three aspects discussed in this paper are that this movement towards a 'perception' should be welcomed. It shows a very realistic approach to practitioner research. Also the perception that is implied that these practitioners see themselves on a longer research journey of which this is just the first step is entirely positive. Indeed they may well as part of their professional lives conduct further reflection on a topic and reflection so sophisticated in nature that it blurs boundaries with research even in those cases where they are no longer formally studying.

Power distance (additional section to the second 'Cambridge' iteration of tis paper).

This paper was also presented at a conference at Cambridge University the day after it was first presented at the University of Northampton. On this occasion it was presented by Joelma Dia Lima and James Underwood and this led to a further rich aspect of the presentation and discussion that built on the first iteration of this paper. Joelma Dia Lima is similarly interested in practitioner research and reflective methodologies. However, her specific research area has been into power distance. Her professional context is also different to that of the other two authors as she works as an independent consultant with businesses and other organisations as well as educational ones.

In a previous research paper that she had presented at the Oxford Conference on Brazilian Studies (2014) she had identified that the level of power distance is the major issue in terms

of communications between superiors and subordinates, potentially causing lack of communication and job dissatisfaction. She also identified that a low level of power distance between employees and their superiors positively influences successful communication between them and also increases levels of job satisfaction. In terms of communication between bosses and employees she discussed three phenonema that resulted from excessive power distance. These are as follows:

- *Communication apprehension* – high power distance can lead to workplace cultures with high levels of communication apprehension. This she defines as the individual level of fear or anxiety associated with either real or anticipated communication with another person or persons.
- *Unwillingness to communicate* – she identified how unwillingness to communicate from those in senior positions impacts profoundly on the communication culture of the organisation as a whole, which can become toxic and atrophied.
- *Dependency* – she identified that in countries in which employees are not seen as very afraid and bosses as not often autocratic or paternalistic, employees express a preference for a consultative style of decisions making. However, in organisations with the opposite traits subordinates become highly dependent.

In terms of this paper although this contribution came from an unexpected perspective it threw light on the nature of the relationship between researcher and supervisor. If the student teacher (student/lecturer) relationship is seen as similar to a boss employee relationship these insights are potentially significant. It has already led to rich discussions so we place this here on this discussion paper for this reason and to encourage further dialogue.

Concluding remarks

We have placed this online immediately following the conclusion of this presentation. The purpose of this paper is to generate discussion in the areas we have discussed above. We would welcome further thoughts, comments and debate.

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