

‘Generating knowledge for themselves’:

Kathleen Graves on teacher research

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Some teachers might have certain misconceptions about research that make them see it as alien to their

professional identity and practices. In this interview, Kathleen Graves challenges these misconceptions and discusses how teacher research can help practitioners to explore their questions about teaching and learning and share their knowledge with their peers.



Over the past few years, the topic of teacher research has been given increasing attention in the literature and at international ELT conferences. How do you explain this rise in popularity?

I wonder if it's cumulative; in other words, whether it's the work of many years of trying to foreground teacher knowledge as an important part of the fabric of the knowledge of our profession. So, I think its recognition is probably long overdue.

Does the fact that more academics and professional researchers are giving attention to the value of teacher research imply that more teachers are engaging in it?

I would imagine that academics are basing their work on studies done by teachers. For example, the work that Donald Freeman has done on teacher research looks at the idea of developing a question, gathering data, and interpreting it. What's interesting is the idea of making teacher research public or that somehow it isn't just contained within the classroom or within the teacher's sphere of understanding or that of the students if the teacher is sharing the research with their students. I think that's the crucial link: making teacher knowledge come from teachers and not just from the academics that write about teachers. There are different fora for teachers to make their knowledge public. For example, presenting at conferences and blogging.

One criticism that is sometimes levelled at academics is the way they have imposed their definition of research on teachers and encouraged them to do that kind of research in their own context. What are your thoughts on this?

If you take at the core the idea of having a question that you want to get some data to find out what possible answers there are, the process for both teachers and academics is similar. For teachers the question often is, "What happens when I do this?" or "What happens when I don't do this?" This is followed by getting the data for doing it, finding ways of interpreting it, and then thinking about the findings and implications. If you take that as the core of what a teacher does and what an academic researcher does – perhaps with different kinds of tools, modes of analysis, and constraints as to what constitutes a research question – I think you have basically the same process. So, I'm not sure that the definition of research has been imposed on teachers so much as the conditions under which and how research should be conducted. The idea that research has to involve statistics or that you need to add so much into it takes away from what teachers want to actually find out.

Some people believe that research can be democratised even further by opening up the construct and enabling other kinds of activity to be considered as research; for example, reflective practice. What's your opinion on this?

I think there's something at the core and then there are different ways of enacting each of the processes involved in research. Research writ large – the idea of having a hypothesis and being able to generalise – is not suitable for teachers who might need a very specific application of research. I think the core of research is available to everybody. So, I'm not sure that it's about democratising it – especially if you accept that there's a set of core processes – so much as recognising that it is something that teachers can do in a systematic way.

Does it always have to be systematic for it to be research?

There's a system to it. Can you gather data without a question? Maybe the components need to be there but the way in which you work with them doesn't follow one specific cycle. There's certainly a norm and a classic way of doing and presenting research, but I think research can probably be much freer for teachers. For example, a literature review might not be essential for someone doing teacher research.

What is the value of teachers engaging in research?

What it allows teachers to do is to stand back from their teaching and to see it in a different light because they are trying to get a perspective on something or a question that has emerged from their practice. As part of their practice, they don't necessarily need to answer this question. But research is another way of generating knowledge for themselves. Most teacher preparation programmes don't train teachers on how to do research; they mainly train them how to become good practitioners. However, research allows teachers to take a different stance. They become learners of what they're doing as well as the protagonists of it.

What are some of the challenges that inhibit teachers from engaging in research?

Self-concept is one of them. Teacher and researcher are not seen as part of the same identity. There's also the idea that research is something with a capital 'R'. Some teachers conceive of research as consisting of something that is found in a journal, involves statistics, and is generalisable. Such teachers may see research as separate from them. Overcoming this challenge involves understanding what it means to be a researcher of your own practice, even though it doesn't necessarily have to be of your own practice. Understanding that research is a possible part of your identity as a teacher is important.

We're doing this interview at a conference, at which there was a pre-conference event focusing on research literacy. What kind of support do teachers require in order for them to develop the necessary skills to engage in research?

For me research literacy is not only about knowing how to design and deploy a research instrument. Methodology is only one of the processes involved in research. I would be worried if we were to look at research literacy as consisting of training teachers to use research instruments that might not really serve their needs.

How would you support teachers' research literacy?

I would support them by helping them to develop a stance of inquiry that enables

them to ask questions about their practice or about their profession. I would start from the idea that one can ask questions: "What happens when...? Why does this work? Why does this happen?" Also, I would help them understand what researchable questions are and to think about what data one would need to gather in order to answer a question. There's also the process of starting to see patterns in the data so that it can be useful to whatever the inquiry is.

This conference is organised by a teacher association. Do you think such conferences are being used as a platform for the dissemination of teacher research?

I do. I think it's one avenue for teachers to make public what they've learnt about their teaching. In that respect, conferences are extremely valuable for teachers, both in terms of taking on the public persona of someone who has something to share and also to learn from fellow teachers. Conferences organised by teacher associations are extremely important in making teacher knowledge public.

What other avenues are there?

Depending on how it's managed, a real learning organisation allows people to learn from each other. I think it's important that schools institute ways for teachers to share their knowledge within the school itself. There are also teacher publications, such as newsletters. In the work that I've done on curriculum design, the impetus for me to start writing about it was to bring teachers' voices into the discourse because they were pretty much absent. All of the work that I've done has involved practitioners sharing their understandings and their processes. When teachers write about their experiences, other teachers can see themselves in what their colleagues are talking about. Electronic media offers teachers huge opportunities in this regard.

What is the role of teacher associations in helping teachers to engage in research and to develop the necessary literacy to do so?

By means of their conferences and events, teacher associations can provide teachers with a form of initiation into the

sharing of research. One of the challenging things is how to find a productive format for teachers to be able to share their knowledge or their questions so that it doesn't become a complaints session. Finding good structures for teachers to get together and share their knowledge is one means by which teacher associations can help.

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