

Helping Each Other to Research: A Collaborative Guided Research Group

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This short article will report upon a language teachers' guided research group which worked together at the University of Graz, Austria. The group consisted of 10 language teachers who met regularly throughout just over one academic year. Each teacher worked individually or with a partner on small research projects related to their teaching or fields of interest. The group comprised some experienced researchers and others with little or no experience of conducting research. The final product was a collection of edited papers; each one written by the teachers and published by the university press. The more impressive product was a growth in the participating language teachers' self-confidence to carry out research projects on their own, as well as increased motivation for all involved both in respect to their teaching and professional lives as a whole.

Introduction

In our tertiary-level language teaching context, language teachers are implicitly expected to carry out research but in practical terms there is very little, if any, real support offered in this respect. With teaching loads of on average minimum 14 – 16 hours per week plus the usual marking and administration, many find it difficult to know where to find the time or how to even begin.

In a study by Borg (2007), he asked experienced teachers for reasons why they did not carry out research, the teachers responded citing lack of time, knowledge and the fact it was something the 'academics' do and not the focus of their own work/teaching. They also referred to the absence of any kind of research climate amongst their language teaching colleagues.

Confronted with a similar situation in our own context, we set out to de-mystify the research process and make it accessible and feasible for practising language teachers in our university setting.

Following the rationale and traditions underpinning approaches such as action research (e.g., Burns, 1999; Crookes, 1993; Edge, 2001) and exploratory practice (Allwright, 2003), the group aimed at encouraging teachers to examine 'puzzles' or 'questions' that they had arising from their own teaching contexts. In this way, it was hoped that the insights gained would be grounded in reality and thus have immediate applied practical relevance. It is not the purpose of this article to enter into the debates surrounding the value of teacher-knowledge; however, the project was an expression of an underlying belief that, although practising teachers can benefit from theories generated solely within academia, bottom-up theories stemming from practical, real world teaching situations can also be of particular value in pedagogical terms and represent a form of knowledge which often seems to be somewhat undervalued and lacking in more widespread professional recognition.

Additionally, it was hoped that the guided research group could help to develop a "community of inquiry" (Wells & Chiang-Wells, 1992 cited in Burns, 2009: 294) within our context, in which teachers felt empowered and encouraged to engage in critical reflection and investigation of their teaching contexts and practices. As such, it was also intended to serve as a form of professional development for those who took part. As research is often perceived as being a rather solitary undertaking, it was also hoped that the group meetings could transform research into a shared experience, whilst still enabling individuals to follow their own particular focus of interest.

Organisation

We met seven times over the course of approximately sixteen months. Each session lasted approximately two hours. Four of the sessions were guided with input from those with research experience and addressed issues such as what is research, how to formulate research questions, choosing tools for generating data and exploring approaches to data analysis. There was also an e-platform to share materials & ideas and offer a forum for discussions and a place to pose questions to the other group members between sessions. By the end of the year, most of the participants had written up a report of their findings and these were put together as an edited collection of papers published by the in-house university press. Not everyone who took part in the working group chose to produce a written paper in the

end, although most did share their findings or experiences with the rest of the group.

Input Sessions

It is impossible to offer an overview here of all the input sessions but perhaps an outline of two key sessions can provide a flavour of the style and content of these sessions. Our first session addressed issues of what research is and to this end we explored slightly adapted versions of the scenarios presented in Borg (2007). This led to fervent debates but also an increased awareness of the potential range of understandings of what constitutes research. We then discussed to what extent individuals in the group could envisage themselves carrying out various types of research in their own areas of interest. We also discussed what topics were of interest to try to identify areas that we would like to investigate and considered how to move from broad themes to more focused answerable research questions. We then agreed to try to at least identify our own personal topic of interest, or maybe even formulate a RQ or hypothesis as appropriate, before we met for the second time five weeks later. In the meantime, the e-platform was established and some articles, websites and references were shared to help guide our reading and ease our way into identifying topics and focusing on issues involved in formulating research questions or hypotheses.

In another session, we considered aspects of methodological design – rather ambitious for a two-hour session; however, this session was merely intended to introduce key concepts and offer a general overview of some of the issues involved. Above all, we focused on how to devise a research approach that provides data suitable for answering one's specific RQs, addressing one's hypothesis or exploring one's general area of interest, but we emphasised the need to take an approach that is realistically within one's capabilities and which is do-able in practical terms. We talked about different methods for generating data and considered their various benefits and drawbacks, as well as the implications of these decisions for the analysis stage of the projects. It was an intense session which opened up a range of issues and topics for participants to contemplate further. Additional recommended reading and the discussion forum enabled people to continue learning about these issues in more depth and helped them to begin to personalise the content in ways relevant to their own research.

As time progressed and everybody engaged in their own research undertakings, we ceased to have input sessions but rather met to discuss and share our ideas,

problems and concerns about our individual projects. The emerging atmosphere of trust and support was extremely important in maintaining momentum and motivation to continue with our research. Not everybody could attend each session, and it was hoped that the online facilities could provide support for those unable to attend. It is also worth noting that some members of staff attended input and discussion sessions but did not yet wish to carry out any research of their own. For these individuals, the group provided an opportunity to gain an insight into theoretical and practical issues involved in investigating their teaching contexts, and it is hoped that this coming year they may wish to undertake projects of their own.

Evaluation

At the end of the year, the organisers distributed a short feedback questionnaire composed of five open-ended questions. Overwhelmingly, the participants reported that the project had enhanced their motivation for both for their teaching and research. Teachers also claimed to have gained more “confidence” and “courage” to undertake research projects of their own. The aspects which were particularly found to have been beneficial were the opportunity to share ideas with colleagues in an informal atmosphere, the theoretical input sessions and the impulse to reflect on one's own teaching context and hear about others' practices and experiences. Participants also reported positively on the group atmosphere and the drive it provided to continue with their projects. The group unanimously decided to continue with the project in this coming year and several new members have expressed a desire to join based on the reported success of the project. Naturally, however, there were also some problems and issues which we have identified as needing further development for a future undertaking of this kind. Firstly, many of the participants requested more additional input sessions and there were practical problems with the running of the e-platform which sadly was not used to its full potential. In addition, participants also suggested that they would have liked the chance to explore and discuss each other's writing, as this was done primarily alone after the end of the academic year and was the only aspect which did not incorporate a collaborative element.

Thus, whilst the outcome of the project in terms of the collection of papers is a positive form of feedback about the success of the project and a way of sharing our work with a broader audience, the most positive outcome was the motivating and supportive group dynamics which contributed positively to the working climate in group sessions and beyond within the institute itself. Although it was not possible to magically generate any extra time

to carry out the research, it has been possible for participating teachers to develop some of the knowledge and skills to carry out projects which addressed issues of real concern in the focus of their teaching contexts.

Ideas for the Future

Given the success of this project, we would definitely like to continue, perhaps in the future also involving language teachers from other schooling and non-tertiary contexts in an attempt to provide a bridge between language teachers at the university and in other contexts. We will also try to accommodate all the points raised in the feedback, whilst mindful of ensuring that the group should not become an additional burden in teachers' busy lives but rather a fruitful, motivating extension of it.

On the whole, it has been a very positive experience in which all the participants have learnt considerably from each other and have profited from the general supportive atmosphere of the group. We think it is worth forming such a guided research group and hope that by sharing our experiences in this article, we can encourage others to try the same kind of project. We would be interested to hear about any similar types of groups which could help us to improve and extend our current project and make sure that it becomes a long-term, established undertaking within our institution.

References

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