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Teaching Quality in Self-Study Research

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Abstract

This paper discusses how the Master of Education (MEd) students at AKU-IED are empowered to understand and monitor quality in self study research. The paper is based on the experience of teaching self study research over a period of three years. During this period, students in the Teacher Learning course in the MEd programme were asked to explore their journey of becoming teachers and teacher educators using self study research. As an end product the students were asked to write an autobiography. During these processes of self-exploration and the writing process, they were asked to follow guidelines identified by Bullough Jr. & Pinnegar (2001) in their article "Guidelines for quality in autobiographical forms of self-study research", which were shared and discussed with the students. During the programme, different methods were employed to ensure that participants followed the guidelines shared with them. Despite the systematic approach to ensure quality in self study research there were a number of challenges. These challenges are discussed at the end of the paper.

Introduction

Over the past decade most of the autobiographical research has been conducted in the form of a self-study research (e.g. Hamilton & Pinnegar, 1998; Loughran & Russell, 1997; Elbaz-Luwisch, 2002), or SSR. SSR has been employed by many researchers to document how teachers and teacher educators develop personally and professionally. Some research studies have shown that teachers learn to teach both in their pre-job years and on-the-job. This has been identified as 'pre-training', 'pre-job' and 'in-service' phases of learning to teach (Feiman-Nemser, 1983). Many researchers (e.g. Ayers, 1993; Bashiruddin, 2003; Beattie, 1995, 2001; Connelly & Clandinin, 1990; Elbaz, 1983; Johnson, 1990; Mattice, 2002; Thiessen & Anderson, 1999) show that that teachers develop and change as individuals as a result of their own knowledge of teaching which they develop from their day-to-day experiences in their respective contexts.

Despite the growing interest in SSR research and publication of such research, one ongoing scholarly debates of the past quarter century is about quality in autobiographical forms of SSR. Since SSR is derived from literary conventions the most frequently asked question regarding its quality and validity has been:

When does SSR become research? This is the question posed and debated by many scholars in the area of teacher education. Mills (1959) has for long argued that personal problems are embedded in public issues and therefore should be understood in that perspective. But that the “human meaning of public issues must be revealed by relating them to personal troubles and to the problems of individual life” (p. 226). He points out that Self Study (SS) becomes research only when it is supported by evidence and analysis. The issues raised in SS are related to the issue of time and place. Bullough and Pinnegar (2001) find that biography and history should be coupled in SS to make it into research as is done in other social sciences. This connection between the two, they argue, is only when “self is shown to have relationship to the bearing on the context and ethos of time, then self-study moves to research” (p. 15). There has been emphasis on the balance that is kept between self and its relationship with time and place and public issues and vice versa. Quality in SSR is to strike a balance between biography and history. As Mooney (1957) points out SSR does not focus on ‘self’ but on the space between self and the practice engaged in. It is felt that there is always a tension between these two elements i.e. self and self in relation to practice and the other characters in the setting. In this engaging debate Bullough and Pinnegar (2001) suggest that:

The balance can be struck at many times during the self-study process, but when a study is reported, the balance must be in evidence not only in what data have been gathered (from self and other) and presented, but in how they have been analyzed, in how they have been brought together in conversation. Otherwise, there is no possibility of answering the “so what” question, the question of significance, that wise readers ask and require be answered.
(p.15)

Keeping this discussion in mind one can conclude that SSR is at the intersection of biography and history. So the questions that one need ask in doing SSR is that of self as a teacher or teacher educator in a particular context, spread over a period of time, and interaction with others. All this leads to the ultimate aim of SSR which is to interact with self and make it an educative experience for oneself and for others. Despite these definitions, the question of quality in SSR is still not easy to answer. Situated in this discussion, my paper shows how an attempt is made to teach quality in SSR.

Teaching of SSR

SSR was introduced to the students of the MEd Class of 2004, 2005 and 2006 at the Aga Khan University, Institute for Educational Development, Karachi, Pakistan. The students in the MEd programme are from Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Pakistan, Syria, and from countries in the Central Asian and East African regions. Since the MEd is an in-service teacher education programme, the students bring with them rich experiences of teaching and professional learning.

I introduced self-study research in a course called Teacher Learning. This course had four themes, one of which was called: Teachers' Lives. The aim of introducing self-study research was to enable the students to better understand their own lives as teachers.

The self study was based on my own experience of being involved in SSR which is "intentional and systematic inquiry" (Dinkelman, 2003) and places importance on the subjective understanding of an individual's life experiences (see Bashiruddin, 2002, forthcoming (a) and (b)). I designed the theme "Teachers' Lives" with the intention that students should write an autobiography. I introduced this with the following question:

Becoming a teacher is a journey with significant learning experiences. Write an autobiography in which you capture the richness of your experiences and beliefs as a teacher. Identify important people or critical incidents that have significantly influenced your understanding of professional development as a teacher. Then, critically analyze those experiences and beliefs in terms of how they have shaped you as a teacher that you have become and a learner of teaching. While constructing an autobiography keep in mind the guidelines identified by Bullough Jr. & Pinnegar in the article "Guidelines for Quality in Autobiographical Forms of Self-Study Research".

Following the guidelines for quality in SSR

There were several ways employed in teaching which enabled students to ascertain quality in SSR. Below I describe the four steps used:

Step 1: Reading and understanding guidelines

I gave the students the article “Guidelines for Quality in Autobiographical Forms of Self-Study Research” by Bullough Jr. & Pinnegar (2001) to read. This article was discussed with them in detail in class to make sure that they understood this method of research, its historical background, theoretical underpinnings and the question of how SS becomes research. The 14 guidelines (see Appendix A) were also discussed in detail.

While discussing the guidelines the students were asked to think of themselves as researchers and authors of their own lives. This was to acknowledge them as knowledgeable individuals and that “everyone’s voice matters and everyone has something worthy to communicate” (Wood & Lieberman, 2000, p. 260). While discussing the guidelines which indicated that “nodal moments” need to be documented, the students were asked to think of ‘critical incidents’ which they would like to make public. They were also asked to write why these critical incidents helped them to understand their professional development as teachers.

Step 2: Reading and analyzing quality self study research articles

In the first MEd cohort (Class of 2004) the students were given two samples of autobiography, one, my own (Bashiruddin, A. 2002) and the other a chapter from a book by Beattie (1995). They were also given supplementary reading material that they could read in the library. For the Classes of 2005 and 2006 I also shared the writings of the students of the Class of 2004 that I had compiled in the form of an E-Book. These were examples of quality writing from the developing world.

In class we discussed the important structures and contents of the readings assigned to the students. Detailed mind maps were made on the whiteboard. These papers were also analyzed against the guidelines for quality and some indicators of quality, such as the stories and their meanings, interpretations, problems and issues, connections, truth and insights for teacher education were identified and discussed. Using these autobiographies it was also pointed out how each individual has his or her own authentic voice and how that voice is represented in scholarly writing. Through my own autobiography of becoming a teacher I could point out how character was developed by using dramatic actions.

I also introduced and gave examples of ways in which autobiographical writings could be organized. Some of the examples that I shared were the use of

metaphors, stories, poems, dialogues, paintings and sketches as a frame for autobiographies. These were ideas to help the students to think of ways of structuring and representing their stories. It was made very clear that these are some of the ways and are not the only ways and, therefore, are not mandatory to use.

Step 3: Process of SSR and writing

The process of writing an autobiography began with a brainstorming activity. The students were engaged in an exercise to develop annals and chronicles.

The students were provided time to make and display their annals in the classroom and discuss them with each other. This was to provide them as much opportunity as possible to look at each others annals which were presented in different ways, some presented it as a spider web and some in a linear form. Then the students were asked to write stories representing the critical incidents that they had mentioned in the annals. This was a way to move from annal to chronicles.

While writing the students were divided into pairs and small groups to enable them to listen to their own voice, discover and see how their lives as teachers changed and developed by describing their experiences in detail. Collaboratively they shared some of their stories with each other. The peers gave oral and written feedback. The purpose was to provide support to each other in writing and to learn from each others' stories as reading others' stories may spark ideas.

Students also served as critical and supportive friends for each other because "each individual has some expertise, knowledge, or nuanced understanding with

1 "An annal...is a line schematic of an individual's life divided into moments and segments by events, years, places, or significant memories. The construction of an annal allows researchers and participants to gain a sense of the whole of an individual's life from his or her point of view. Annals also allow individuals to represent visually something of the topography of their life experiences, the highs and the lows, the rhythms they construct around their life cycles." (Clandinin & Connelly, 1994, p.419).

2 After the participant has constructed an annal, we ask him or her to tell stories, to construct chronicles around the points marked on the annals. Frequently we involve participants in creating annals and chronicles as a way of scaffolding their oral histories, of beginning the process of having them re-collect their experiences (Clandinin & Connelly, 1994, p. 420)

the potential to help others” (Wood & Lieberman, 2000, p. 260). Through writing and constant collaboration with peers and reflecting on their own writings, the students were theorizing, although the process of their theorizing was not linear. It was a reflective and “dynamic interplay between description, reflection, dialogue with self and others” (Johnson & Golombek, 2002, p. 8). While working as critical friends they were asked to help each other to see how stories were told and interpreted, how history (i.e. their past) interacted with their present and provided an improvement for their future. They were also encouraged to challenge the new perspectives they brought to issues and perspectives on established truths.

Step 4: writing reflections

Students were initially not familiar with the specific genre of writing autobiographies by employing SSR; therefore, they were given specific questions. By answering these questions they were able to understand a process of writing that I call “Reflections-on-writing”. Students were given four questions that they had to answer and share with me at various stages during their writing. These were as follows:

Task 1

How did your memory help you in writing major incidents of becoming a teacher, which you discovered from constructing an annal? How has it informed you about your professional development?

Task 2

How did reading stories and collaborative writing help you in developing your own learning?

How does reading articles help you in your professional development and in understanding your processes of becoming a teacher?

Task 3

How did it help you to understand your teaching journey as a teacher by:

- reading and responding to your own writing;
- reading and responding to the stories of your peer and

- getting feedback from your peer?

Task 4

What were your learning experiences in writing about your journey of becoming a teacher and learning to teach? How would you use this strategy of teacher learning with teachers in your context?

These tasks enabled them to look at the development of their autobiographical writing.

Challenges

There were several challenges and, in this paper, I will discuss three of the most prominent ones.

The first challenge was to introduce a new form of research to the students and also make them cognizant of the aspect of quality in engaging in such research. Most of the students were sceptical in the beginning because this was the first time that they had encountered SSR in their entire career. For me as a tutor, introducing an innovation in the form of SSR, in which self-disclosure is a major ethical concern, was a challenge. Students had to be oriented to engage in SSR. “Introducing a new activity requires more time, not only in carrying out the activity itself but also in orienting and training the students to perform the new and different task” (Bashiruddin, 2003, p. 249). There were two major issues. One, to convince the students that their stories were important since mostly there is a tendency for teachers to accept knowledge from outside, that is from books and journal articles and thus devalue learning from their own experiences. It was also made clear to them that since they were the authors of their own stories they could select the pieces that they wanted to disclose. Therefore the first step that I thought was important was to share my own story of continuous professional development (Bashiruddin, 2002), which is published. This convinced many of them to overcome their anxiety. Second, they were told that during writing they would be provided with support.

The second challenge was to plan and teach in such a way that students were not only made aware of the quality in SSR but also to enable students to achieve this quality. Although various criteria exist, such as believability, credibility, consensus and coherence (Eisner 1981, 1991; Lincoln & Guba, 1985), these are difficult to measure in all forms of qualitative research. I had to constantly engage the students in discussions and in answering questions such as: so what

does this story mean? What is the truth and how do I interpret it keeping in mind my context and time? How does this story bring issues of my past to the forefront and how do I answer them in present?

My own experience as a researcher and from being involved in self-study research (see Bashiruddin, 2002) gave me confidence to plan by reflecting and recollecting the techniques that helped me in writing such as brainstorming, developing stories and then linking them and finding significance, writing individually, reading my own stories of experience and reflecting on them, sharing my stories with others and getting their feedback, and reading published SSR. I tried to incorporate all these ways of exploring and writing 'Self'.

Another challenge was to make students believe in themselves and their stories of professional development. For example, at the time of developing annals they expressed their concerns about what to write as they felt that they had nothing significant to write about. So the first step was to make them aware that each one of us is unique and we need to acknowledge that each one of our lives, beliefs and the way we developed as teachers would be different.

Conclusion

The insights and understandings gained from students' questioning and reflections provided me with alternative ways of thinking about teaching SSR. Therefore I could see "my learning to be intertwined with my students' learning. They were teaching me how to be a teacher educator by expressing what they needed to learn as young professionals" (Mueller, 2003, 71). Subsequently, these alternative ways of thinking and learning helped me in teaching SSR to the next group of students; then, I incorporated changes as I learned from my experience of teaching and reflecting. This has shown me that the SSR cycle is a creative process which also brings change in self.

Teaching of SSR and also finding ways of looking after its quality has made some methodological contributions; it has inaugurated a new domain of experimentation in Pakistan. Others (e.g. Hamilton & Pinnegar, 1998; Loughran & Russell, 2002) have used SSR in the West as teacher learning strategy but it was for the first time that it was introduced in a developing country (Pakistan). Thus, as a teacher educator I have contributed to the reform movement by introducing it to students at AKU-IED. The students had not been involved in this kind of self-study research, which gives priority to the teachers' voice and thus opens up a new way of understanding teachers. It was also for the first time that writing about 'self' was used as a mode of inquiry and of professional

development. Thus, such initiatives need to be taken by teacher educators to introduce new research paradigms. We as “Teacher educators need to continuously create spaces within teacher education programs that are dedicated to practicing and to discussing the crucial role of reflection with beginning professionals. Concurrently, when teacher educators engage in dialogue with their colleagues about critical learning experiences, future teachers and teacher educators are enriched personally and professionally” (Mueller, 2003, p. 82).

I have sown the seeds of teaching quality in SSR and I hope that further work in this area will be taken up. I have hopes that since all the students in the MEd program come from diverse backgrounds and countries they will take this to their own contexts and further develop and adapt as they see appropriate, which would further extend the community of researchers.

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Appendix

Guidelines: Autobiographical Self-Study Forms

1. Autobiographical self-studies should ring true and enable connection.
2. Self-studies should promote insight and interpretation.
3. Autobiographical self-study research must engage history forthrightly and the author must take an honest stand.
4. Biographical and autobiographical self-studies in teacher education are about the problems and issues that make someone an educator.
5. Authentic voice is a necessary but not sufficient condition for scholarly standing of a biographical self-study.
6. The autobiographical self-study researcher has an ineluctable obligation to seek to improve the learning situations not only for the self but for the other.
7. Powerful autobiographical self-studies portray character development and include dramatic action: Something genuine is at stake in the story.
8. Quality autobiographical self-studies attend carefully to persons in context and setting.
9. Quality autobiographical self-studies offer fresh perspectives on established truths.
10. Self-study that rely on correspondence should provide the reader with an inside look at participants' thinking and feeling.
11. To be scholarship, edited conversation or correspondence must not only have coherence and structure, but that coherence and structure should provide argumentation and convincing evidence.
12. Self-study that rely on correspondence bring with them the necessity to select, frame, arrange and footnote the correspondence in ways that demonstrate wholeness.
13. Interpretations made of self-study data should not only reveal but also interrogate the relationships, contradictions, and limits of views presented.
14. Effective correspondence self-studies contain complication or tension..

Source: Bullough, Jr. R.V., & Pinnegar, S. (2001). Guidelines for quality in autobiographical forms of self-study research. *Educational Researcher*, 30(3), 13-2.