

# Teacher-as-Researcher

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## Introduction

The concept of teacher-as-researcher is a popular idea that contemporary educational reformers have promoted through their books and articles. It is a perspective that views teachers as active participants in conducting research to enhance their working conditions, revise their curriculum, and assist in professional development planning.

Contemporary distance education schools have often stressed teaching over research activities. Yet, there is a growing awareness that current teaching practices need to be built upon a stronger body of research studies (Saba, 2000). Ultimately, schools will need to provide more support for their teachers to enable them to effectively pursue writing and research oriented activities.

## Research Challenges

Today's distance educators who want to pursue research studies in their colleges and universities must overcome some unique challenges. Professional writing is often considered a secondary or minor activity to teaching. The organizational structure of distance education schools is designed to provide technical, curriculum and professional development support. Teachers are usually not financially rewarded for their academic publications.

The majority of today's online instructors have a full time job besides their online work. Distance educators must face the reality that they have limited amount of time to conduct research and write articles for journal publication. Today's distance educators and administrators must start placing a higher value on educational research. Contemporary research studies have the potential to make vital contributions in four areas:

- enhancing our knowledge of distance education issues
- improving teacher practices
- informing policy debates
- improving student and teacher research skills (Creswell, 2002).

Teachers must become more proactive and share the importance of research studies within distance education schools and within the larger virtual community. It is encouraging to observe that more schools are starting to take a greater interest in research. For instance, the University of Phoenix does offer faculty the opportunity to earn money for their article publications. It is a positive affirmation that research and journal writing are valuable activities to the school. A research project may:

- address gaps in knowledge** by investigating an area of research that fills a void in existing information
- expand knowledge** by extending research to new ideas or practices
- replicate knowledge** by testing old results with new participants or new research sites

**add voices of individuals to knowledge.** individuals whose perspectives have not been heard or whose views have been minimized in our society (Creswell, 2002, p. 4).

## **Qualitative Research Methods**

It is important to remember that the research question will provide the basis to select the appropriate methodology. Every research method presents a wide assortment of potential strengths and weaknesses. Historically, researchers have been theoretically divided in their preference toward quantitative and qualitative methods. The intellectual posturing over methodology has created unnecessary tension among the educators. There has been an academic bias against qualitative research that I have found to be somewhat irrational. Krathwohl (1993) wisely observed that modern "researchers need all the help they can get, and qualitative methods have an important and useful place among the research methods. All methods have strengths and weaknesses, our task is to learn when and where to capitalize and avoid weaknesses (p. 34)."

The qualitative research model is not linear but is interactive, inductive and open-ended. Maxwell (1998) relates that the activities of collecting and analyzing data, developing and modifying theory, elaborating or refocusing the research questions, and identifying and dealing with the validity threats are usually going on simultaneously, each influencing all of the others (p. 70)." Rather, the research design is intended to be flexible to provide a less restrictive format. According to Maxwell (1998) a good research design effectively moves the project along by including five basic components:

- purposes
- conceptual context
- research questions
- methods
- validity

Qualitative research involves an inductive process of descriptive data collection and analysis of real life events. A strong emphasis is given to understanding the individual's perception of reality through a variety of sources such as written documents, surveys and interviews. It is a participant centered paradigm that highlights the value of individual interpretations involving work, education and leisure experiences. Therefore, researchers will usually examine not one particular situation but a series of social interactions. Researchers will often pursue difficult subjective features of the social world that cannot be easily expressed in the form of numbers. Yet, some critics argue that the subjective approach makes qualitative data soft or intangible and too elusive to properly study. Qualitative advocates would respond that subjective events or life situations offer excellent opportunities for doing serious research. Naturally, the information gathering process is sometimes fluid to enable the researcher to effectively meet changing circumstances without sacrificing scientific investigation standards (Neuman, 1997).

The educator must realize that the qualitative approach involves a major investment in time. Intense preparation and planning is necessary to create and develop a research project. Qualitative researchers must become familiar with the literature surrounding the problem statement. The researcher must carefully read and study the literature to be

equipped to be able to discern what data methods to select. Additionally, researchers must study large amounts of information and learn to separate the important from the trivial data (Leedy & Ormrod, 2001).

When should an individual select a qualitative approach to their investigation? The qualitative study should assist the researcher in one or more of the following ways:

**Description** They can reveal the nature of certain situations, settings, processes, relationships, systems or people.

**Interpretation** They enable the researcher to (a) gain insights about the nature of particular phenomenon, (b) develop new concepts or theoretical perspectives about the phenomenon, and/or (c) discover that problems exist within the phenomenon.

**Verification** They allow a researcher to test the validity of certain assumptions, claims, theories, or generalizations within real-world contexts.

**Evaluation** They provide a means through which a researcher can judge the effectiveness of particular policies, practices, or innovations (Peshkin, 1993 as cited in Leedy & Ormrod 2001, pp. 148-149).

### **Action Research**

Distance educators who are interested in developing research projects should consider the advantages of action research. Often, action research projects are less time consuming than qualitative methods. Kemmis and McTaggart (as cited in Johnson, 1993) state that

*"Action research is deliberate, solution-oriented investigation that is group or personally owned and conducted. It is characterized by spiraling cycles of problem identification, systematic data collection, reflection, analysis, data-driven action taken, and, finally, problem redefinition. The linking of the terms "action" and "research" highlights the essential features of this method: trying out ideas in practice as a means of increasing knowledge about and/or improving curriculum, teaching, and learning (p.1)."*

Distance educators can use action research projects to obtain accurate information about their schools. A major problem in the distance education movement has been the lack of research studies on the teaching and learning process. Research data is needed to help foster site-based decision making that will provide appropriate educational changes that will enhance student learning (Saba, 2000). Action research reflects four major tendencies:

- cyclic -- similar steps tend to recur, in a similar sequence;
- participative -- the clients and informants are involved as partners, or at least active participants, in the research process;
- qualitative -- it deals more often with language than with numbers; and
- reflective -- critical reflection upon the process and outcomes are important parts of each cycle (Dick, 2000, paragraph 3).

The four tendencies reflect the importance of action research as a very fluid and flexible process. Now, the cycles of steps provide a framework for researchers to test their ideas and refine the focus of their study. Therefore, the action research process requires critical

reflection to offer insights that are responsive to the emerging data. It enables the teacher to operate as researcher who takes ownership in designing and conducting the investigation (Mills, 2000). Often, action research involves a collaborative project that challenges colleagues to design and conduct their studies. Johnson (1993) states that the "research study team provides support and a forum for sharing questions, concerns, and results. Teachers advise each other and comment on the progress of individual efforts (paragraph 6)." Teachers engaged in action research enjoy the benefit of cultivating a professional dialog with their colleagues. It helps educators create a basis for professional growth and school improvement.

Suggestions for promoting research studies in distance education schools:

1. Provide workshops on grant writing for teachers.
2. Create a monthly newsletter and quarterly journal that will offer a place for graduate students and teachers to publish their work.
3. Provide financial incentives to teachers who publish articles in journals.
4. Provide academic support for individuals conducting research within their schools.
5. Provide financial support for teachers who want to share their papers at technology conferences.

## **Conclusion**

Educational research can provide an effective way to address vital issues in the distance education community such as examining the quality of interaction in online classes. Saba (2001) observes that research studies ". . . have further revealed the complexity of distance education, indicating the many variables involved in any instructional setting, not to mention other elements involved in distance education such as social, economic, and global issues affecting the field (p.7)." It is time for distance education leaders to make research a higher priority in their organizations and provide support for the concept teacher-as-researcher.

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