

SAGE Research Methods Cases

Peer Observations as a Vehicle for Engaging with the Student Voice: A Phenomenological Inquiry

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I began my Doctorate of Education in 2008 and had a strong interest in developing teaching and learning. I wanted to know how learners could be involved more directly in the observation process to improve the quality of teaching. There were strong policy drivers pushing for the development of the 'expert learner' and student involvement initiatives, so there seemed to be something here worth consideration. A review of literature soon demonstrated that what little research had been done had been essentially in the compulsory education sector, and had been poorly documented in terms of methodology. My focus was on post-compulsory education, and I used an action research model to work with participants from an 'HE in FE' curriculum area. Participants came from a 2-year teacher training programme area, and the research used a peer observation format, 'pairing' the observing member of teaching staff with a second-year student: observations were conducted within first-year classes. Participants were provided with a pro forma to structure focus within the peer observations and post-observation discussions. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with all participants throughout the research, with 'key' participants interviewed at several points throughout the time span to elicit their phenomenological interpretations. The data were interpreted through a combination of theoretical frameworks – communities of practice and ecological learning systems, and a range of theoretical concepts around identity.

Learning Outcomes

By the end of this research project case study you should be able to

- Justify the relevance, and appropriateness, of research questions to the theoretical frameworks and/or concepts selected
- Evaluate the advantages and disadvantages of using action research and phenomenological inquiry
- Explain the challenges involved in analysing interview transcripts
- Identify the limitations of a research project in terms of study 'context' and generalisability

Summary of Research Study Background and Project Findings

When I started on this research, I had looked at the works of Collinson and Forrest et al. because I wanted to know how students could be more directly involved in the observation process: I had a strong background in mentoring and developing teaching staff, and also involvement with 'learner voice' and graded observations. I had sufficient depth of prior 'interest' and experience to get me started, but finding that 'gap in the knowledge', that specific area within which I could make a contribution to knowledge was critical. Prior research was limited, the majority of which was in the compulsory education sector, and what did exist had a poor methodological stance. Although linking with student voice initiatives, the case studies tended to focus around whole school improvement, student councils, anti-bullying strategies and so on: even where learners had been involved in formal observations, the 'participants' had been selected by the school, and findings were reported anecdotally.

Having found my 'gap' in the literature, my aim was to investigate why adult students, and teaching staff, might *choose* to volunteer for a peer observation action research study, what they each anticipated gaining from the process, how their sense of identity might influence these perceptions, what might evolve from the reflective conversations

between teacher and student and how these findings might be used to improve the teaching and learning experience for everyone involved (Hall, 2012). This necessitated looking at the research, and the data, from a range of perspectives and levels: the personal (*micro*), the interaction with others (*meso*), the institutional (*exo*) and policy (*macro*). Although the research was informed by policy, having completed an initial review of the main drivers, as I was seeking phenomenological perspectives, I chose to use semi-structured interviews as my primary research method. After all, if you want to know what people think, it is usually simplest to ask them, particularly when it is the depth of insight and feelings that you want to discover as this often requires additional, follow-up questions to probe further. This was not only about the individual perspectives, however. The study was also seeking to analyse what was happening in the 'interactions' between the student and the member of staff, and the implications this might have for the peer observation process. So, in addition to issues around these interactions and individual perceptions, the study also sought to understand what was happening between these various 'communities', that is, students and staff. As such, I used Lave and Wenger's communities of practice and Bronfenbrenner's ecological learning systems, as initial theoretical frameworks through which to view these: were we looking at 'master-apprentice' models, with students gaining some form of legitimate peripheral participation to the teacher's world through their engagement with the observation process and their 'input' into the peer observation feedback, or was it something more fluid where the student's agency was more independent and there was a more bi-directional influence in the evidence (Hall, 2012)? As with Kolb and Kolb's work, I wanted to understand how this experience might enable learners to engage with metacognitive practices, and so become 'expert', if at all, and what their perceptions were of this experience.

Student participants talked of opportunities to shape and develop knowledge and practice – both their own and that of the teaching staff; teachers saw a vehicle for gaining direct access to the perceptions of their learners, and for modelling good practice in doing so. As trainee teachers, the students anticipated knowledge gains from observing an 'expert other' teaching and of engaging in reflective post-observation discussions with their partner. As second-year students, they also saw the potential to act as a 'broker' or 'bridger' of these two communities – teaching staff and students – and the transfer of knowledge and understanding between these groups. However,

these *were* conversations between a *teacher* and a *student*, so at times, there were issues around locus of power and challenge within these discussions: a strong degree of trust and confidentiality within these conversations was essential, and the member of teaching staff needed to take responsibility for ‘enabling’ the student to voice their opinions in a safe and supportive environment. Within these conversations, however, all participants reported benefits: teachers felt ‘liberated’ as a result of having opportunities to clarify thoughts around the peer observations before giving feedback. They felt relieved of the ‘usual constraints’ of feeling obliged to give ‘nice’ peer feedback and were able to formulate concise, informed and constructive discussions with the member of staff observed. Where the student trainee teachers came from a different curriculum background, possibilities also opened up around Lincoln and Guba's transferability of sending and receiving contexts – for sharing of practice across subject areas (Hall, 2012). Interestingly, the students also recognised aspects of their own behaviour as learners in the classroom and the impact this had on teaching and learning, with references to ‘having had the mirror’ held up (Hall, 2012) as part of their involvement. Even though these student participants were trainee teachers, they were still learners, and so, although this also provided opportunities to strengthen their developing sense of identity as ‘teachers’ and their sense of belonging to that professional community, as Schaffer has cautioned, such interactions could have impacted negatively on an individual's self-esteem or self-concept if the process had not been carefully monitored.

Through the analysis of language and how this was used within interactions with other participants, the data also considered how an individual's sense of agency was evidenced prior to, and during, the observations, and whether it displayed differently depending upon context and conversational partner. This became a means through which to define the personal and/or social identity of the individual (Hall, 2012), either through reinforcement of an existing identity, or establishing of a new one.

The overall findings indicated that learning conversations, structured around the peer observation format, were successful in engaging participants in a partnership approach to teaching and learning. Teachers and students were enabled to have both a reflective, and reflecting discussion as they shared their perceptions (Hall, 2012), and the pro forma provided a good scaffold for this process. Where conversations were most effective, a largely ecological learning system approach was seen: individual agency, fluidity in exchanges, collaboration and parity of interactions. All participants were,

however, from academic curriculum areas, so a pilot is now being run with a vocational area to review whether the findings are similar, or align more closely with a traditional community of practice model.

Research Questions

When I began to formulate my research questions, I was aiming for between three and five key questions which would link clearly and logically to my research premise. Having completed the literature review, I had a strong idea of the area and overall 'working' focus for my research study, so it then became a process of teasing out those initial questions, but they continued to evolve along the way. I started by considering what I *really* want to find out, and the possible research methodologies I was going to pursue: this was about finding a means to engage with the student voice, using peer observations as the vehicle, and thus improving the quality of teaching and also developing the reflective skills of those involved as they engaged in conversations, with each other and with me as the researcher. Having already identified relevant policy, theoretical frameworks and concepts, as this was to be a collaborative process, I adopted an action research approach.

The actual questions I used were (Hall, 2012) the following:

Question 1: Why do we ask our learners to tell us what they think? For whose benefit and to what purpose?

This question was essentially framed around two perspectives: the first from the institutional aspect, and the second, from the 'individual' viewpoint. The first, looked at the external and internal drivers, and in particular, one key policy document from the Learning and Skills Council (LSC), which was urging post-compulsory education to involve its learners as 'individuals', as a 'collective' student body, and at an 'organisational' level (e.g. Student Council representatives on Governing bodies). The

second perspective sought to evaluate this from the individual's position – both teachers and students.

Question 2: How do learners' self-perceptions influence their involvement with learner voice initiatives (perceived 'trajectories', sense of self and cultural placement)?

This second question built on the first one, considering why learners would even choose to volunteer, and how an individual's self-perceptions might impact on this. These participants were not, after all, within the compulsory education age group – they could be seen as having more of a choice about whether to get involved. They may have different expectations around the outcomes if they chose to do so. This question was, therefore, about an individual's sense of identity, and drew on texts by Bandura, Cooley and Oyserman et al., for example: it considered whether this was a personal and/or social identity, whether it might vary in different contexts and whether there were issues around self-efficacy and self-concept. As this was not just about their individual learner identities, but also those displayed within the conversations and interactions with teaching staff, it was also necessary to consider those aspects addressed in the third question.

Question 3: What are the issues around language, locus of power, tensions and conflict?

It was important when evaluating what coding and thematic analysis would need to be conducted that this question was included within the research. Cockburn and Donnelly addressed some of the issues associated with teaching 'observations', and these needed to be considered in relation to what was happening within these conversations, and the naturally inherent imbalance of power between teaching staff and learners, and between participants and the organisation. As I was seeking the phenomenological perspectives of the participants, it was also of great value to look at the individual words, phrases and interjections, which took place within these interactions, and to code these against the relevant theoretical frameworks and concepts.

Question 4: What are the implications for practice?

This was the final question, and one which not only fit with the EdD focus, but which was also of value in establishing conclusions for the practice of those involved with the research, for myself and for the organisation. It was also a means through which to discuss the potential issues around generalisability and context issues: it looked at aspects around Lincoln and Guba's 'sending and receiving' contexts for ways in which the research findings might be used by others.

What was important in establishing these research questions was that they provided a means through which to define the research focus, and to clarify the theoretical frameworks and concepts which would be used to add the layers and depth to the data coding and analysis.

Research Design

The influence on the research design came from the research questions about the perceptions, interpretations and experiences of individuals, their sense of identity and their interactions with others. In adopting an action research approach, the aim was to construct knowledge and meaning through joint exploration which would enable an exploration of the ways in which ‘social worlds’ are understood and experienced by those within these interactions. This meant that I was very close to the data and the participants, and from both an analytical and an ethical perspective, I had to acknowledge this within the research design. It was also important that this design did not remain static and my literature ‘search’ did not cease once the literature review was completed and the research was underway – it continued to inform. Although additional work around ‘systems’ and ‘communities’ has been done by Hodgson and Spours, and further work by Wenger, these were still insufficient for the data exploration and analysis. Even with additional associations arising from the evidence (deductive) and contributing to the development of the research design, there was still a need for something else. This resulted in a new ‘continuum of practice’ being devised by me in order to aid the data analysis (Hall, 2012).

As an action research project, this needed volunteers who would be available to work together, and who would be available at repeated intervals across the duration of the research for interview and active participation. Initially, the research outline was offered out to a number of higher education (HE) in further education (FE) curriculum areas as my aim was to have a ‘participant’ course where learners were on-programme for at least 2 years: the intention being to take second-year learners in to first-year classes, and in this way alleviate some of the potential problems which might be associated with a learner being involved in an observation ‘within year’. The area which volunteered was that of teacher training, and by focusing the research within one specific curriculum area, there were strong opportunities for an action research focus. It might have been possible to spread the research across more than one curriculum area, but these were considerations which I had to balance when formulating my research design and methodological approach. The research questions and theoretical focus/foci have to align, so it is important to evaluate what might be gained, or lost, as a result of engaging

with a broader participant base and to consider such issues when addressing any research limitations.

Having undertaken these initial 'soundings' and obtained my curriculum area, the research outline was taken into classes so that potential participants had an opportunity to discuss it further with me and follow up as appropriate. In total, there were eight participants from a teacher training area: two learners, who were each paired with a different member of teaching staff for the peer observation; three members of teaching staff who were willing to be 'observed' and the curriculum manager for that area. The four key participants (two learners and two teachers) were each interviewed in depth, three times at different points across the research. Other staff had at least one interview, and some had two interviews depending upon how the research unfolded. It is worth noting here that this was done across a 12-month timescale, and that data were coded as I went along – this is important and useful so that analysis begins to further inform one's data search, which enabled me to identify additional themes and so to pursue deeper analysis of the data. It can also help to identify where things may not be working well, or as anticipated, and so prevent the pursuit of a 'wrong pathway' or missed opportunities. For me, all of this helped to further inform the theoretical concepts, and also highlighted that the two communities of interaction (communities of practice and ecological learning systems) were insufficient on their own; this led to the development of a new 'practice' framework (Hall, 2012).

When the peer observations did take place, the teacher and student observation used a pro forma provided by me as a scaffold for their focus, and for use in their post-observation discussion. I sat in on the observations purely to note the interaction between the teacher and student observer pair. After the observation, the pair went to a private room for a conversation about what they had just seen, using the pro forma as an aide-memoire for their discussion. After I had set up the digital voice recorder to record their conversation for subsequent analysis, I did not remain, but left them to explore their reflections on the session observed. Once this part of the process was complete, the annotated pro formas were returned to me for inclusion within the data analysis. Although offering insights and an exploration of the observation, the student was not involved in giving the peer observation feedback to the member of staff observed.

A pragmatic approach was taken to the number of participants involved, the scope of the research study and the ability of a single researcher to manage the process. The objective was to obtain rich, multi-layered data which would provide a nuanced analysis of the interactions and perceptions of those involved.

Data Gathering and Analysis

As stated earlier, semi-structured interviews were the primary data tool used, and interviews and conversations were recorded on digital voice recorders, all of which were held securely by me, and I was the only one with access to them. Once recorded, all conversations were transcribed – all but two were transcribed verbatim, including pauses and interjections across conversations, and two had key aspects transcribed where comments were useful. As this research was about individual's perceptions, the subtleties that can sit within conversations and language, it was important that the recordings were analysed against all of the various theoretical concepts and frameworks involved. This necessitated repeated 'sweeps' of the data to assign 'themes' and 'sub-themes', which involved listening to my recordings a lot! While time-consuming, this actually meant that I got to know my data very well and was able to pick up on connections and broaden my insights.

When working with qualitative data in particular, it is important to have a robust method of coding that data, as there can be questions around its validity and credibility. I initially tried a computer software tool (NVivo) to do this, but after piloting the first few interviews through this, I found the use of computer-aided qualitative data analysis (CAQDAS) programs to be too restrictive. I could not obtain the subtlety of analysis that I needed, so I produced hard copies from the transcriptions and used an old-fashioned approach of highlighting and adding coloured dots to sections to represent different themes and sub-themes. This did, however, enable an initial sweep for the broad 'themes' and then further analysis for the sub-themes. One of the benefits of doing this on hard copies, rather than in a virtual environment, was that I was able to physically compare and review transcripts side by side, even several transcripts at a time to look for themes, to understand what was happening around them, and to gauge timelines within and across interviews and the research process. It also provided an opportunity to investigate the 'interjections' which were happening within the conversations, for example, where

individuals agreed or disagreed, or where they confirmed or disengaged with the expressed views of others.

Methodological Problems and Limitations

In terms of problems and limitations, it could be said that as a small-scale study, there may be questions around the generalisability of any of the findings. However, the data analysis was extremely deep and provided several layers of thematic coding and analysis, with a robust and thorough explanation of the method and methodological approach taken. As such, other practitioners and researchers should be able to identify appropriate contextual links to their own area.

As an action research format, it relied on repeated access to the participants, and their continued reflections and engagement with the process. This can be difficult in the current climate where organisations are under constant pressure and restructure. Similarly, illness and personal health issues can impact the interviews, and indeed, one of the last interviews had to be conducted via the telephone because of just such an issue.

Even where a study is small scale, if one uses interviews as a primary means of data collection, at some point, these will have to be transcribed: this is either a heavily time-dependent or an expensive route, depending on whether one is able to do the transcription oneself or needs to pay to get this done.

Questions Raised

Although the outcomes from the research were regarded as positive by the participants, whenever work is done with just 'some' learners, then automatically others are excluded. While this was not within the scope of the research, it could be a useful topic to explore elsewhere. Similarly, this was an academic curriculum area, where the 'students' were already familiar with the peer observation model, so it was important that limitations were honestly recognised.

Those involved regarded this ‘developmental’ model of peer observations as a good vehicle around which to structure learning conversations; however, this does come with a cautionary note. As stated earlier, where staff and students collaborate, there are issues around the relationship and potential for power imbalance to exist; it was therefore seen as vital that the member of teaching staff *enabled* their student partner to participate fully and openly within the reflective, learning conversation. It is important to remember that even though these are participants who are familiar with the ‘context’ of observations, that there was still a ‘teacher’ and a ‘student’.

Importantly, whenever the word *observation* is mentioned in a teaching context, even experienced staff become apprehensive, so putting in sufficient development and support for all those involved is essential. Allowing sufficient time for this, and planning thoroughly, is also a key aspect for consideration, as is the issue of organisational ‘buy-in’ if changes to practice are to be implemented. Trust between participants and the organisation, a clear knowledge of what is being done and why and who will be responsible for which aspects of feedback to the observed member of staff are also crucial. Cain has looked at teachers engaging in classroom-based action research, which was a useful text, but it was about ‘colleagues’ working together, not about engaging with ‘learners’.

Conclusion

For a small-scale action research study, this project provided a powerful vehicle for staff and students to engage in discussions which were both reflective and reflecting. There was a real sense of partnership and of sharing of perceptions: an opportunity for frank and open discussion prior to feedback being provided. The use of the pro forma as a scaffold for the observation and the subsequent discussion was important, but I should have provided it sooner as this would have allowed participants time to discuss it beforehand in more detail.

Reviewing this now after completion of my research and continuing to keep an eye on student voice initiatives indicate that these are developing, but are still hard to implement within an organisation. The only advice I can offer is that if something is really of value and should be shared, keep on talking to people and using dissemination

opportunities whenever possible. Look at small pilot case studies as opportunities to push against the door – eventually it might just open!

Exercises and Discussion Questions

- In terms of the research questions used and in looking at the ways students and staff interact, what other theoretical concepts might I have looked at?
- In this study, the participants were known to each other, with some working in the same establishment. What ethical implications might there be for the researcher and the study?
- This research was placed in an academic curriculum area. What do you think the implications might be if it had been conducted in a vocational curriculum area?
- I used a qualitative approach and semi-structured interviews to gain participants' perspectives: what other methods might have been used to gain participant perspectives? What difficulties might be associated with using interviews?
- Had the study taken its focus on policy rather than on individuals, how would you design your research approach and methods?
- What might you need to consider when completing research with a small number of participants?
- Action research requires a lot of collaboration. What do you think might have been some of the practicalities I needed to be aware of in relation to the actual implementation of the research and the coding?
- If you wanted to look at a research project to either (a) improve student voice, (b) improve the peer observation process or (c) improve the metacognitive skills of learners, what questions might you ask?

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