

Becoming a Researcher

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Introduction

I have been asked to talk about ‘becoming a researcher’ – and the easiest way I can do that is to draw on some of my own experience. Although I clearly *did* become a researcher, it was something that evolved and was somewhat unexpected. However, having happened, I have been able to reflect on the experience and this is the basis for the thoughts that I have to offer.

I started teaching in 1972, with a Reception class in a Yorkshire primary school. After a few years, once I had found my feet as an Infants teacher, I became interested in the way in which the quality of what I offered the children, the curriculum experience, seemed to effect their behaviour and their engagement. I used to find that at certain times during a term the children would drift away from me and I would think, ‘Why is that? What’s going on?’ My initial response was to become frustrated and wonder what was wrong with the children. But then I started to turn it back on myself and say ‘OK, if they’re getting disconnected, then maybe it would be better if I tried to reconnect with them, to pull them back’. So I would very consciously project myself more dynamically or bring in some kind of experientially exciting activity or curriculum topic, and I found that the children’s engagement was, indeed, rekindled. In this way, I became able to sense the climate and quality of my relationship with the class as it ebbed and flowed during a term. I gradually learned to detect early warning signs and to find ways of managing the classroom climate and its influence as a context for learning.

Those little experiments in my own classrooms were really my first ‘research’, and they got me interested. Thus, a little later studied for an MEd (1976) which enabled me to look at classroom interaction in a more theorised way. That eventually led on to a part-time PhD (1981) and to my first book ‘The Social World of the Primary School’ (1985) which is all about interaction and relationships and very much rooted the kind of exploration that I did initially as a new teacher with my class.

I think this example illustrates one simple answer to the question ‘How do you become a researcher?’, which is that one should be curious and enquiring. Perhaps that is essential. It is certainly what led me to become interested in the notion of ‘reflective teaching’.

Having said that of course, it becomes a lot more complicated and difficult, and it’s some experience on facing these challenges that I really want to share with you. I will address some key questions: ‘Why bother?’; ‘How to prepare?’; and ‘How to play the system’.

Why bother?

The first set of reasons for bothering to do research is pragmatic. There are institutional reasons why research is important and they of course have to do with your college or university - esteem, status and maintaining a research profile is an important part of working in higher education. The second pragmatic reason is because it is connected to personal careers. Teaching and administrative contributions are increasingly valued nowadays and that's a very good thing, but there's usually a threshold requirement in relation to research. Few academics can afford to ignore this.

However, there are a number of more principled reasons for doing research as well and I particularly identify two. The first is that research should contribute to knowledge, and thus to policy and practice. There is a kind of noble intention which is underpinned by a moral concern with making a worthwhile contribution. That is really important, I think, because there are many personal costs involved in doing research and, if you are going to put up with them, then it is very important to feel you are making a contribution that matters.

A second principled reason relates to the teaching profession and initial teacher education. Research can enhance and defend the profession, which for the past ten to twenty years has been under critique. We have a chink of light in the rhetoric about evidence-based practice - and that evidence must be provided by good quality research. The fact that research by classroom teachers is being so strongly supported by TTA is also a positive move. We might not always agree with every nuance in the way its set up, but the basic affirmation of enquiry is hugely important. It's not just at that level of the classroom. We have also got the Government coordinating new strategies for research development, sponsoring new systematic research reviews, data-bases, projects and research programmes. There are many other moves which, in the last few years, have furthered the importance of research. Indeed, engaging in research, at whatever level, does enhance the stock of knowledge available and in particular it does defend and enhance the professionalism of what we do. This is why it is strongly supported by the General Teaching Council.

So my answers to 'Why bother?' are that it is in our institutions' interests and in our personal interests - but it is also simply important as a contribution to knowledge and to the enhancement of professionalism.

How to prepare?

There seem to me to be five aspects of this that we need to think through: the personal issues, the practical issues, the substantive issues, the theoretical issues and the methodological issues.

We'll start with personal issues. The first one people tend to think about is finding time for research. How do you get time to think - quality time? With an overful timetable already, how do you fit this into your teaching? Also, we need to remember that doing research has got to be consistent with maintaining a satisfactory quality of life. This is important in its own terms, but I also think that a good researcher needs to

maintain a valid grasp of reality. This is not possible by becoming a recluse. If they hide away and communicate solely through their keyboard, they are unlikely to produce really worthwhile research. So I think actually there is some responsibility to stay active and engaged in a normal way of life. But somehow, amongst that, you need to find some quality time – early morning, late at night, Sundays, or whatever. That might well mean that you need to negotiate with the significant people in your life at home and at work to try and find an approach to this so that everybody understands that hiding away to research and study is part of what you need to do. Sometimes managers in institutions also generate unrealistic expectations. For example: ‘Oh yes, we’ll cut your timetable by 20 hours next term and that should enable you to produce two papers’. This is utter nonsense I’m afraid, for good research does not come off a production line.

Now the next personal issue is to do with your own commitment. It is absolutely vital that you care about the topic that you are going to work on. It must seem worthwhile because there will be challenges in actually carrying it out. If you don’t care about it you are unlikely to be able to meet the challenges. However, at the same time you must be careful that your commitment and your concern for the issue don’t override some degree of open-mindedness. After all, research is about looking at evidence. I always advise that one should use one’s values when selecting a topic of importance, but then open your mind to the possibility of finding evidence that contradicts your values and expectations. The other thing about commitment is that there is some merit in having a focus in your research activities because the way the academic world is organised it tends to reward the specialist. If you develop understanding in a particular field that you care about, then you start to accumulate expertise and become known for something. Opportunities then open up because of that expertise. So strategically thinking about something that you care about is important. Needless to say too, it is crucial to work on something that you *know* something about. I don’t think it’s by chance that I ended up doing my first research using interactionist analysis to look at classrooms, because that’s where I started out. I drew heavily on my own experience and personal knowledge.

A third type of personal issue is to do with social support. Research tends to be a relatively individual activity - that can be lonely and it can be quite threatening too because you never quite know whether you have got it right. It’s useful to have some friends around you to talk with particularly at the point where you get to presentations or publication because a lot of people do find such things quite threatening. I think it is well worth working with a ‘critical friend’ or in a little team to get some positive support or honest advice. My wife, Ros, has fulfilled this role for me for over thirty years now.

Let’s turn to some practical issues. There may be tensions between teaching and research and administration. There are basically two strategies for overcoming them. One I call ‘interfacing’, where you look for research opportunities around the activities which you are required to engage in. For instance, people often do research on partnership arrangements or school experience or working with student teachers. Another strategy is to separate the areas of work completely so that you start afresh on something completely different. It might be refreshing doing it that way and particularly useful sometimes as an institutional solution because a whole department can start to focus on a particular issue.

Another practical thing is actually having somewhere to work, where you can put things out and leave them and come back and look at them again. This may seem unnecessary, but you will have to wrestle with problems and you do need a psychologically appropriate working space where you can put things down and pick them up again later without too much disturbance to the continuity of your thinking.

Now to some of more research based aspects. A classic approach here is to identify substantive, theoretical and methodological issues. The first of these I've already talked about, in terms of the worthwhileness of the substantive topic and about it being something that you really care about.

On theoretical side, it has to be said that colleagues coming into teacher education don't always have a background in social science and some of theoretical issues are not always fully grasped. You really do need to somehow get hold of some sort of framework of the key philosophical issues in conducting social science. Usher's book on *Understanding Educational Research* is a good start, or Pring's *The Philosophy of Educational Research*. This is important because whichever research paradigm you work in there will be all sorts of tacit assumptions. These do have significance for the way in which you construct a research study and for the way in which other people will evaluate your study.

With methodological issues, the key issue in my view is achieving coherence. Basically you will begin with an overall aim. But then you need some tightly drawn research questions through which you operationalise your aim. This sounds much easier than it is, and you may well need to be creative and innovative to work out how to convert a general commitment to researchable questions. Then, of course, you need a research design – experiment, survey, case study, ethnography, action research, etc. – and an appropriately selected sample. Indeed, you've got to decide whom you are going to be working with; how you will negotiate access; what sort of ethical framework you will offer. Then you've got to find ways of gathering the data. Of course, these data and the way you analyse them *must* answer your research questions. So this is where the remorseless quest for coherence starts to come in. The sample's got to be large enough, representative enough and appropriate to answering your questions. Can you get appropriate data – and analyse it with reasonable confidence in the overall reliability and validity of your study? If you are confident about these things, then you must have a strong and internally consistent research design. But such coherence almost always has to be worked for. I regularly create little bits of ideas about how I might do something. I might go away for a week or so and I come back, think, then go away again. I am trying to convey the creativity that is involved in creating a research design, as well as the science, and also the fact that you may have to give time for the ideas to come and develop. This is why you need to be mildly obsessed, or at the very least extremely interested. It needs sustained commitment to chase through the ideas. That's the essence research design, a cumulative process drawing on creativity, technical knowledge and judgement as you try to overcome successive dilemmas.

How to play the system?

I've got a little formula here which expresses what I think is a fairly realistic point of view.

strategic thinking + research quality + positive identity = successful papers or funding

Let me explain what I mean by 'strategic thinking'. If you want to have a paper approved or get some funding, it's a good thing to have ideas which can be seen relevant and important to the field. This is about 'Where's the herd going? Should I go there to, or try somewhere else? Or 'What is the Government doing, and what issues are likely to arise as a result?'. I asked myself that last question very consciously in the mid-80s when, as the Government started to emphasise curriculum delivery, I decided to focus my work on pupil perspectives. As in tennis, one idea is to pop the ball back not to where the player is, but to where the player isn't. There is strategic value in thinking divergently. Research should be about creation of new knowledge and about asking questions. Of course, there is risk here too – you might just get ignored!

The next point concerns 'research quality'. An essential element of success is to begin with an excellent idea. Once again, this may stem from creativity, scholarship, discussion and 'thinking outside the box'. However, if that idea is not coherently followed through, then the reviewers will discover this and your paper will not be approved or your proposal will not get funded. For this reason, it is important that you don't submit your work too soon. It's often worth working it up to where you think it's finished and then talking to other people, then look at it afresh until you get it to the point where it really is very good.

'Positive identity' refers to another factor which many, appropriately, worry about. Research awards, like the assessment of papers for journals, are made through processes of peer review. Our colleagues are thus our friends, our critics and our gatekeepers. And we also need to recognise that the academic community is organised in networks or, as Tony Becher put it, 'tribes and territories'. The reality therefore is that, whether we like it or not, there are relationships between people that matter.

This is one of the reasons for developing some specialisation because it means that you can get to know the people in your field. With a bit of luck, they will support your work as it evolves. I'll give you my own example of this. When I was initially dabbling in my classroom, I sent off my MEd dissertation to Martyn Hammersley and Peter Woods. I got really supportive letters back and, a few months later, received an invitation to speak at an ethnography conference at St. Hilda's in Oxford. The people there were all those 'big names' whose papers and books I had read, and as a classroom teacher I felt somewhat awestruck. However, I was starting to be sucked into a specialist field within a theoretical framework that I felt comfortable in from my earlier first degree study of sociology. I also felt that I had something to offer because I was coming direct from a classroom background. Many of the people I met are now old friends. This is just a personal illustration of the importance of going to appropriate conferences and of taking initiatives and making contact with people.

You might also want to consider the role of criticism in academic work. It is certainly important in the refinement of ideas, but I don't personally think it is a terribly clever idea to spend one's academic life actually insulting other people. The academic world is full of such activity where, just because somebody operates in a different discipline or frame of reference, they're attacked. My experience is that most perspectives are sincerely held and I think the correct default position is that one should respect and try to understand the work of other people. Almost every approach offers some particular insight, even though you may not select it for your own work.

Finally, we should consider the importance of developing constructive relationships with research users. They are really important these days and there are several models of engagement that you might like to think about. If you get involved with the users early, your research should be much more embedded in practice or policy issues. It should have more authenticity and thus at the end of the day it should have more impact.

Conclusion

Going back to where we began, becoming a researcher must start from something you know and care about. You then need to make the research process viable in your life – your work life and your personal life. You then work in a sustained way with your specialist focus and any support you can get from colleagues, friends and family, whether it's through an MEd or PhD or writing papers or proposals for funding or whatever. Link up with research users if you possibly can, because that is likely to enable you to do more authentic research and ultimately to have greater impact. Also, be a bit canny about the journals and funders you use, and make friends amongst your peers, don't lose them. Try to be theoretically aware and respectful of other, different positions.

So that's my view on how to become a researcher. I continue to think it is a very worthwhile thing to do. If we can have more people in teacher education actively researching and producing high quality work, then we will get more influence over what happens to us as part of the teaching profession. We might not be pushed around quite as much as we have been in the past decade or so. Indeed, we might be able to answer back!