

Managing insider issues through reflexive techniques: An insider-researcher's journey

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Abstract

Experiences of conducting research vary according to the researcher's position in the research process. This paper discusses the experiences and valuable insights of a researching journey with colleagues who share commonalities with the researcher. This is often described as an insider-researcher's experience, in which the researcher conducts research into intimately-known communities, such as one's own profession, workplace, social grouping, or a specific aspect of their culture. Although it is possible to generally define the characteristics of an insider-researcher, the issues and challenges experienced by individual researchers vary according to their contexts. This paper highlights a number of issues and challenges which emerged during an ethnographic data collection process. These issues were primarily associated with the researcher's own insider knowledge, entanglement, and role ambiguity. This paper describes these issues and how they were managed through several reflexive techniques such as writing a field-journal, the 'think aloud' approach, and diagramming. Exploring these issues and challenges may contribute to a wider understanding of insider-researcher perspectives in the research journey.

Keywords

Insider-researcher, qualitative methods, ethnographic research, self-reflexivity

Introduction

Qualitative research is often labelled as an unfolding journey regardless of one's carefully designed plans. Minichiello and Kottler (2010, p. 11) advise that qualitative researchers face "surprises, twists and turns in the road, and unforeseen obstacles" that need to be addressed in the research process. A considerable amount of literature discusses the insider-researcher's journey in terms of highlighting the dilemmas and challenges in the research process (Al-Makhamreh & Lewando-Hundt, 2008; Labaree, 2002; Paechter, 2013; Rogers, 2012; Taylor, 2011). These researchers suggest that the experiences of individual researchers vary according to the nature of their research, the familiarity of the investigator with the participants, and the context under investigation.

This article describes the experiences I encountered during the data collection process of my doctoral research. My research aimed to explore teacher educators' (TE) use of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) and its implications in their pedagogical practices. I adopted Bourdieu's (1977) notion of habitus as a lens in order to understand TEs' formed dispositions in their professional context that may have been unconsciously influenced by their own culture. Bourdieu (1977) assumes that individuals' options for action are initially determined by their culture. My research was designed as an ethnographic approach, using interviews, observations, and 'hanging out'. I spent five working days per week for two months with 11 professionals working in an institution where I had previously worked in the Maldives. My collegial relationship with my participants positioned me as an insider-researcher, which enabled me to anticipate and analyse the cultural influences on TEs' pedagogical practices through the habitus lens.

The term *insider-researcher* has a number of characteristics and definitions. Insider-researchers conduct research about home communities, such as one's own profession, workplace, society, or culture (Innes, 2009). Jenkins (2000) defines an 'insider' as a member of an 'in-group' with access to its past and present, who shares experiences with the research participants, or as Griffith (1998) suggests, has lived familiarity, which can lead to a feeling of sameness between the researcher and participants. However, Griffith (1998) further cautions that the insider position cannot be identified with merely common characteristics such as race, gender, or ethnic history. My insider status can be clearly recognised as having multiple commonalities with my participants, such as shared culture, language, religious beliefs, educational experiences, profession, work roles and responsibilities, collegial relationship, daily activities and lifestyle. Sharing these commonalities led me to experience

dilemmas during the process of my data collection. Take, for example, the following insert from my field journal while conducting research:

Halfway through my data collection, I struggled to understand my role as a researcher, because I found it very hard to separate it from my workplace role and [this] was exacerbated by my participants seeing me primarily as their colleague rather than [a] researcher. I was daunted by a number of ‘hiccups’ (difficulties) that were unfolding in my own thinking as I continued with interviews and observations (Field journal: 15th January 2012).

This paper draws upon my novice researching experiences, outlining a number of issues and challenges in my doctoral journey.

My insider issues and challenges

Although working as an insider allowed me to access in-depth information both formally and informally, I encountered a number of challenges because of the sameness that I shared with my participants. DeLyser (2001) claims that insider-researchers may face difficulties during the research process because of over-familiarity with the research context and participants. Kim (2011) argues that individual researchers may experience complicated dilemmas and challenges, depending upon the nature of research process. In addition, Takeda (2012) argues that these challenges and issues are mostly generated through a researcher’s positioning in the research process. For me, the insider position was challenging because of the nature of my ethnographic methodology, which emphasised understanding the professional world of my participants and making sense of their “lived reality” (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011, p. 193). Thus, the insider position led me to encounter considerable challenges regardless of some advantages it offered in my research. These issues are illustrated in Figure 1, which demonstrates the signifiers of each issue, and its effects on my research journey.

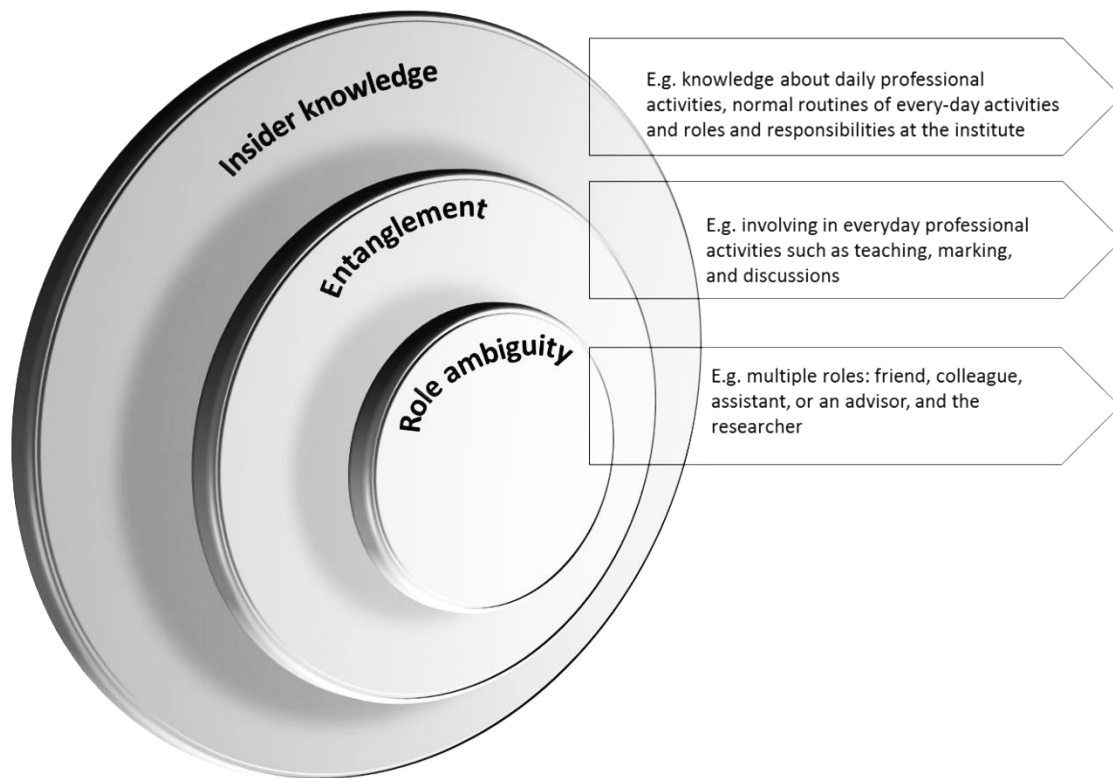


Figure 1: Insider-researcher issues

1. Insider Knowledge

Insider knowledge is the knowledge people have about their own experiences, either gained through practising or learning experiences. I came to this research with an interest in understanding the impact of ICT use in teaching and seeking to know more about others' experiences in that regard. Gunter (2004) explains that people come to research with backgrounds that shape what they are interested in. Kanuha (2000) suggests sharing similarity with the context and research phenomenon is also related to insider knowledge. These factors include knowledge, insights, and lived experiences of every-day life in the research context (Coghlan, 2007; Roth, Shani, & Leary, 2007). As an insider, I was privileged in understanding my participants' daily professional activities and their roles, responsibilities, and facilities available to them. However, although I was advantaged in accessing my participants' backgrounds, I also experienced a number of challenges in terms of collecting data from them. Some of these occurrences are highlighted as examples below.

Initially, because of my previous role as a colleague, my participants appeared to have particular assumptions about what they should tell me during my interviews. For example, when I asked specific questions about their various activities at the institution, some

participants responded saying: “you already know about it”, and “you have seen it”. In these situations, I tried to probe with more questions with regard to their experiences. However, when I sought clarification, I learnt that my participants preferred talking about other things instead. Coghlan (2007) argues that insider-researchers may assume that participants will explain everything without much prompting because of the familiarity factor in their relationship. DeLyser (2001) argues that participants’ over-eagerness may make it difficult to elicit the desired responses because they engage in conversation about concerns that are not necessarily related to the specific questions. I experienced both of these issues. I noticed that sometimes participants did not provide many details because of our shared common knowledge.

In addition, a feeling of over-familiarity with my participants’ experiences led me to face some difficulties in separating my own knowledge from theirs. This was a great challenge, as I realised when interviewing some of my participants. However, it enabled me to ask more questions about particular aspects that mattered to my research. Innes (2009) suggests this is an advantage of an insider’s pre-understandings. For example, when I asked about the ICT tools that participants use for teaching, I deliberately probed with some questions about *how* specific tools serve their teaching or students’ learning. While my insider knowledge about common tools available is similar to theirs, I learned from my participants that their intentions and experiences are not always similar to mine.

Besides these issues related to insider knowledge, my entanglement with my participants, as I go on to discuss in the following section, made for some uncomfortable encounters when dealing with them.

2. Entanglement

Entanglement refers to my involvement with my participants’ everyday professional activities during the period of data collection. It can be defined as being over-involved (van Heugten, 2004), engaging in ‘over familiarity’ (DeLyser, 2001), having ‘over-rapport’ (Miller, 1952), or even ‘going native’ (Kanuha, 2000). Being entangled with my participants generated both positive and negative outcomes. The advantage is being close to the data sources, which allowed for a more in-depth and careful observation of research participants, which included learning more about simple details of their everyday professional activities. Also, it is important to note that if I was merely observing them without being entangled, I might not have been able to obtain an in-depth understanding of what was happening around them.

However, entanglement also led to unexpected complications at an early stage of data collection.

One such complication involved engaging in many unnecessary duties outside of my research work. I found myself occupied with helping my colleagues' teaching, lesson preparations, discussing their own projects, assignments, and developing modules. At the beginning of this research it was not my intention to become so actively involved with my participants, however, I seized all of the opportunities that I could to be with them; whether it was having tea, lunch, or just an informal talk during their free time. Initially, I presumed conducting research is a 'give and take' relationship - if they gained help from me they would be more likely to pay back in return. However, over time I learnt that it also could interfere with my research work. As a result, I became concerned about whether helping them would have any impact on the generated data. Thus, this entanglement created a sense of uneasiness in my researcher self.

Due to these experiences, I realised that it was difficult to shift from my role as a colleague/friend to a researcher. Victoria (2011) argues that helping participants is not part of research work, and thus should be limited so that one can maintain the researcher role in order to perform proper data collection processes. She also believes that researchers must hold back from involving themselves in other activities outside of their research. Similarly, Hammersley and Atkinson (2007) argue that researchers should not surrender fully to the research group by being over-involved. However, I wondered whether I needed to discuss these issues with some of my participants in order to create a degree of distance between us. I also discussed these issues with other researcher friends. These discussions helped me to overcome issues, for example, by making the activities I was involved in with my participants part of my research. Further, with time, I learnt that my entanglement, in fact, enabled me to explore my participants' practices more thoroughly. Bryan and Deyhle (2000) suggest that lack of distance enhances the research outcomes. Kanuha (2000) claims that distancing herself from participants may have negatively influenced the quality of the data. In Kanuha's case, she found the experience of gaining knowledge ought to be a "natural connection", building on "closeness and achieving distance" between the research and the researched (Kanuha, 2000, p. 442). These arguments suggest that being entangled is a way of enriching the data being collected, though it may also lead to uncomfortable experiences for the researcher. My involvement in multiple activities outside the research also made me

encounter role ambiguity and consequently face some additional challenges, some of which I highlight in the following section.

3. Role ambiguity

Being entangled with my participants and sharing common experiences led me to encounter role ambiguity in my research journey. Role ambiguity is associated with role duality (being the researcher and the colleague), and role conflicts (doing research work and helping with participants' work), which are often claimed to be part of an insider-researcher's journey (Coghlan, 2001, 2007; Coghlan & Holian, 2007; Moore, 2007). Although role ambiguity benefited me in terms of developing particular research skills, it also made my data collection challenging.

During the data collection process I occupied the dual roles of colleague and researcher. Often, I was asked to help a participant with her lesson preparation. However, on one particular occasion it turned out to be the same lesson which was scheduled for my observation. I then realised how difficult it was to let my colleague down, as I felt very uneasy when giving excuses for not being able to help her in that particular lesson. Burns, Fenwick, Schmied, and Sheehan (2012) argue that role ambiguity is experienced by insider-researchers during the data collection to different degrees, which was certainly true for me. For example, as I was engaged in activities, I experienced multiple roles: friend, colleague, or advisor, as well as being the researcher. In some instances, I was asked to guide some participants in their own research projects (advisor), while at other times I was asked to be with them after-hours (as a friend).

At times, this experience caused me a degree of confusion about my own roles. For example, when discussing work issues with participants, I would sometimes find myself considering my answers and input in relation to my roles, both as a researcher and as a colleague. In the early phase, I wondered whether to step back because of the role confusion I was experiencing. I presumed that it might discourage my participants and influence the data collection process. However, of a later stage I realised the benefits I was gaining through in terms of enriching my data. Therefore, I did not completely stop being part of their everyday activities. Coghlan and Holian (2007) argue that doctoral candidates often face challenges while researching in the same institution where they previously worked. In order to better manage my roles, I started taking notes about the things we did together, accordingly reflecting on and dealing with my uneasiness in the research journey. I now consider these

issues to be a beneficial part of my research journey, and was fortunate that over time I learnt to 'put on different hats' throughout my research process (Roth et al., 2007).

Overall, the above issues and subsequent challenges were pertinent to my research journey, and enabled me to develop useful reflexive techniques throughout the data collection process.

Managing insider issues through reflexive techniques

Although I was privileged by being an insider in terms of easy access to information, the above issues and challenges were not only overwhelming at times but they were also unanticipated. Consequently, the greatest problem was the conflict they generated in my own thinking about the insider-outsider 'divide'.

Richardson (1997), in sharing her research journey, explains her notion of understanding the researcher's 'own self' before understanding 'others' (participants). Ellingson (2009) believes that describing the complexity of the research process and explaining the degree of reflexivity are important principles in qualitative research. These two views suggest that understanding my insider issues and explaining the complexity are important part of becoming reflexive in my research journey.

Reflexivity became an integral part of my research journey for understanding my own researcher self and the insider-ness within the research process. Kralik (2005) argues that reflexivity is a way of engaging in self-reflection about the research process, in order to enhance one's understanding of the researcher and the researched. It also aims to reflect on issues and experiences that emerge in the research journey in order to enable the researcher to lessen his or her biases and increase the trustworthiness of the research process (Glesne, 2011; Minichiello & Kottler, 2010). Finlay (2002) argues that the goal of reflexivity depends on the nature of the methodological aims and the exercise being carried out in the research process. Thus for me, reflexivity means dealing with issues that emerge in the research process in order to pursue several aims. They are, to balance my insider and outsider perspectives, to provide possible explanations that could justify my own concerns and issues, and to become aware of my 'blind spot' in interpreting the data, so as to enable me to capture the full 'stories' of the researcher and researched. In order to pursue these aims, several reflexive techniques have been adopted in for the research process:

- 1) Using various strategies for writing a reflective journal which include:

- a. Using Seidel's (1998) model (notice, collect, and think) throughout the whole data collection period;
- b. Using the three types of reflection suggested by Schön (1983): (i) *reflection-in-action* (writing a journal about my participants' interviews), (ii) *reflection-on-action* (after completing an interview or observation, I recorded similarities and differences in my own and my participants' experiences), (iii) *reflection-through-action* (more or less relating to deliberate and intentional reflection). Reflection-through-action is a type of thinking that I needed to be aware of when I analysed and generated emergent findings from the data. This kind of reflection was undertaken in order to diminish the effects of researcher bias in the course of generating findings; and
- c. Using an 'imaginary friend' whom I interacted with about a number of concerns during the writing of my journal. Much of these were relating to uncomfortable or confused feelings. There is an example of a reflection written after an interview:

I am wondering whether I am on the 'right track' or not. Sometimes, I find it really hard to believe what my participants are telling me. Do you know I was very upset about yesterday's interview? I wondered whether I'm going to get any useful data, 'something new' to [add to] my knowledge. It is quite difficult to accept that all my participants' experiences are similar to mine. I even wonder whether my interview techniques need to be more practised or perhaps crafted, so that I'll be able to direct the conversation towards my focus of research (Field journal: 12th January 2012).

Another example is a reflection written when I was unconsciously entangled with my participants. I expressed that uneasiness as follows:

Today, I am upset about what I'm going through. I just finished preparing a presentation for one of my participants. It took... an hour. Yesterday, I was designing assignments with [names removed]. It is surprising...that one of my colleagues asked me to take her teaching hour because she was busy. I was lucky to have an interview scheduled at the same time. Otherwise it would be hard to let her down. I'm not good to say 'no' (a weakness in my personality). I wonder whether I am doing too much...or perhaps too many unnecessary things.... What exactly I'm expecting from them. Am I worrying too much about not getting enough information... It's time for me to seriously 'rethink' where I am going and what I want to do (Field journal: 18th January 2012).

Using these strategies in the writing of my journal aided in the realisation of the benefits associated with my entanglements with participants. Thus, I continued to seize all of the opportunities to make the participants' everyday activities part of my data collection.

- 2) Using the 'thinking aloud' approach to learn about issues relating participants' practices. daSilva (2000) recognises that thinking aloud enables people to listen to their own thoughts. During this research, I was using this approach with my doctoral colleagues, supervisors, as well as with my own colleagues. Thinking aloud is a way of sharing information with others, as well as with oneself. Moreover, this approach took place in research group discussions with other doctoral students at our university. Whereas thinking aloud with oneself typically took place when I was visually diagramming my thoughts regarding the number of common factors between myself as the researcher and my participants as researched. Both ways helped me to understand the notion of 'they' (the participants) versus 'me' (the researcher). I also learnt that using the 'think aloud' method with my supervisors often made me more aware of my inner thoughts about the insider-outsider 'divide'. Coghlan and Brannick (2005) acknowledged this as a way to balance insider-outsider knowledge in doctoral candidates' research, in order to bring the two perspectives (insider-outsider) together in one dialogue.
- 3) Diagramming my thinking and creating illustrated tables as ideas emerged from my data. Buckley and Waring (2013) argue that using diagrams helps the researcher to become reflexive and transparent in the research process. Diagramming my thinking enabled me to learn about the insider-outsider 'divide'. I created various concepts, maps and profiles for each of us (the researcher and the researched) in terms of some highlights (education, experiences, early professional career, and other aspects). Using these techniques permitted me to conceptualise my participants' stories relating to their professional experiences. It also assisted me in drawing a 'line' between myself and the participants whenever I reflected upon the emerging ideas in my data. Richardson (1997) emphasises this as a way of being reflexive which inherently links to the degree of understanding of oneself prior to encountering the 'other' (the participants).

Conclusion

Although doing insider research can be challenging, it enabled me, a novice researcher, to learn useful reflexive techniques, such as journal writing, utilising a 'thinking aloud' technique and diagramming, which were not only pertinent but critical to my research journey. However, it would not be possible to learn these skills without having experienced the issues associated with insider knowledge, entanglement and role ambiguity. As a result, this experience permitted me to become reflexive in terms of understanding the notion of me (the researcher) and researched (the participants). These techniques moreover enabled me to address the influence of my own subjectivity and enhance the trustworthiness of my research endeavour.

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