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Weak knees in education and mismatched crutches from other social sciences: Native methods and methodology for the native researcher in education.

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Abstract

The education research community has long been supported by intellectual foundations from external disciplines. Education creates and researches itself. Despite this unique dynamic, native methods and methodologies have not been independently developed as a dominant force within education research. As the education research community positions and repositions itself, an awareness of the power relationships and knowledge constructs within this self-perpetuating system is continually needed. This paper will argue for the need to have native methods and methodology for the native researcher in education with respect to the aforementioned power relationships and knowledge constructs.

Introduction: You need to do a number one and a number two in research

“Put simply, first-order concepts are the ‘facts’ of an ethnographic investigation and second-order concepts are the ‘theories’ an analyst uses to organize and explain these facts” (Maanen, 1979).

Education: Structure and philosophy (it creates and researches itself!)

An argument for “native” methods and methodologies might seem problematic because it appears isolationist upon initial inspection. It is neither intended to be an elitist gospel, nor a call for intellectual segregation. It asks for a reflection on a number of ideas that can only live in the educational research community. The relationships created in education between the various involved broad social groups that are unique to education are the focus of this argument.

The practice of education, in modern societies, is realized in educational institutions which tend to occupy distinct physical spaces but also represent constructed symbolic spaces. The teaching and learning relationship is at the centre of the educational experience and necessitates the interaction of
teachers and learners.\(^1\) If education is achieved through the process of teaching and learning, then teachers are the practitioners of the educational institution. Teachers teach students. If those who are involved (whether this is by choice, coercion or force) in learning and teaching (other than the teachers) are taught then they are students. If they do not learn then they have not been taught.\(^2\)

In tertiary education, within departments of education, teachers teach student-teachers (undergraduate or graduate) about and around teaching and learning, the relationship with which they are engaging during that specific encounter. Furthermore, this experience is one of the research topics with which the educational researcher is engaged. Educational research focuses on the material and social conditions in which these relationships are produced.

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\(^1\) Although it is true that the complexity of educational institutions has come to involve numerous other relationships, beyond those of teachers and learners, and that these are largely necessary for the operation of the education system in its current state, I believe that the teaching and learning process still remains an integral and necessary experience that cannot be removed without a fundamental redefinition of education and mass schooling.

\(^2\) This is not intended to be an exhaustive series of axiomatic arguments. It serves only the purpose of providing a rough outline of the relationship between teaching and learning in order to provide those aspects that are unique to education and therefore relevant to the argument that follows. It says nothing about how these experiences are shaped by the infinitely possible combinations of material and sociocultural conditions that constitute each unique encounter between teacher(s) and learner(s). It is fraught with limitations and also rendered inadequate if the individuals involved in an educational experience do not perceive themselves or their interactions as such.
while also being involved in, and in many ways responsible for, their reproduction. Educational researchers are thus “natives” in education.

Education is necessarily forward-reaching and backward-driven. The struggle between generations remains an integral part of education, whether it is perceived, believed, or assumed.

‘Education’ is the prime example of a term that weaves this way and that, shedding and assuming differing attributes and nuances. Those practices that we recognize as ‘educational’ stand at a meeting place of, on the one hand, one generation’s vision of and for the future, and, on the other, the limits of that generation’s imagination and ability to marshal the moral, intellectual and material resources to display that vision to the next. (Freebody, 2003)

Temporally directional changes in education are represented as a means of securing cultural transmission and serve to illuminate relationships of power. These relationships further serve to mould the teaching and learning experience. In a modern education, we face the questions raised by the mortality of our own bodies. We look for an end to achieve immortality in fabricated universal truths but we fear the mortality of our own ideas as we try to come to terms with the absence of an end to our educational inquiry.

Reflexively (re)positioning research allows for a discussion of the way in which a “native” researcher within education will try to understand purpose. We are currently at a point where the goodness of education is in question (Wilson, 2002), partly because of the changing social landscape. In asking whether education is a good thing, Wilson makes reference to desirability, merits, values and worth. He defines education as distinct from training, indoctrination, socialization or conditioning and “above the level of what [human beings] would naturally pick up for themselves in their everyday lives” (Wilson, 2002, emphasis mine). Is there a justification or value for education if extrinsic, utilitarian merits are removed? This is a particularly important question to ask as transdisciplinary inquiry, that requires intrinsic motivation, is becoming increasingly popular in newly introduced curriculum models.

The dichotomies fell out of Aristophanic love in my text: Divorcing dichotomous thinking from our methods and methodologies

“One of the hallmarks of anthropology used to be… that it is a study of other cultures… This emphasis on other cultures has distinguished anthropology from sociology, which in the main studies its own culture and society” (Ohnuki-Tierney, 1984). The distinction of “own” versus “other” is not adequate to describe the multiple relationships between individual and collective cultures of researcher and researched. For anthropology, at least, “the paradigm polarizing ‘regular’ and ‘native’ anthropologists is, after all, part of received disciplinary wisdom” (Narayan, 1993). For educational research “disciplinary wisdom” in this respect was “received,” by and large, from
sociology. The absence of literature, in the mainstream, on educational researchers as “natives” may be a consequence of the “wise” belief that it is not necessary to problematize the methods and methodologies we select when we study our own culture.

Aside from knowledge of the everyday, Ohnuki-Tierney (1984) explains how “native anthropologists are in a far more advantageous position in understanding the emotive dimensions of behaviour” but also, how the “intensity” of this connection “can be an obstacle for discerning patterns of emotion.” As “native” educational researchers, we too are acquainted and familiar with the everyday and the emotive dimensions of behaviour in education. We have obstacles in the process of analysis but experience the unique relationship between that process and our subject of analysis because they are one in the same.

Kenneth Pike (1990) used the framework for analyzing language sound systems as an analogue for analyzing insider and outsider dichotomies. The native speakers of a language interpret the legitimacy of a phonemic identification whereas a phonetic analysis is formulated on assumed universalistic rules of linguistics. In the same manner, an emic positioning allows for a “native” interpretation based on intrinsic cultural interpretations and an etic perspective makes reference to an assumed universalistic meaning-making system. Constructed around scientific validity (outsider/etic) and the imagined native (insider/emic) this thinking framework relies on dichotomies.

These dichotomies necessitate binary relationships of “us/them” in an “either/or” relationship. bell hooks (2003) calls for a “commitment to seeing a world of both/and thinking” as we negotiate pedagogical relationships. Dichotomous perspectives can be transcended by (re)constructing “shifting identifications amid a field of interpreting communities and power relations” because “the loci along which we are aligned with or set apart from those whom we study are multiple and in flux” (Narayan, 1993).

Structurally, as educational researchers we may be classified (or classify ourselves) as “natives” but this distinction that places us apart from “non-natives” is only as permanent as the structure that supports it. “Instead, what we must focus our attention on is the quality of relations with the people we seek to represent in our texts: are they viewed as mere fodder for professionally self-serving statements about a generalized Other, or are they

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3 For a review of these developments in educational research over the third quarter of the twentieth century refer to the introduction in Halsey and Karabel (1977). They group schools and traditions of thought into five categories: (1) functionalist theories of education; (2) the economic theory of human capital; (3) methodological empiricism; (4) conflict theories of education; and, (5) the interactionist tradition in educational research and the challenge of the “new sociology of education.
4 She refers to the intimate knowledge of rites and rituals such as practices of personal hygiene, body perceptions, as well as cooking and eating habits. In education we may refer, for example, to the rules and regulations of schooling such as routines and scheduling, punishment and expected behaviour.
accepted as subjects with voices, views, and dilemmas—people to whom we are bonded through ties of reciprocity and who may even be critical of our professional enterprise?” (Narayan, 1993) For educational researchers, the professional enterprise is about producing the quality of relations that many of our texts are about, while at the same time being intimately involved with their reproduction.

Power relationships in education are also (re)produced from spaces beyond research settings and beyond the discourse communities of the researched. They are shaped by the tension we experience between producing pedagogical relations and being a part of their reproduction because they all exist within the same institutional structure. This is further complicated in educational research on children and young adults, where there is a difference in age between the researcher and the researched. These relationships are constantly changing and depend on the ways in which childhood is invented and reinvented (Schwartzman, 1978). Similarly, in the pedagogical relationship students have been invented and reinvented.5

In many cases, educational research is a forged experience defined differently by the researcher and the researched. The “native” conditions, material and social, are being manipulated by the researcher. The methods used in the process of research must be designed in such a way that the process itself is transparent to everyone that is involved. Informants are being sought out based on researcher utilitarianism. Efforts to include participants’ responses are tokenistic and serve to reproduce power relations rather than problematize them. Are some of these efforts to include participants in the research process just another way of gaining access to a “better insider” who has a more “native” gaze on a particular group?

Towards a “rethinking of ‘everyday life’” (Sandywell, 2004)

The notion of the everyday has been alluded to above. In the educational structure, the everyday includes both the rites and rituals of schooling as well as peoples’ daily lives beyond the pedagogical relationships. Policy documents, curriculum, and knowledge boundaries all serve the purpose of making distinctions that set the everyday apart from the reproducing practices of the pedagogical structure. In a (re)positioning of educational research the “native” educational researcher can expose the ways in which “the ordinary has been systematically denigrated in the very act of being theorized as ‘everyday life’” (Sandywell, 2004). Since the everyday is a changing category of experience with fluid boundaries, the educational researcher can include the intimate connection between schooling practices and its representations as part of the research repertoire.

5 Schwartzman uses some metaphors for the construction of childhood that are remarkably similar to those that have been used to describe learners in pedagogical relationships (i.e. the child as primitive, the child as copycat, the child as personality trainee, the child as monkey and the child as critic).
In designing educational research methods and methodologies, the historicity of human experience in schooling is only as important as its significance to the people that live it. We can draw on polychronic perspectives of lived experience in schooling to transcend the limits of dichotomies in modern thought. Conceiving the everyday as stable allows for an ahistorical conception of human experience in schooling, and raises ethical questions about the purpose of our research. Again, if the purpose of our research is intimately connected with the practices of schooling then our methods and methodologies must bear this. A reflection on the “native” languages of schooling and their relationships to lived experience allows for an attempt to uncover the effects of this modern institution. The rigid separation of theory from practice is not a consequence of the plurality of the everyday.

A reflective practice, such as this, poses a threat to the identity of subject. The problematizing of intellectual paradigms has allowed for debates (backlashes) around “crises” in entire knowledge disciplines in response to this threat. As teacher educators and researchers of schooling, we are exposed to resistance, against transdisciplinary practice, by pre-service and in-service teachers as well as parents, administrators and various other “stakeholders” in education. This is characteristic of reactions to a threat of identity and authenticity of experience. Pedagogical relationships throughout schooling allow for the threat to be realized, irrespective of whether it is at the primary, secondary or tertiary level. Consider the threat, as a consequence of the tension between the pedagogical production and reproduction in schooling, to the identity of traditionally constructed educational researchers and the tension between the dichotomies of theory and practice:

We should know as academics that we do not have a monopoly on knowledge production, including knowledge production about what ought to count as valid inquiry into practice. (McWilliam, 2004)

The meeting of assessment and audit cultures with the structure of schooling and the pedagogic relations has created a drive for “authentic” forms of assessment and a search (Bendix, 1997) for “true” indicators of learning and performance. The movements that reflect this drive attempt to (re)claim the everyday as worthwhile, relevant and valuable. The intrinsic value of the everyday, or more appropriately, of the many “everydays,” is multifaceted, polychronic and immeasurable. The challenge is frustrating and relevant to the native educational researcher.

Conclusions and contortions: Educational researcher (insider, outsider... and/or/both) “folding both backward and forward” (Lather, 2004a)

It has recently been argued that new managerialism, neo-liberalism and quality management have shifted the professional identity of the educational researcher. Furthermore, “if and when we dismantle new managerialism and recuperate the resources that are currently ploughed into surveillance and control, we will have to find creative ways to recuperate the social and our
places in it” (Davies, 2003). Those creative ways require thinking “within and against Enlightenment categories of voice, identity, agency and experience so troubled by incommensurability, historical trauma and the crisis of representation” (Lather, 2004a). The shifts in policy can be countered with activism to expose silences and demonstrate how it is possible to move beyond discussion. By (re)locating representations of lived experiences with celebration of the multiple and changing everydays, boundaries can be made more fluid. We need to put “critical theory to work” (Lather, 2004b).

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References


