Communicating Classroom Innovation as Research

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This paper discusses teacher-research activity, but its focus is the overall pattern or form of that activity, rather than results. There is an emphasis on communication patterns, and a particular focus on the research-based communication that guides the task of defining knowledge for teaching. An example of a teacher analysing their educational task using formal research, and what emerges from this, gives rise to the suggestion that formal research communications are a network operating between and with two other networks. One of these is the self-communicating and self-defining activity of the teacher. The other is a network offering a validating generalisation of the task with other teachers.

Introduction

Fifty years ago, the author of a comprehensive text introducing Educational Research to student-teachers noted the difficulties in getting the messages of science across to where they were needed: 'Pioneers have struggled to erect some spans of understanding from both sides of the academic river, but a free flow of intellectual traffic to and from the classroom and the laboratory has not been achieved'. (Van Dalen, 1962, p.vii). It was a communication problem with clear consequences: 'The formidable "foreign language" of research fences off many teachers from the exciting frontiers of education thought, and the resulting paucity of teacher-researcher intercommunication impedes professional progress.' (ibid., p.vii)

This paper will argue for an approach to identifying and communicating knowledge for teaching based on the activity of interest itself - from what is being done by educators.

Lonergan's triple cord: the tasks of knowing

Knowing is conceptualised as a dynamic cognitional structure, a compound of three tasks forming a 'triple cord' in all intelligence in action (see Lonergan, 1967b, p.230). This triple cord is a cord of communicative and active intention. The first strand is made up of the messages from whatever is going on, the data of the moment, for which Lonergan uses the ordinary term 'experiencing'. The second is the conceptualising, the saying-what-is-happening. This is the strand Lonergan calls 'understanding', but this understanding is never the last word.

There is an all-important final strand, in which we are always informally, and sometimes formally, testing and checking our insight messages against others, from the three strands together, to achieve some overall certainty, some hard-won coherence, congruence and stability for the ongoing dynamic interplay. This third strand of checking and probing putative understanding Lonergan calls 'judging' and it ends at decision in action, to prompt ever further cycles of inquiry as necessary.

Lonergan helps the teacher ask crucial 'method' questions both about what they are doing and about what they are telling themselves about the task they see it as. The messages from experience and conceptual definition efforts weave together in aid of knowing the task, but it is activity itself that delivers the judgement to go on with.

A first movement of player and audience

This reported genesis and organising of patterned communication of classroom innovations is a genuine research exercise. There is some general message which could be applied with suitable modification to any curriculum area, teaching program or research interest related directly to schooling practices.

At some point in their career teachers form a pedagogical and profession-based framework that defines their ongoing aspirations and tasks. It is generally the case that such frameworks emerge through pre-service training experiences where research findings and practical pedagogy are conveyed by accredited experts in various fields and by experienced teachers.

Subsequently, the teacher in action is strongly aware of the need to satisfy the goals and requirements of the education system they are working in. There is thus built up a crucial message-generating and message-sorting role for one's 'philosophy in action', with a driving and guiding self-defining question: How should I be doing this job here and now?

This is a story of performance, involving performers who are also audience to themselves and each other. In terms of the musical metaphor, the first movement featured a junior primary/ primary teacher of Spanish to English-speaking pupils. For this teacher, as audience to himself, there was persistent inner dialogue about his performance, involving messages of clear dissatisfaction with what was happening in his classroom. It had become merely a 'language awareness' program with a high level of student disengagement.

Audience participation: an expert research-communication network

The first movement produced some messages from the teacher-researcher indicating dissatisfaction with the practical status quo. Given awareness of the existence of externally available professional and theoretical 'research messages', an obvious task was to speak with potential expert partners known to be located in university training institutes, in the education system's bureaucracy and in schools. This was a step into the abstract: a movement from concrete actions to more systematic abstraction, but with a view to affecting the ongoing concrete practice in purposeful and measurable (i.e. experienced and critically judged) ways, with clear decisions for action.

Of course what was purposeful and appropriate to measure was defined by the education system for its own purposes through a prescribed curriculum framework. Accordingly, the initial guide for the wider dialogue with experts was self-defined in concrete and practical terms as measurable literacy outcomes from the delivered Spanish language program.

A research-communication network emerged therefore, with the dissatisfied teacher inviting messages of commentary, hypothesis and recommendation from a recognised expert in literacy development and an associated research psychologist.

In and through this dialogue the teacher-researcher, as he may now be called, started organising relevant literature from psychological, literacy and language studies relevant to the teaching acts being undertaken and those considered for enactment. It represents the product of a process of self-talk and critical dialogue involving formal research literature and the organising teacher-researcher's past and present professional experience.

From the expert research-communication network:
the research-based task message for action

A number of messages were able to be identified from research sources that generally and directly could influence task analysis for classroom action. These became the effective drivers in terms of developing the initial Spanish teaching program and also the expert research-communication network. The first of the messages concerned universality. The next message concerned transference.

While this literature was useful in establishing an evidentiary and theoretical basis for discussing the notions of universality and transference with respect to the objects and actions under scrutiny, little guidance was afforded to teaching methods; to acts to be employed in the concrete setting of the classroom. Subsequent discussion and analysis on aspects of practical pedagogy for literacy-based languages programs uncovered two abiding frameworks for guiding classroom action: linguistic interdependence (Verhoeven, 1994) and contrastive analysis (Ellis, 1994). Both of these frameworks

provide messages that could support pedagogical application of the notions of universality and transference.

Thus, through an ongoing series of movements from the concrete to the abstract and back again messages were transmitted between pedagogue and experts, pedagogue and literature, and pedagogue self-talk such that a scheme for teaching a second language that is oriented towards measurable literacy outcomes in the Australian primary school context emerged: the Multilingual Literacy approach (MLL).

Collaborative intelligence in action: natural extension of a task message network

The expert research-communication network was never a matter of the teacher-researcher bowing to authority. As noted, its whole operation was governed by the classroom activity of the teacher-researcher, as generative of the experience necessary for critical decisions. The teacher-researcher needed something to work with, not simply to write or think about. As the approach then became visible in the concrete practice of the teacher-researcher, it started developing, simply from the nature of intelligence in action, its own communication momentum.

From information spread by word of mouth on the above scheme, and the related classroom work, an extended audience now came upon the scene, interested in learning about what was happening. It is as if the teacher-researcher was about to be researched.

There can now be discerned the overall pattern in which a 'practitioner self-communication web', based on experience and inquiry, is subsumed within a 'research expert network, based upon accredited abstract understanding, and both in turn then work within a 'professional practice network' which provides critical public tests.

A formal framework for communicative research

The core notions, the derived principles and the intial outcomes data moving the action in the initial teacher-researcher's classrooms had proved attractive to the system and to the other interested pedagogues. The crux of the effort became now a test of the successful transmission into action of the MLL approach in and through a network of responsive teachers researching their own professional action.

It can be rightly claimed that it was because of an invitation process that suitable candidates could be identified. The basis for such a claim rests with the view that an invitation is a mark of respect, and exemplifies an ethical disposition towards teachers as professionals of equal standing and merit, providing a genuine sense of equality without necessarily implying sameness. Thus a new research-communication network was born: a professional teachers' research network. The existence now of three rather imbricated communication networks or subsystems called for a further shift in the role of the initial teacher-researcher. From teacher, to teacher-researcher, to organiser of teacher-researchers was a shift of significant import involving different definitions of self and tasks.

Constant acts of moving from the concrete to the abstract and back remained central to the broader communication system. However, the communication had now to contend with the concrete multiplicity of background and foci and the concrete reality of pragmatic pressures both of and on the new network.

This meant that the initial teacher-researcher would have to act as an interpreter of sorts, translating and relaying messages from researchers into practical pedagogy and translating and relaying messages from practice-based professionals into academic vernacular and abstractions. This proved to be a core task for the initial teacher-researcher, who was able to communicate as one teacher to another.

These colleagues were not going to be researched according to an imposed method, however. They were joining the initial teacher-researcher in that same role, and would indeed be learning to subject his activities and his formal messages, along with their own, to scrutiny from a research point

of view. The methodology would be the communicational framework already proceeding, and the derived method would be such as to organise communication but not impede its natural progress in relation to intelligent practice.

The research vehicle: a structure for precise messages and collaborative learning in action

The vehicle employed to carry the task messages and to monitor their effects, the latter somewhat as in case studies, was a professional learning (PL) program for the teacher-researcher network. A core component of the overall method was translation of ideas, tasks and feedback between 'audiences' in an ongoing, reciprocal fashion. This communicative dynamic was directly aided by site visits by the initial teacher-researcher, as 'audience' to pick up the messages from each teacher's own setting and way of doing things. There was then developed a dialogic presentation of key tasks and messages in general from two members of the expert network working as leaders together (the initial teacher-researcher and the literacy research expert – both experienced Primary-level teachers).

The idea of site visits is relatively straightforward and apparent. However, the dialogic or collaborative communication of tasks and ideas by two research communication leaders is not.

There were however some pitfalls to be aware of. In the first instance each message needed to be preserved or quarantined from the ambiguity that could have arisen when attempting to integrate two views and backgrounds. Both these experienced teachers and researchers needed to establish consistent pedagogical views about the matters at hand but also accept an openness to being challenged and scrutinised in the moment of transmission. Generally, a positive disposition towards uncertainty in the face of differing perspectives and understandings was required.

The PL program was thus a series of communications on and about the MLL approach that operated to support and guide each participants' movements from their concrete contexts to the abstractions of research findings around the approach and its defined tasks, and then to return with these to their context. Because of the organisers' classroom teaching background these communications always took the form of teaching moments.

Initial messages about these core pedagogical tasks gave way to concrete explanations and task-analytic discussions which yielded to feedback on their acceptability in light of participants' prior experience and subsequently, feedback from their own practical test. It was this final element that proved highly productive in terms of knowledge for teaching: participant feedback on task definition and performance exemplified systematic and 'generative' learning-by-doing.

Conclusion

In this story, identifying knowledge for teaching begins when the acts typical of any teacher lead to acknowledging a potentially definable problem and drive a search for useful definition for further action. As the challenge is taken up, it is received as a message to act, and to seek further messages from researchers and research literature. There then follow in some natural manner the taking up of communication networks that might promise, and prove able, to sustain a cycle of learning in and from the acts of teaching and learning.

References

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