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Version: Published Version

Article:
Gray, S (2018) The Benefits of Self-research in Education: A Teacher researcher's Experiences. Hillary Place Papers, 4. 1. pp. 4-10.

https://doi.org/10.48785/100/235

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The Benefits of Self-research in Education: A Teacher-researcher's Experiences

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ABSTRACT: This paper makes the case for teachers/researchers conducting research projects in which they and/or their own practice are the subjects of study. The author outlines and exemplifies two self-research methodologies through accounts of their own experience: (1) autoethnography, and (2) action research. With reference to these accounts of experience, as well as to the literature, the author highlights a number of ways in which self-research can be beneficial to a teacher/researcher by, variously, helping them to develop an understanding of themselves and their experiences, facilitating their on-going development, and enabling them to contribute their experiences, insights, and perspectives to the wider research field and professional community.

Introduction

As a practicing teacher and researcher, the experiences I most wish to understand and the problems I most wish to solve are, I must confess, usually my own. For this reason, I have conducted a number of research projects over some years, alone and collaboratively, in which the subject of study was myself and/or my practice. Doing so has enhanced my understanding of both, and has facilitated my on-going development as both a teacher and a researcher. In this paper, I describe my experiences on two projects in the hopes of encouraging others to conduct similar research and providing an example that will facilitate doing so.

Why research yourself?

As I reflect on the reasons for researching myself, an experience comes to my mind. After submitting for review a paper on a class I had taught with a colleague, I was surprised and unhappy to find among the reviewers' comments the criticism that we had provided only a 'sketchy' description of the research participants. 'Who are these teachers?' the reviewers asked. It was then my colleague and I realised. In writing about participants in the project, we had focused on the students and largely left ourselves out. It had not occurred to us that it mattered who *we* were.

In fact, a researcher's identity and the relationships they have to research participants unavoidably influence data produced and analysis done (Garton and Copland, 2010). Therefore, researching yourself is useful because it provides you with the information you need in order to understand the role you may be playing in the co-production of data that ostensibly comes from others (Pavlenko, 2007).

Moreover, research that involves observing and reflecting on yourself and your actions has numerous benefits. Among those benefits exemplified below, self-research allows you to gain an understanding of your experiences and how they relate to the context in which you have them (Méndez, 2013). Sharing that understanding as research makes it possible for others in your field and in similar contexts to learn from your experiences and analyses (ibid). Self-research can also facilitate self-directed changes and improvements in a teacher's practice (Kemmis and McTaggart, 2005; Farrell, 2016).

It must be noted that the process of observing ourselves, reflecting on our experiences, and writing about them necessarily involves recreating those experiences from our own viewpoint (Bruner, 2004) and therefore this recreation cannot be an objective record of what actually happened (Ellis and Bochner, 2000). In light of this, some commentators have warned against research as mere fiction writing (Walford, 2004, in Méndez, 2013). However, with the application of appropriate research methodologies and theoretical frameworks (Pavlenko, 2007), research on your own experiences can not only be valid as research, but also has the potential to produce unique insights (Méndez, 2013) and facilitate the development of your practice (Kemmis and McTaggart, 2005) and the practice of others. To illustrate these points, I provide two accounts of my own experience of self-research below.

Understanding experience: Autoethnography

Before continuing, I must include some background information on myself. I am a British teacher of English as a foreign language (EFL) who has been living in South Korea and working with students of all ages for seven years at the time of writing. I am also a student in the school of education at the University of Leeds. The focus of my PhD research is EFL teachers in Korea as learners and users of the Korean language, a topic I chose because it is close to my heart. I am such a teacher, myself, and the often very turbulent emotional experiences I have had in learning and using the language form a large part of my research motivation.

One day, while searching for material relating to my PhD research topic, I came upon a blog by a foreign teacher in Japan (Makino, 2016). Offhandedly, the blogger mentioned that he had been experiencing 'stereotype threat' – the sense that a mistake in his use of Japanese would confirm for onlookers that as a white foreigner he was ignorant of the language (ibid). Reading this, I was struck by how closely it mirrored my own experiences in Korea. At once, I was inspired to research ways in which the theory of 'stereotype threat' might be applied to explain things in my own context.

But who was I to use as the focus of study? Who had the time to indulge a short-term, deeply personal research interest of mine? The answer was obvious. Me. On the one hand, as a research subject for myself, I was especially accessible (Méndez, 2013), and on the other hand, it was my own experiences that had motivated a lot of my research up to that point, and I desperately wanted to understand what I had 'been through'. I felt confident that such an understanding would help a great deal with my PhD research, for which I would be asking other people about *their* experiences.

I began to read into methods of self-research, which led me to *autoethnography* – the generation and analysis of 'salient narratives' (Hughes and Pennington, 2017) of my own experiences. I decided I wished to produce and analyse my narratives in the most 'valid' way I could, so I turned to a pre-existing framework for reflection: Kolb's learning cycle (1984). The first step in this cycle was to produce reflective narratives as close to how they happened as I was able. I sat down at my keyboard and began remembering, and writing.

Halfway through the third or fourth narrative, I felt a sudden wave of shame wash over me, and I stopped writing mid-sentence. I had stumbled on a memory of conflict with former teaching colleagues that still fills me with profound regret. I had read that this was a risk of autoethnography,

but I had not thought that I would experience any difficulty. In the event, writing out my memories proved quite challenging. However, working with painful memories also provided an opportunity – as the memory was of my own poor behaviour, analysis of it allowed for a certain catharsis, self-criticism (Méndez, 2013), and potentially, atonement (Hughes and Pennington, 2017). In light of the pain, I ceased writing for a day, before returning to it and pushing on through the discomfort until I could remember nothing more that seemed relevant.

The next two steps in Kolb's (1984) cycle were more dispassionate: (step 2) considering why my experiences had played out as they had, and (step 3) extrapolating principles from this consideration. To prepare for this, I read widely on the subject of stereotype threat to construct a theoretical framework (Pavlenko, 2007). I then analysed my data through this frame – why had my experiences taken the form they did? And, how could the theory of stereotype threat help me to understand this? Finally, I wrote up my conclusions and published them (Gray, 2017).

By the time the project was complete, I had made a series of gains. I had become acquainted with a hitherto unfamiliar theory, and I had applied that theory to myself and my own context in a way that provided valuable grounding for my on-going study of others in that same context. I had also come away with a much-enriched sense of understanding of the nature of my own experiences and past behaviours, something I had long desired. In this way, the project was academically useful, intellectually satisfying, and emotionally cathartic. Indeed, by the time I was done with my analysis, I felt that the psychological burden of my unhappier memories had been lessened, somewhat.

While I did not use, and could not have used my experiences to make generalisable claims (Méndez, 2013) about all foreign teachers living in Korea, what I was able to do was to understand how my own experiences, as I constructed and related them, revealed my relationship to Korean society (Pavlenko, 2007). This is one use of autoethnography – It allows us to see how reality is a product of the relationship between actors and contexts, between the personal and the social (Méndez, 2013), and as long as this is our goal, a lack of generalisability need not scupper us (Connelly and Clandinin, 1990).

That being said, once I had completed the project, I was delighted when a friend of mine who had read my paper approached me to thank me for writing it. Apparently, my own experiences mirrored her own so closely that she was able to see herself in my writing, and to understand her own experiences better through the same theory that had helped me to understand mine. On this basis, I contend that although the experiences analysed in an autoethnography are ultimately unique to the author, such research can, nevertheless, be relevant and informative for others – in this sort of research, particular observations, descriptions, and insights substitute for general laws (Stenhouse, 1979).

Experimenting with practice: Action research

While achieving a theoretical self-understanding is potentially valuable, for in-service teachers practical problems in their own teaching contexts that need to be addressed are often more to the point. Here, too, self-research can be very effective. By researching their own teaching, teachers can develop a greater understanding of what's happening in the classroom whilst actively experimenting with and improving their practice.

A case in point: some years ago, I was approached by a colleague, who abruptly offered to buy me lunch. Over that lunch, she inquired: would I be interested in co-teaching a class of young learners with her? She was interested in seeing what could be done to help these young, beginner-level EFL students engage in discussion and critical thinking as part of their English education. I shared her enthusiasm for these things, and so I agreed to co-teach the class.

Together, we read into the literature on critical thinking and young learners' EFL education. What we found was a great deal of complexity and divided opinions. The very definitions of critical thinking that we found varied widely. Some commentators argued critical thinking was important for young EFL learners, others that it was not possible or reasonable to include critical thinking in such classes. Notable in this was Sarah Benesch (1999), who asserted (decades ago) that actual classroom data would be necessary to settle this issue. However, on checking the literature, we found that none of the existing classroom research had been done in classes quite like ours. So, with this in mind, we decided to do the research ourselves.

For this project, we became acquainted with *action research* – the cyclical process of trying something out in your practice, observing the results, reflecting on these results, and continuing to experiment on the basis of these reflections in an on-going fashion (Kemmis and McTaggart, 2005; Farrell, 2007). Following this, we would walk into class each week, start audio-recording, and begin teaching. As we taught, we would make quick, written notes about what we were doing and saying, same for the students, as well as any noteworthy incidents that occurred in class. After class, we would listen back to the audio recording and transcribe noteworthy portions.

Triangulating between written notes and transcriptions (Farrell, 2007), we discussed together the reasons for things happening as they had, extrapolated principles from this that we could use, and planned future classes according to these principles. Collaborating on this made things much better. Alone, we experienced classes on an emotional level, with prominent emotions being (unsurprisingly) elation and frustration – whereas, together we challenged each other's interpretations of what had happened, and were able to arrive at a much more rigorous understanding of things.

After repeating the reflective cycle again and again for several months, we ended up with a mound of data and several workable principles and practical activity suggestions for encouraging dialogue and critical thinking among young, beginner-level EFL students such as ours. We then wrote this all up and had it accepted for publication (Lee and Gray, 2019).

As in the first example, this project yielded a lot of gains for my colleague and I. As well as learning a lot about getting children to discuss together in a second language, this project gave us the opportunity to add our voices to the discussion surrounding critical thinking. During and after the project we conducted many conference presentations at which audience members told us that they found our project to be unique and useful. Candidly speaking, it was gratifying to be praised and to be viewed by others as something of an expert. But in truth, my colleague and I did not do anything methodologically ground-breaking. All we did was record our own teaching, reflect on it, speculate about why it went the way it did, try to make improvements, and then, crucially, repeat this process (Kemmis and McTaggart, 2005).

This reflective action research process, though admittedly somewhat time-consuming, represents an accessible way for teachers to develop their practice (Farrell, 2016). Importantly, the results of such research are of immediate relevance to you, the researching teacher. The problems and challenges addressed are your own. The researcher that observes is also the teacher that learns and grows. And while this process does not *require* a formal write-up, disseminating your classroom research serves to enrich the wider teaching community and promote the inclusion of teachers' perspectives in the field of education alongside those of academics. It also opens your work to comparison, comment and feedback, from which you will most likely benefit, and which is not available to those who keep their research to themselves (Stenhouse, 1981).

Concluding remarks

There are many complex questions relating to self-research that I have not addressed in this paper. For instance, just how much of yourself should you reveal in your research? How close should you try to position the audience to yourself (Wyatt, 2006)? [1] What ethical issues are peculiar to this sort of research? I also have not discussed the merits of the collaborative self-research methodology of *duoethnography* (Grant and Radcliffe, 2015). I advise readers interested in conducting research on some aspect of their own lives, experiences, and practices to read Kemmis and McTaggart (2005), Méndez (2013), Grant and Radcliffe (2015), and Hughes and Pennington (2017), particularly, for more methodological information and examples.

For my part, I hope that the descriptions of my experiences that I have provided may encourage other teachers/researchers to conduct similar projects. The professional community of teachers and the educational research field stand to benefit greatly from written accounts of the lives and practices of practitioners. I say this as someone who has profited tremendously by reading self-focused research conducted by other teachers and researchers in my field. I find such research is often of the greatest relevance to me and to the challenges I face and goals I have in my classroom and in my studies. Therefore, I highly encourage teachers and researchers to keep on writing. Those who do are likely to benefit, both from improvements in their own self-understanding and professional development, and also from the chance to contribute to the wider teaching community and make their voices heard.

[1] Readers will note, in the present paper I have tried to position them quite close to myself.

Author's biography

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