

# Researching the Tutor in Online Practice: Reflections on an appropriate research methodology

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## ABSTRACT

This paper, describes the research methodology used in a study on an online tutor's educational beliefs. It describes the methods used in the study and discusses their appropriacy. It presents both the researcher's and the participant's interpretation of the case study data and comments on them. The conclusion reached was that the research experience was of mutual benefit to both parties. It was agreed that the humanistic style of research, which respected the views of both parties and, to some extent, shared decision-making about the direction of the research and the methods used, was an important feature. Moreover, it was agreed that reading the other's interpretation was helpful in gaining new insights into the data. Finally it was concluded that the methods used could be developed in a future study where the research would continue in a more equitable way with researcher and participant in conversation exploring each other's practice.

## Keywords

Humanistic research, naturalistic inquiry, relationship between researcher and participant, participant-led research.

## INTRODUCTION

This paper arises out of an inquiry into the online tutor's practice and raises issues about the relationship between the researcher and participant. In addition it highlights how the relationship between researcher and participant influences the research methods and outcomes and describes how the research was of mutual benefit to both parties. In this study the research method emerged from discussions between the researcher and participant.

The methodology for the study drew on the work of Lincoln and Guba (1985) and Erlandson et al (1993). The data collected for the study was 2 interviews and an autobiographical account. Consistent with naturalistic inquiry, the study was to some extent participant-led in that participant and researcher were co-constructors of the interview and the participant decided on the focus and structure of the autobiographical account. The first interview was semi-structured, the topics were suggested by the researcher, and the second was structured with the questions written by the researcher but drawn from the previous interview and the participant's autobiography.

After the data gathering, the accounts collected were used to create different interpretations (Winter 1989). Both researcher and participant wrote separate accounts of their interpretations of the data. These interpretations were exchanged and discussed and then a joint commentary was written.

The first section of this paper describes and critiques the research methodology for the study. The researcher's and the participant's

interpretation of the data are presented in the appendix (below) and the second section of this paper comments on those interpretations.

## **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

The case study discussed in this paper is part of a larger study into the beliefs of e-learning practitioners. The case study followed the design of the larger study. There were three stages in the study. The first stage was a semi-structured interview based around topics that the researcher had devised. The interview schedule covered three broad areas. The first topic was the various roles the participant has e.g. tutor, administrator etc. The aim was to collect some background information for the case study and to give the participant something concrete to talk about at the beginning of the interview. The second topic focussed on their experience of tutoring and again participants could talk in concrete terms about specific aspects of tutoring. Finally the last topic concerned their beliefs about learning and it was felt that this led on from the concrete description of their practice and encouraged them to reflect on their beliefs about learning.

In the second stage of the study participants were asked to choose a research method for exploring their practice and beliefs in more detail. Various methods were suggested and it was hoped that this stage of the study would be more participant-led so that participants would raise issues of concern to them within the framework of the study. In this case study, the participant decided to write an autobiographical account detailing how personal and professional experiences and previous learning had influenced his practice. He decided on the structure and focus of the account and there was little guidance from the researcher.

Biographical research methods position the given practice within the context of the life of the practitioner. They do this by bringing together critical incidents that may affect perception and practice (Goodson and Walker 1991). More importantly, the practitioner him/herself authors that sampling of the past as the key holder to a deeper understanding of practice. This is important in terms of avoiding a separation of the practice from the practitioner. A study of the practice alone is a study of a trace or artefact and an abstraction of the practitioner. More importantly, to separate the practice from the practitioner risks missing the influences and ideas that gave rise to the practice taking a particular form.

Biographical methods are also important in terms of the power relations between the researcher and the practitioner giving both a voice in any publication. The researcher has interests in any research and these interests necessarily lead to a selection from any interview data. Such a selective process is a particular view of the practice that detaches the practitioner. The biography re-locates and re-connects that view of the data in the context of the life of the practitioner.

After this account had been written there was a third and final stage. This was a structured interview where the researcher constructed an interview schedule from the issues discussed in the two previous stages. The aim of this was to explore some issues in more detail and, if necessary, to clarify what was said.

### **Joint reflections on the research methodology**

In discussion, the participant felt that the topics for the first interview were helpful as they provided an anchor and a way into the task. This gave him a feeling of security, initially, as he tried to work out what the task was and what the researcher wanted. The interview technique helped him organize his thoughts for delivery and the interview and the interviewer were motivating factors as he attempted to teach someone else about his practice. However, the researcher was concerned with giving the participant space to explore his issues and felt that the topics might close down and limit the participant's response.

In addition we felt that the participant is initially trying to discover the researcher's agenda and looking for ways of understanding it and assimilating it into his interpretation of his practice. At the end of the first interview we felt that we had both found meeting points and as a result of this a fresh agenda was constructed, so the research framework was modified as a result of the participant's input.

In the second stage the participant was given space to raise issues of concern in his autobiographical account. For the participant this was an interesting opportunity to reflect on and explore his practice and bring together his experiences into a coherent story. In writing a narrative he could blend the personal with the professional and explore the connections. This 'storying of the self' allowed him to take a more holistic view of his practice and as a result of this experience the literature on holistic practice gained more validity for him.

We both felt that the third stage of the case study, the structured interview, was the least successful. From the participant's point of view, he felt that having established his own emerging research interest in the autobiographical account, he was now being dragged back to the researcher's agenda. It felt like he was revisiting a previous discussion and finding no new space for exploring issues. The researcher's aim was to explore some of the issues raised in more depth but, although there was some more discussion and deeper insights into what had been said, it felt less successful than the first two stages. One reason for this may be that in the second

stage the researcher had handed over control of the agenda to the participant and was now trying to take back control by structuring the final interview.

Overall, we felt that the research was valuable. The researcher gained insight into the participant's practice and this helped her reflect on her own practice. The participant felt motivated to look not only at his practice on the online course but also to place that practice in the wider context of 'self'. That was a self that comprised personal and professional aspects as well as historical issues. It was an opportunity to consider himself as a document and to try and take a detached view, even if temporarily, before trying to accommodate any changed perceptions back into that self.

## COMMENTARY ON THE INTERPRETATIONS

Both the researcher's and the participant's interpretations of the data are presented in the appendix below. These interpretations were written independently and then we met to discuss them. We thought that one of the participant's key beliefs was that the tutor help students find a voice and encourage their professional development by helping them to be autonomous learners. This is an important tutor responsibility 'to support others in finding a voice and some understandings.' We also commented on the empathy that he has with students who are 'struggling' on the course and both discuss his previous learning experience on an online course where he was 'wrestling' to make sense of the course. This seems to have made him aware of the need to look out for students who may be having problems understanding the course.

We both commented on his professional development as a tutor which he describes as an 'apprenticeship'. The researcher describes this development as starting from a point of uncertainty and then moving on to a period of observation where he watched other tutors on the course and used them as 'models'. Finally he gains the confidence to strike out on his own and develop his own style of tutoring.

One key difference between the participant's interpretation and the researcher's is that the participant can use the transcripts as a vehicle for reflection. So, for example, in his response he makes a link between his apprenticeship as a learner and then as a tutor and makes the point that 'teaching ... is a major learning strategy'. This was not explicitly stated in the transcripts, so the participant's response can, in a sense, go beyond the transcripts and add new information.

The researcher comments on issues that the participant doesn't touch upon, for example, she discusses the tutor's beliefs about his role and the strategies he uses in his practice. She also discusses the tutor's beliefs about learning. She sees these as important points because that is her research agenda: to describe the tutor's educational beliefs about learning and about his/her role.

In conclusion, in reading the interpretations we found that there were no major disagreements. We found instead that we had taken different angles on the data. The researcher had pursued her own research agenda and had discussed the parts of the data that fitted with her agenda. The participant had read the transcripts and then was able to reflect on them and, in his interpretation, take some ideas one step further.

## CONCLUSION

This study followed naturalistic principles of inquiry as much as possible. This approach stands in opposition to positivistic approaches. We do not seek to prove or disprove a theory or idea but retain an aim to understand through exploration. Our methods emerged from this exploration. The goal was not to pre-judge or pre-structure interaction between the researcher and the participant wherever possible but to allow interests and issues to emerge and be explored in a context-sensitive way.

We also recognized the relationship between the researcher and the participant and the way they are inextricably linked and influencing each other. This was true during and after the research activities and evidenced in the co-construction of this presentation. More importantly, recognizing that inter-connectedness, we were concerned to develop and maintain a position of equal status between the researcher and the participant. The researcher is part of the participant's internal dialogue (Bruner, 1966) as well as forming part of a critical community. We were co-constructing knowledge that was both personal and social in the exploration of online practice.

The relationship between the researcher and the participant is important here. Goodson (1994) points out that research consists of 'a good deal of prescription and implicit portrayal but very little serious study of, or collaboration with, those prescribed or portrayed.' The researcher does not approach the participant as a data-mine to be plundered in some way but rather in a spirit of co-operative inquiry. The researcher has interests but suspends them and remains open to phenomenon that may arise. We tried to incorporate this in our study although at times the researcher's agenda seemed to dominate the discussion.

At the beginning of the research relationship, the researcher offered to host an interview that once begun, quickly evolved into a *learning conversation*. We use this term because the questions were not pre-set but instead arose from the discussion and the

exploration of the practice. The understandings of that practice evolved from the discussions and were *new* to both participants. The interview was very much in the tradition of an interview as collaborative storying (Bishop, 1997). The researcher did not come only to gather data using tools and methods that had been decided upon long before the eventual meeting. To some extent, the methods and tools and the shape of the engagement formed part of the collaborative research act and the ideas and decisions were shared. This particular research activity and study was situated for the researcher within the wider context of a study of several practitioners and practices. This particular study was of interest to both the researcher and the participant and it is situated within an ongoing relationship between them. We hope to extend and develop this relationship in further inquiries into our practices. We hope to go on to collaboratively develop an agenda for our research.

## **APPENDIX**

### **the interpretations**

In this appendix two separate interpretations of the study are presented.

#### **The researcher's interpretation**

There were 4 main themes for me. Firstly The participant's beliefs about the role of the tutor and the strategies he uses in his practice, secondly his description of his own professional development, thirdly his beliefs about learning and lastly his explanation of what had influenced these beliefs.

The participant seems to believe that the tutor should be 'unobtrusive' and 'a figure on the sidelines'. He seemed concerned that the tutor shouldn't dominate the online discussion space but should be there to support and guide students. This seems consistent with his belief that the student be independent, be an autonomous learner and take control of the online environment and the course. He sees it as part of his role to encourage the student to be independent and to help them find their own voice.

However, although he believes he should put 'as small a footprint' as possible on the course, he thinks that the tutor has the responsibility of managing the online discussion and ensuring that all students have the opportunity to have an 'equal voice'. He is particularly concerned about students who are 'struggling' on the course and tries to invite them into the discussion. He is also mindful to keep a check on students' progress and sees it as part of his role to intervene if students seem to have problems: 'Sometimes it's not where the interventions are actually required, but it keeps in mind for me where I need to be particularly alert to them making slight shifts from one phase to another, and at those times if it doesn't look that they're reaching or seeing that kind of the other side of the bridge, then I might describe the bridge to them as an option as an intervention.'

He discusses the strategies he uses to achieve these aims. One strategy he uses to bring 'struggling' students into the discussion is to address them by their names and invite them to participate in the discussion. He empathizes with students who struggle on the course as he also had the experience of struggling on an online learning course. He believes he can aid students' development by demonstrating activities and showing them how to, for example, use a chat system. He also tries to show students and staff (in his role as staff developer) how the online environment can be shaped to meet their needs. His strategy here is initially to demonstrate an activity and then hand 'over responsibility in a supported way' to students i.e. he withdraws but is there to help if needed. He explains that he 'scaffolds' learning and can demonstrate how to 'construct a space for discussions' but he then hopes students will take control and inhabit that space.

He discusses his development as an online tutor. On the last course he tutored on, he felt it was initially 'scary' to be a new tutor joining an established team of tutors. He began by looking at the input other tutors gave, and used them as models. However, he soon realized he needed to take responsibility and to develop his own style of online tutoring and gave himself 'permission' to 'respond individually' in his own way to students. He describes this process of development as starting from a point of uncertainty about his role, moving on to a period when he observed other tutors on the course, using them as models, and finally deciding to stand on his 'own two feet' and develop his own style.

He believes that adult learners bring previous knowledge, experience and expertise to a learning situation. Therefore it is important that learners interact with each other, share experiences, and don't just look to the tutor 'for the truth', as 'learning is a social experience'. In addition he believes that, especially with online learning, experiential learning is valuable. When working with staff, he demonstrates the online environment as it's important for them to experience 'the tempo of exchange in these environments'. A strong belief is that 'a great way of learning a thing is to teach it'. He first experienced 'teach back' as a learner on an online course and it struck him as a 'strong learning strategy'. He adheres to 'social constructivism' but the issue for him is how to support the learning process, for example through scaffolding the learning experience with resources, and through including a 'teach back element'.

During the study the participant reflected on what had influenced his educational beliefs. A key influence was his experience as an

online learner on a Masters course. He describes his initial confusion on the course and his 'struggle to make sense of it all', hence his empathy with learners who struggle on his course. He found that with 'hindsight' he began to understand the course and to 'appreciate what was going on there and the rationale behind it'. He also realized that other students on the course had reached a level of 'perceptual, conceptual development' that enabled them to take advantage of the course and use it to further their own development. He felt that they thought, " 'Oh yes I see this is all about this and I can fit this into my schema this way.' whereas I was fitting into the course." Therefore he encourages learners to be autonomous and shape the online environment to their own needs. Finally he first experienced 'teach back' on his Masters course and it 'really struck' him so that later in his practice he used it and still uses this strategy with his students. In conclusion he finds that he is 'constantly revisiting' his Masters course and his experiences there influence his practice and his beliefs about learning.

### **The participant's interpretation**

Reading back through the transcripts was an interesting moment. Perhaps this was some kind of ego trip in the sense that it was the first time anyone was interested in my practice. Perhaps it was flattering to be chosen for study and perhaps that accounted for the transcripts that resulted being of interest. I don't know.

When I looked back over the documents several things became clear. Some of these had been semi-transparent or were emerging slowly but others were less so and certainly the way in which some of the elements of my practice and my beliefs were connected was less apparent.

### **Reflections on my practice**

The theme that emerges for me from reading the transcripts is apprenticeship. This means apprenticeship as a learner and then as a tutor. It also means support for others on the course as possible apprentices. Allied to this is the theme of development of autonomy or a voice and again this is the development and support for others to find a voice as a goal and the parallel goal of developing my own voice and view of practice. This is still very much evolving.

Looking back on my being a learner online and then a tutor (accepting this was also a learning role) I think that the key point is the transition from being an apprentice student to becoming an apprentice tutor. That transitional stage of taking on greater responsibilities for others and myself is important. Pulling that apart a little more I can see that this develops a previously held view that teaching is for me a major learning strategy –almost a model of teaching and learning within any context (on or offline).

The elements of the emerging model would be audience, motivation, context and purpose (amongst others). The central idea would be that acting within a group and having an audience involves both cognition and metacognition in the organizing of thought for delivery. In being an online student and trying to cope and understand the course I was studying I was constantly wrestling with my expectations and limited understanding of the content and technology. I was also struggling to imagine how this might fit into a possible career change and what the career might be. A career change was, after all, the primary reason for my return to education. The consequence was that I didn't learn as much as I might from that course, and it was nothing to do with the course.

When I became a tutor I had several years developing my understanding of the career area and was now primarily involved in relating these issues to others. This was a process that was as much a learning experience for me as it may or may not have been for my different audiences. The transition to being an online tutor on the MEd course was one that placed responsibilities on me to support others in finding a voice and some understandings.

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