APPLYING THE PRINCIPLES OF RESEARCHER AS BRICOLEUR TO CONDUCTING RESEARCH IN EDUCATION

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Abstract

Our research set out to explore ESL student perceptions of academic assessment on a continuing education programme. The context of the study and the nature of the questions being asked demanded an unexpected fluidity in the research design and approach, especially in the use of technology to engage research participants in the research process. Alongside examining the core research question, this research explored how to conduct qualitative research with a migratory research population of students studying part time evening courses. Research design and approach became paradoxically intertwined with a need to rely on a broader application of the methodological tools of interpretative research. The underlying philosophy of 'Researcher as Bricoleur' underpinned the application of the interpretative framework for this research at a theoretical and methodological level and enabled the researcher to open up the process of data collection so that the research content and approach co-existed.

Keywords: English as a second language, Qualitative research methodology, Higher education, Innovation, Social media

1. INTRODUCTION

"The qualitative researcher as Bricoleur or maker of quilts uses the aesthetic and material tools of his craft, deploying whatever strategies, methods, or empirical materials are at hand"

(Becker 1998 cited in Denzin 2000, p 5) [1]

In the research framework presented here, the philosophical concept of researcher as Bricoleur is explored as a research paradigm that affects the research process at the theoretical, intuitive and methodological level. This paper proposes that applying the principles of researcher as Bricoleur as a starting point in designing your research project affects you, as researcher, at all levels of the research process. As the Bricoleur researcher you are immersed in a research process that is part of an emergent construction that changes and take new forms as different tools, methods and techniques are added to the puzzle. The choice of which qualitative research practices you eventually decide to use depends upon the careful management and eventual synthesis of research activities that are central to both demonstrating coherence in research design and enabling you as the researcher to plough the depths of your data to arrive at complex insights into social phenomena. Bricoleur research activities encourage you to abandon research practices that demand that participants ‘fit into’ a prescribed research engagement framework but instead force you to submit to the contextual constraints inherent in your research environment. Submission to these constraints allows you the intellectual freedom to weave together a theoretical, intuition and methodological montage that is logical and consistent and allows you to develop greater insights into the phenomena under scrutiny. Although research into the application of qualitative methodology in research is growing in prominence, the concept and practice of researcher as Bricoleur is often stumbled upon in the process of conducting qualitative research (that requires fluidity in research design) rather than being adopted as a deliberate strategy from the outset.

This paper seeks to provide a degree of illumination to this practice (moving away from text based description) to provide a diagrammatic representation of the researcher as Bricoleur approach.

It is hoped that this will both provoke further debate and research into the Bricoleur approach to engaging in qualitative research and also provide insight into how to apply this approach in practice as an explicit choice at the start of the research journey.
1.1 Researcher as Bricoleur

The concept of researcher as Bricoleur should be understood as a philosophical position that you adopt as a researcher, which allows you the freedom to engage in a number of diverse tasks ranging from interviewing to observing, to interpreting personal and historical documents, to intensive self-reflection and introspection. I contend that this is a recurrent process buttressed by a reliance on your belief in the power of reflectivity as an illuminating process in qualitative research and informs theory, methods and techniques employed to give definition to your research. Bricoleur researchers approach all research tasks as part of an emergent construction including tasks that traditionally need to have a finite end point such as a literature review conducted for masters or doctoral research. But as qualitative researchers we all need to start somewhere, even if our destination only becomes clearer to us as we plough the depths of our data through analysis. By drawing on the theory of heuristics [2] in the early stages of your research journey the Bricoleur researcher can create an anchor for their work in the field. This anchor is informed by trusting in the validity of one’s own professional and personal perspective on the important elements of the research environment (i.e. those that will directly affect how you conduct the research; the rationale, the people and the context) whilst trusting in, and working within a framework that is part of an emergent construction. Continuous reflexivity and introspection about theory, approach to data collection and analysis defines both the heuristic you establish and defines the concept of working within a research framework that is part of an emergent construction. This heuristic also ensures that you stay consciously aware of how background issues such as changes in the research environment, the changing circumstances of the participants and feedback received from external sources could and should affect your final decisions about data collection. Figure 1 provides a diagrammatic representation of this process and an example from practice is provided at the end of this section to further illuminate the Bricoleur approach to research.

Figure 1: Approach to conducting research as Bricoleur researcher
The external layers of the diagram show the research context in a state of flux but submission to these contextual fluctuations for the researcher as Bricoleur is an important step in the research process managed by the heuristic that you create to provide containment and focus for your study.

1.1.1 Application of Bricoleur research in practice; a case study

'Multiple interpretative practices’ [1] informed the approach to this study at the theoretical, intuitive, methodological and analytical level supported by constant reflexivity and introspection. In the case study presented here (see Box 1 for more information), adopting the philosophy of researcher as Bricoleur was not chosen as the researchers starting point. However, the interaction between the contextual issues (see Box 1 for more information) and the subsequent development of the Bricoleur approach in the early stages of this study was an essential step in trying to theorize a way forward and to ensure that the research design presented was coherent and valid [5]. The impact of this philosophical positioning by the researcher is also evident in the way that data was analyzed.

Adopting the attitude of researcher as Bricoleur [1] encourages you to revisit the literature during data analysis to explore other perspectives on how to treat the story of the data as it emerges through different stages of review [3]

More specifically, in this study a phenomenological perspective informed the way in which questions were framed to render conscious aspects of a process that is both subconscious and not necessarily understood in structural terms by students: the processes involved in studying for and completing assessments.

Entwistle, 1995 [4] describes phenomenological research eloquently as:

‘...the subject and the object of the research are investigated for their relationships in a particular context and the search for qualitative variations in these relations…’

It also provided a theoretical explanation of the progressive focusing technique that was chosen to frame semi-structured questions in this study to 'focus on issues as they emerge gradually through naturalistic observation’ [Stake 1981, p 13-17] [5].

Intuitively, these principles also enable the practitioner researcher to integrate their experience of teaching the participant group over many years and observing their behavior as it relates to their approach to completing assessments. Therefore choosing phenomenology as one theoretical perspective directly influences how you approach the qualitative task of interviewing (for example, using a progressive focusing technique), how you develop your heuristic to help give shape and containment to a research process that is part of an emergent construction and the platform (in this case the use of WordPress, the free blogging platform with interactive comments function) [6, 7] that you might use to collect the narratives of participants. The Bricoleur researcher may also draw on other theoretical perspective to inform, for example, how to construct or frame questions asked of participants within the progressive focusing technique (such as using techniques derived from psychoanalysis to ‘drill down’ into participants responses to questions) [9].
2 CONCLUSION

This article seeks to provoke debate and further research into applying the principles of researcher as Bricoleur as a starting point in research design, especially when the demands of the context are such that research tasks cannot necessarily be conducted in a ‘conventional’ way. Achieving ‘rigor, breadth, complexity and richness, and depth to any enquiry’ (Flick, 1998, p.231) is the central concern of the researcher as Bricoleur. This paper contends that you can achieve this aim by adopting an ‘attitude of mind’ which is predicated on the notion that your instinctual, professional and personal perspective about the research environment is a valid starting point and could actually exist as a step before engaging with the theoretical literature on the subject. Adopting the philosophy of researcher as Bricoleur allows, the research context to give up its secrets to you, and these emerging secrets create shape to the future progression of your research.

3 REFERENCES