

The Role of Reflection in Action Research: Towards Enhanced Understandings of Curriculum Improvement

Abstract

In this paper we draw upon our reflections from an ongoing action research project on student research in course-based, professional graduate programs. We broach our considerations to delineate the complexity of improving curriculum by tracing how the iterative process of action research informed the core findings from the research. The broad framework informing our action research approach includes: (1) planning; (2) observing and acting; (3) critical reflection; and (4) engaging in continuous iterations of this process. Specifically, our collective inquiry takes up the role of reflection within action research cycles to support us in better understanding curriculum review and improvement.

Purpose and Perspective

This action research study focused on educational development and program improvements for a Master of Education Interdisciplinary (MEd) degree pathway, with a specific focus on the action items that resulted from the curriculum review and mapping process for four research courses. Our perspective includes the importance of reflecting on our action research approaches for program improvement within a research-intensive course-based MEd degree (Hendricks, 2016; Kemmis, McTaggart, & Nixon, 2014; MacDonald, 2012; McNiff, 2013, 2014). The study gave detailed attention to the iterative process, which emerged from the curriculum review and mapping process for the four research courses for the MEd Interdisciplinary degree pathway (Jacobsen, Eaton, Brown, Simmons, & McDermott, 2018; Dyjur & Lock, 2016; McNay, 2009; Uchiyama & Radin, 2009). Steeped within four phases, comprised of: (1) planning; (2) observing and acting; (3) critical reflection; and (4) engaging in continuous iterations of this process, this paper reports specifically on our formal and informal team meetings to engage in a process of reflection over a 12 month period within our ongoing action research cycles. We draw upon our reflections from our diverse roles of academic coordinator, instructors and co-researchers from the third phase of our action research study regarding the variant ways in which our individual and collaborative understandings of program design evolved during a curriculum mapping and review process. By contextualizing excerpts from our written narrative reflections as examples of data we used for analysis, we share what we have learned from reflection within our action research practices. We found transformative possibilities that integrate our teaching experiences, student learning, and collaborative work as co-researchers. Narrative reflections allowed for a holistic approach; one that can provide a generative framework for thinking about the complexities of teaching and learning and action research for graduate program improvement in higher education.

Mode of Inquiry, Data Sources and Data Analysis

As educators who research our teaching practices, we worked closely with staff, students, along with recommendations that emerged from a faculty led curriculum review of professional graduate programs in education, to inform curricular improvements in four required MEd research courses. We drew on our critical reflection practices, which opened up transformational possibilities in educational action research. Critical reflection is a constructivist mode of inquiry that qualitatively situates one's experiences as data (Denzin & Lincoln, 2017). Documented experiences can be interpreted in order to address complex educational challenges such as improvement of curriculum programs in higher education. In situating reflection as part of the

action research process, our data sources for this cycle included teaching journals, electronic communications between research team members, notes from team meetings, administrative documentation, and narrative reflection. Key to reading and interpreting critical reflection practices through narrative is the delineation of important relations that shape students' perceptions and dispositions as contextualized within the entangled details of program improvement.

The analysis of the data included two phases. In the first phase we engaged in: (1) coding for themes (Miles, Huberman & Saldaña, 2014); (2) researcher cross-checks for trustworthiness and relevance; (3) visual representation of data in matrices; and (4) overlaying of themes from analysis with action items from the Curriculum Review (CR). In the second phase, we reassembled the data, which involved examining themes emerging from the narrative reflections in relation to the action items from the original CR. This approach to synthesis allowed for a further refining of core themes and the identification of an emerging theme or area for improvement that was not previously amplified in the original CR Action Plan. In phase one, the research team assembled and organized all sources of data. Once the team agreed that the narrative reflections were complete, two researchers coded the data for themes and then reviewed the narrative reflections and individually identified emerging and reoccurring themes. Themes from the initial coding process were cross-checked and discussed by the research team to: a) triangulate similar interpretations, b) establish trustworthiness and relevance and, c) synthesize the analysis into primary themes. Emerging themes included: 1) program understanding, 2) program commitment, 3) student challenges, 4) design team challenges and 5) community of practice. Once the five key themes were identified and all narrative reflections coded, the data were reassembled for phase two. In the second phase, matrices were created that listed the themes and excerpts from the narrative reflections. In the next section, we draw from our narrative reflections from the analysis to explore how this critical reflection assisted us in conceptualizing a collective approach necessary for program improvement.

Narrative points of view: Findings from the data

Our critical reflection process drew from multiple sub-codes. In this section, we amplify a sample of the themes that emerged from the data.

Program & Academic Support proved to be a key identifier in understanding how to support students' difficulties with learning about, designing, and doing research. From analysis of reflective data, it became clear that bringing colleagues together who were teaching the same courses in order to share and negotiate ideas, to deepen collective understanding about the learning intentions, learning tasks and assessment strategies in the four courses, was highly valued by individual instructors for strengthening their own practices and also valuable for informing program wide improvements.

Instructor Continuity was found to play a crucial role in increasing overall instructor and student understanding of the four sequenced research courses and also the nature of students' needs. Instructors frequently reflected on the possibilities that surfaced when they taught the same cohort of students across the four courses. The theme of Instructor Continuity showed through reflections on students' formal and informal comments around the importance of already having a sense of the instructor's expectations and conceptual framework. From an instructor perspective, staying with a cohort for several courses allowed one to take on a supervisory role within a non-supervisory program and allowed for insights into students' needs through the ebb and flow of "uncertainty" when first delving into educational research. Furthermore, the

opportunity to teach each of the courses within the program was found to enhance instructor comfort with the ways the courses were designed to connect and build upon each other, particularly when one knew the students they were going to be working with. Whenever possible, instructors worked with MEd students from inception of research project to enactment to reporting and knowledge dissemination. We got to know the students in a way that allowed for deep and personalized learning. Through the later courses in particular, the reflections indicated that we had a real sense of where each student could go in their writing, thinking, being, and doing educational research. There was a sense that at the beginning of the terms we could build upon established learning communities and trusted relations in the cohort and, as such, move seamlessly into the objectives of each course and research processes much faster.

We organically formed *Different Types of Collaborative Teams*, each with a different role in the teaching and research – 1) Course Redesign Teams – in these teams, we redesigned the course syllabus together. The purpose of the collaboration was to redesign the course learning intentions, signature pedagogies, learning tasks, and assessments. 2) Common Course Teams – In these teams all members were assigned different sections of the same course during the same term. The purpose of the collaboration was to meet regularly throughout the term and support faculty less experienced with the course(s) and to problem solve together. 3) Course Pairing Teams – In these teams all members were teaching the same cohort of students during the same term. The purpose of the collaboration was to ensure courses are coordinated and offer students a manageable working timeline throughout the term. While we believe in collaborative work, some challenges emerged for the design team: (1) individual interpretations, (2) idea negotiation, (3) redesign progression and (4) balancing course pairings. Each instructor interpreted the course redesign and enacted the course uniquely. Even when using the same syllabus, two instructors enacted the course in different ways and through our reflections, we were able to both note and attend to the tensions that might otherwise slowly pick away at the productive possibilities when working with a collaborative group. It was noted in the reflections that while these challenges existed, being able to share them with one another through the reflection processes allowed the team to work better and with more trust as individuals within a team. In education, people often work collaboratively, and in order to be effective, we need to know how to actualize the theory-practice relationship. The acts of doing reflections during our action research on curriculum improvement and also collaboratively reading and analyzing those reflections both embodied and served the emphasis on community that we aim to enact in pedagogical signatures of the program.

The final theme we retrieve in this paper is that of *Signature Pedagogies* (Shulman, 2005). Part of the intentional design decisions chosen to develop research active practitioners were grounded in signature pedagogies, particularly the deep and implicit structures of learning educational research, such as making provisions for inquiry and peer review processes used in the courses. Our reflexive journaling revealed both the ways in which our various collaborations supported our innovative enactments of signature pedagogies and the ways in which being able to share and discuss our approaches to teaching educational research shifted our own confidence in instructing. By each of us committing to the signature pedagogies, we found in our reflections an ability to be able to better assess the response to the curriculum review. We found that the signature pedagogies created a consistency from which to make the assessment while also leaving us room to take up the courses in a way that was pedagogically meaningful in our individual teaching practices. Again, the intentionality and space provided by the reflections

within the action research drew this point out, whereas initially we were concerned about overdetermining academic freedom.

Results and scholarly significance

In the analysis of our narrative reflections, it became evident there were challenges that arose as a result of working in collaborative design and teaching teams; yet through the process of analyzing our reflections on the experience, we have been better able to attend to the tensions within the collaborative focus of the program. Through the reflection process, we collectively developed a comprehensive conceptualization of how the four research courses fit together with program outcomes from research design, to field-based inquiry, to students writing the final research report [see figure 1]. The analytical themes informed program improvements. Study findings revealed instructors' perceptions about how they enacted the recommendations for program improvement for teaching and learning, including: (1) developing a visual conceptualization of the program; (2) improved connections between the courses; (3) articulation of coherence in goals and expectations for students and instructors; (4) increased focus on action research; (5) increased ethics support and scaffolding for students; and (6) fostering communities of practice (Jacobsen et al., 2018). Some of the challenges were: time commitment, in particular, for part-time sessional instructors; idea negotiation as shaped through our different interpretive frameworks; redesign progression and the complexity of collaborating and balancing the sequencing of course pairings. The findings highlight strengths of the current MEd program and course designs, and also the action items and research needed for continual program improvement and enhancement of the scholarship of teaching and learning. Our research highlights the value of reflection in an action research approach to collaborative design and enactment of actions for program improvement. At the same time, ongoing research is still needed on how to support collaborative design and teaching teams to address challenges such as additional time for meetings, idea negotiation, and redesign progression. The significance of our critical reflection speaks to the importance of researcher's experiences as data, how collaborative work can be innovative for educational research, and that the experiences of researchers are relational serving as a reservoir to understand curriculum and program improvement. This study adds to the current literature on curriculum review and mapping, and highlights the value of critical reflection using action research as an approach to collaborative curriculum design and program improvement.

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Figure 1

