

Re-Searching Teaching: Moving from Gut Feeling to Disciplined Conversation

Chris Breen

University of Cape Town

ABSTRACT

In this article, the author focuses on some of the problems involved in offering an appropriate university Masters module for teachers who want to improve their practice and move beyond the intuitive. The article claims that this is a highly complex task, which in the first place will demand several radical changes in focus and attention. The author describes the fundamental theoretical framework on which this module will be based, and also gives an insight from a related assignment as to what might be expected from the course.

INTRODUCTION.

“There are lots of useful observations in the educational literature about learners learning but not so many about teachers teaching. This must be partly because it is so difficult to give an honest account of what it is actually like to teach - most attempts to do this slide into idealised intention or pious hope” (Tahta 1995).

How does one give an honest account of what it is actually like to teach, and just as importantly, where is the appropriately constituted place where teachers can feel safe to talk critically about their teaching? This article will describe the beginnings of an attempt to address the issue of improving one's own practice by undertaking an appropriate form of research. It will also highlight some of the risks and dilemmas that have already become apparent in embarking on such a path.

The following extract from a teacher provides an unusually honest written account of what it is actually like to teach:

Teaching in my classroom seems to depend mainly on me - or at least I often behave as if I think it does! I have a lot of apparent power in the classroom - the power to choose activities, to shame, to praise, to shout, to abuse, to read from the textbook. I have choices - every single moment in every single interaction. Sometimes I feel wonderful about what I did, sometimes I feel good but know I could have done better, and sometimes I know I was horrible and am glad there was no-one there to see (Of course, there was, but in the classroom the power is so one-sided that I can often forget that the students also count!). I'm alive in the classroom and feel what's happening deeply in my stomach region. So when I try to talk about what happened in a particular class in the staff room and a colleague questions me as to why I took a particular action, I often respond “Oh, I just had a gut feeling about it”.

The sentiments and experience expressed in this extract are likely to find a large degree of resonance amongst readers. However, is it enough for a teacher to ascribe certain actions as having come from the ‘stomach region’ as if this somehow absolves him from having to do further work or give more detailed explanations? What is this language of the inside? It seems that this ‘gut feeling’ covers a wealth of tacit knowledge that is at the very core of teaching practice and experience and is the key to any understanding of the teacher and his practice of teaching.

It has become increasingly common over the past decade to access teachers' stories by asking them to record their thoughts in a journal (see for example, Breen 1992). Such journals provide data that can be used for further examination. However, the lack of public examination of teachers' stories has resulted in a paucity of understanding of where teachers are in their examination of their own practice. For example, participants in a workshop at a national conference of mainly university mathematics educators were presented with the following piece of writing from a teacher at a

workshop.

Attending to questions and answers is a demanding process. I get a sense that I become very focused. A contribution is made - I listen, respond, challenge, push, prod, tease, play and throw the response out to a different part of the room trying to involve as many people as possible. I know I try to ensure that one or two students don't dominate this part of the session and my aim is to be provocative. I'm all over the place - my eyes are everywhere and dodging into each and every part of the room. No wonder I feel tired afterwards! Shifting to activities is generally governed by time and group energy. It feels as if I am aware of a moment when the group's energy fades and where the gains become less and less the longer they stay with the topic. The move to activities heightens the energy again. Desks are cleared. People stand around wondering what's going to happen next. I become aware of space and connections and try to secure the environment by showing my ease with the room and with them. There's a forced slowness to my actions as well as a resoluteness.

Participants were divided into groups and asked to make intelligent guesses as to the sex of the teacher and the number of years that s/he had been teaching. They were also asked to recommend the next step that this teacher should take in his/her education and also to begin to design a suitable research programme for the teacher as s/he is so clearly thinking about improving her/his own practice.

An overwhelming majority of this group of experienced mathematics educators was certain that this teacher was a she, mainly because of the sensitivity she showed to her surroundings. They also decided that she was a beginner teacher on teaching practice during a preservice course and was slowly coming to grips with the realities of teaching. They motivated this conclusion on the basis of the teacher's uncertainty as to her correct action and also to her tiredness, which they said was common to all beginner teachers. Their advice was that it was too early for her to get involved with research because she was still too close to her teaching to make a good objective researcher. She needed to carry on teaching for a while to gain some more experience before registering for a higher degree.

The irony is that the piece of writing came from a male teacher with 8 years school and 15 years university teaching experience! The majority response from this group of experienced mathematics educators highlights an absence of knowledge of each other's teaching through shared stories as well as a general silence about personal feelings of uncertainty in one's own teaching. The dominant academic discourse of the existence of a uniform best practice based on sound epistemological grounds has become almost monologic and has contributed to the silencing of stories that might open up a dialogue on teaching practice. It also highlights the dominant view that one somehow has to become objective to be able to research one's own teaching when the very nature of teaching is such a highly personal experience.

The insights gained from this example, however, still leave us with the question as to how the experienced teacher whose journal extract is quoted can follow a suitably directed research programme to improve his practice. It would also be important for such a programme to address the issue of developing a language to explore and analyse what the teacher in the first extract described as a 'gut feeling'.

GETTING STARTED.

This will be the starting point for a module called Researching Teaching which forms one of the core courses in a newly introduced Masters in Teaching to be introduced at the University of Cape Town. The module will have the published aim of trying to give practitioners the opportunity of re-viewing their actions in order to increase their possibilities for future action. Against the background of the earlier commentary on traditional ways of researching teaching, the intention will be to create the space for teachers to be able to enter into the passion of their practice. The course has been designed

to enable them to share with their colleagues the things that excite and trouble them and to create the possibility for them to stay with these so that they can learn more about what interests them. For this to be done, their practice will be foregrounded in priority to the theoretical imperatives generally preferred by the academy. The course has been framed by asserting that each of these students brings with them an enormous wealth of classroom experience and tacit knowledge, and that, once tapped, this will provide an extremely rich and hitherto untapped source of data for developing theories and knowledge about teachers' tacit knowledge. It is believed that in order to ensure that these aims do not remain at the level of pleasant sounding rhetoric, there needs to be a conscious parallel introduction of certain crucial philosophical and theoretical steps. The rest of the paper will describe these important shifts and illustrate them through examples taken from an earlier student assignment.

Changing paradigms

In a separate paper (Breen, 2000), I have described the traditional further education options available to a teacher wishing to improve her practice, and have argued that a basic assumption in all these options is that the teacher is required to leave behind her passion and intuitive knowledge, and become apprenticed to an expert who will select what is to be studied and how it is to be studied. The teacher is generally required to search for and assimilate knowledge 'out there' in an 'objective' way, where the main task is to learn the academic discourse being presented. Olson (1997) draws on the work of Gadamer (1975) in describing the dominant paradigm in this form of working as one of 'getting an education'. In this version "knowledge takes the form of an object which is separate from the knower making it possible to have objective truth uncontaminated by contextual contingencies and personal biases" (Olson 1997, 15). In this version of learning from the expert, there is room for only one voice, one version. The paradigm is one in which there is a strong hierarchical power relationship between the authority and the learners, and one where argument and explanation are the vehicles for arriving at an agreed position. Telling overshadows listening as individuals compete to have their versions accepted. We are far more used to these 'discussions' whose aim is to assert the correctness of a particular point of view and unsurprisingly many metaphors for such discussions are drawn from the image of war. (I will *shoot holes* in your argument; I *demolished* his argument; His criticisms were *right on target*; etc. – see Lakoff and Johnson, 1980, 4). Learners are asked to co-operate with the expert as the curriculum is covered by allowing the expert to set the agenda and activities. The task of the learners is to co-operate with the expert in an effort to pick up as much of what the teacher has to offer as possible. In this paradigm, the teacher will commonly use the tools of the newly-learned discourse as a lens to interrogate a research question which is chosen so as to be appropriate for the lens.

In contrast to this, Olson offers an alternative paradigm, again drawing on the work of Gadamer, of 'becoming more experienced'. Here, "knowledge is seen as embodied and personally and socially constructed through the continuous and interactive nature of experience" (Olson 1997, 18). In this paradigm, the practice of the learning experience takes the form of stories rather than of theories. This does not imply that this is an atheoretical position, however, it merely asserts the primacy of experience. The space has to be given for participants to tell their own stories confidently in the knowledge that they are the experts on their own experience in the sense that their stories are unique to them. The power thus becomes far more devolved in that no-one can contradict a person's narrative (since they have no personal knowledge of the incident being described), they can instead ask the teller probing questions or offer their own narrative. The relationship is one of collaboration where teacher and student are involved in a mutually agreed on task where the contributions of each participant are equally valued and the agenda of the interaction is also dependent on each participant. Trust becomes a crucial factor.

This will be the first fundamental block of the Researching Teaching module - an attempt to maximise the possibilities of working in a 'becoming more experienced' paradigm. The change of paradigm to one of 'becoming more experienced' will be enhanced by drawing on the theoretical framework offered by the enactivist perspective. Enactivism stems from the work of Maturana and

Varela (1986) and Varela, Thompson and Rosch (1991) and is based on the work of Merleau-Ponty (1962) and ecological understandings from chaos and complexity theory. It attempts to find a middle way between the mental and the physical (inner and outer) by suggesting that the body is that which renders the mind and the world inseparable. It is concerned more broadly with the collaborative construction of a collaborative world. Concern is focused on the ecological interface of mind and society rather than on a solitary mind trying to make sense of an ontological given. It involves both becoming part of an ongoing existing world and the shaping of a new one. The crucial contribution in placing an enactivist learning perspective at the centre of the move to the change to a 'becoming more experienced' perspective is that it asserts that our knowledge and our identities are dependent on being in a world, which is inseparable from our bodies, our language and our social history. The basis of cognition is not to be found in the Rationalist "I think" or in the Empiricist "I observe" but in the enactivist "I act", and acting demands re-unions of mind and body, and subject and object.

Hermeneutic Conversations

The move to a 'becoming more experienced' paradigm will not be easy to put into practice. Once one creates a safe environment for teachers to talk about their daily experience, they seldom need a second invitation. Teachers will have a string of anecdotes to tell about each day's events and will weave a seamless thread of subjectively interpreted stories. The difficulty will lie in getting teachers to tell these stories in such a way that there is an entry for others to offer resonant or dissonant experiences. A first step will be to get the narrator to trim the story so that s/he focuses on a single incident or moment and then tries to describe it so that all the other participants have the opportunity to enter into that moment. However, this will still not be an easy task as the competitive mode of discussion will inevitably initially be carried over from the 'getting an education' paradigm. Work will have to be done to establish an environment which supports the collaborative engagement with these narratives.

For example, in an activity offered during a pilot run of the other core module of the Masters in Teaching called 'Teaching and the Modern Condition', the class was asked to watch a five minute videotape excerpt of a music concert. After they had finished watching, they were asked to mentally rewind the videotape and replay it, pushing the pause button when they came to a frame that really captured their imagination. Participants were then asked to share their 'paused' image with the rest of the class and then to elaborate as to why this image was important to them. It is important to note that this activity was clearly aimed at creating an opening for each observer of the videotape to offer their own image and story about it in a safe environment where the major product was intended to be the opportunity to learn a bit more about themselves and each other through their stories. What happened during this particular session, was that two participants chose the same incident from the videotape and immediately moved into 'getting an education' mode! They started arguing about the correctness of their own interpretation of the facts of what they had seen. The argument started as "it was!/it wasn't!" and moved onto an appeal to other viewers to verify one or other interpretation as fact. Class members were drawn into the argument and the teacher was asked to play the extract again so that the truth could be determined. When the argument was suspended by the intervention of the lecturer and the participants were asked to continue with their narrative by telling the class why their story depended on their perceived image to be correct, wonderfully deep and meaningful stories became available to everyone present. In this case, the search for 'truth' had jeopardised access to the story and hence access to the tellers and their rich source of insights and experience.

It soon becomes clear that different skills will be needed as one ventures into the world of 'becoming more experienced'. One crucial skill will be the commonly neglected art of conversation. Davis (1996) places this topic within a hermeneutic framework. "Hermeneutics is the art of interpretation. It is interested in meaning, in understanding, and in application. It is concerned with investigating the conditions that make certain understandings possible. It is concerned with past, present, and projected understandings.... It understands that there is no truth that is fixed once and for all, no method that can predetermine the location of truth, no authority who can say the way things really

are” (Davis 1996, 18). He goes on to describe the main feature of conversation as one where all participants have the aim of deepening their understanding of the issue at hand. In order to do this, participants have to allow the subject matter to conduct them in a fluid, meandering way where self is often forgotten for the sake of allowing the interaction to move to an unspecified and unanticipated destination. So conversation can, at times, be directionless where the parties involved are allowing the subject to emerge into focus, in contrast to discussion where the subject is a given stage for contestation. Davis points out that a move to conversation also requires a shift from metaphors of sight to those of sound. Discussion (from discuss - to shake apart) is based on “*seeing* is believing; to *clarify* one’s position; to *expose* mistakes; *enlightenment*; gain *insights* and seek *illumination*” (Davis 1996, xxiii). In contrast to the dominantly monologic act of discussion within the ‘getting an education’ paradigm, conversation is a triad which involves you, me and the topic or subject matter. The subject matter exists only in the conversation - neither in you or in me, but between or about us - and we are conducted by it. “[As I listen to another, my body] discovers in that other body a miraculous prolongation of my intentions, a familiar way of dealing with the world. Henceforth, as the parts of my body together comprise a system, so my body and the other person’s are one whole, two sides of one and the same phenomenon, and the anonymous existence of which my body is the ever-renewed trace henceforth inhabits both bodies simultaneously” (Merleau-Ponty 1962, 354).

In drawing attention to the importance of conversation, Davis (1996, 33-34) points to the frequency with which the word “listen” arises in current social, political and economic contexts. Commonly one party feels distanced from the other and each believes that this distance might be reduced by listening. Equally commonly, the demand for such listening is usually made of others! It is ‘the other’ that is not paying attention (“If only you would listen!”). He goes on to argue that a root problem is that we have an incomplete understanding of listening that is based on inaction rather than on enaction. He defines three types of listening modes in an attempt to emphasise the changes that are necessary to allow conversation to take place.

Firstly evaluative listening - a detached, evaluated mode that most of us use in our daily living and which meets our needs. It is a hearing which “is personal, adequately skilful in meeting the normal demands of living, and is ruled over by the ego, which habitually structures all the auditory situations in which it finds itself in terms of subject and object” (Levin 1989, 47). Secondly, he identifies interpretative listening, which is a deliberate action intended to make the listener able to access the subjective nuances of what is being heard - a reaching out rather than the taking in of evaluative listening. Our task here is essentially to develop “our listening as a practice of compassion, increasing our capacity, as listeners, to be aware of, and responsive to, the interrelatedness and commonality of all sonorous beings” (Levin 1989, 47). Davis maintains that both these forms of listening are premised on conceptions of human identity and agency as essentially subjective, autonomous, isolated and insulated. In hermeneutic listening, these boundaries are problematised and the hearer and the heard become involved in a shared project which is more negotiatory, engaging and messy. It is “an imaginative participation in the formation and transformation of experience through an ongoing interrogation of the taken-for-granted and the prejudices that frame perceptions and actions” (Davis 1996, 53). Hermeneutic listening then is a participation in the unfolding of possibilities through collective action.

“Thus it is characteristic of every true conversation that each opens himself to the other person, truly accepts his point of view as worthy of consideration and gets inside the other” (Gadamer 1975, 45).

These then are the major changes in approach and interactive skills that will form the foundations of the module in Researching Teaching. A further focus to the conversation about teaching experience and moments will come from the work which has been done by John Mason from the Open University on a Discipline of Noticing (Mason 1994, 1997). Here students work on the task of recounting moments in a way which records the details of an event in such a way that it is accessible to those who were not present and offers a possibility for others to offer resonant or dissonant stories.

Moments are recounted as ‘accounts-of’ rather than ‘accounts-for’ which means that the subjective interpretation of the teller of the story should not be included as this layer often prevents a listening from entering into the conversation. Opening these moments up to others for conversation allows listeners to give alternative interpretations of the events which occurred and these different interpretations and stories will provide the basis from which theories about practice will emerge. Students will be asked to stay with the experience of the interactions or the texts they are exposed to and learn to re-visit each to uncover different levels of understanding and insight, rather than to fall into our common predisposition to rush to an early closure of insight.

A TRIAL RUN.

The previous section has described some of the key theoretical foundations on which the first run of the ‘Researching Teaching’ module will be based. However, an unexpected early opportunity arose to test and report on some of the ideas discussed in this article. Two mathematics education primary school mathematics in-service fieldworkers who had previously been involved in a research project with the author based on the Discipline of Noticing (Breen, Agherdien and Lebethé 2002), both registered for his mathematics education Masters module. At the end of this module, both chose to tackle the following assignment for assessment.

Make arrangements to have a videotape taken of you at work in your professional capacity in a way that is typical of how you interact with teachers or learners. Select a piece that has a maximum duration of 10 minutes. Write an essay where you use the videotaped extract to pose an interesting question for yourself. Attempt to open this question out further by drawing on your experiential and tacit knowledge; the theoretical tools that the mathematics education taught Masters modules have given you; and appropriate literature references that your question has drawn you to. Present the major insights that you have obtained from your journey to a group of mathematics teachers.

The enormity of the challenge facing a student taking up this option and form of working is clear in Agatha’s introduction to her essay (Lebethé 1999), where she said she was going on this journey with one of her second-hand leather suitcases as a security blanket. The suitcase would contain “past experiences, a skimpy shawl of enthusiasm, and bundles of wrapped insecurities”.

“I have decided to invite and write myself into the essay and give an autobiographical account of what has led me to my present views and that helped identify and choose the moment. My decision is fraught with anxiety. Even though the assignment requires me to write from experiential and tacit knowledge, the university is a place that generally emphasises the development of intellectualism from a rational perspective. It is not a place where the discussion of one’s personal experience is considered relevant. This essay scares me and I know that I am taking a risk” (Lebethé, 1999, 1).

The selection of an incident proved to be a difficult matter. Gabeba (Agherdien 1999) found herself frequently re-running the videotape in an attempt to find her incident. In the end it emerged rather than jumped out and the topic centred around student participation - a concept that she had always heavily emphasised in her workshops with teachers. She found an incident where one of the participants resisted her attempt to draw him out during the session and he defended his silence as a choice rather than a sign of failure. She spent time re-examining her response to his stance.

R: I just want to say that it is not necessary for everyone to talk. Everybody has his way of doing something. So if I don’t talk, that does not mean that I am doing nothing.

G: No, no, that is not what I said.

Gabeba’s continuing examination of this incident took her on a journey where she exposed her teaching and revealed her thinking and interpretations. By looking at some of the literature on psychoanalysis, she was able to understand some of the threat she experienced in R’s response to her invitation to contribute in class. She reported that she was scared of losing control - not a fear of losing authority and assertiveness, but more one of not knowing how to proceed. Her analysis led her

to recognise her actions on the videotape as falling within a constructivist framework of separating teaching from learning, which was contrary to the enactivist line she espoused.

Agatha found similar difficulties in finding an extract that she thought was critical and that was one she could learn from. Finally she found herself becoming increasingly intrigued by a section of the tape where teachers were talking about their own classroom practice with what she felt was astonishing confidence. This identified moment led Agatha on a journey into the past, where she went back to her own previous writing as a beginner fieldworker becoming concerned about her practice. As she became immersed within her exploration of the moment, she also became aware of a parallel process where she was gaining new learnings about her own practice. She found that traditional writing methods did not help her record these parallel insights, so she had to create her own way of doing this. Her extract drew her to consider more deeply what constitutes an incident, and how our stories can enrich each other's perception of the world. She recognised how she shares moments in her own life with her classes as a successful form of encouraging them to tell their own stories and that this embodied action from the teachers contains powerful and confident practice. She said that one of the important lessons she had learnt was from John Mason who says that we should resist premature interpretation of evidence. The more we can enter vividly into the experience, the more we draw on what it offers.

Both students reported on submitting their essays that this was the most difficult essay that they had had to work on in their life. The absence of a given endpoint, the lack of a definite path to follow, and the task of being true to themselves rather than to the lecturer proved to be enormous obstacles. However both felt the journey had been valuable.

“At the beginning of this essay I said that this journey involved taking risks. Now at the end of the journey I believe it to be true. I have learned though that I like challenges and so risk taking has helped me to work with my own real true questions and thoughts. It has guided me in finding my own voice and provided a context by which I can develop a vision of self and an integrated knower. If I am to enable teachers to develop their own voices, then it seems reasonable to assume I must develop my own voice” (Lebethe 1999, 18).

“In pulling out the threads and themes of my critical moment of teaching I have chosen to expose my teaching and found the courage to reveal my thinking and interpretations. I have revealed numerous shortcomings, tensions and set agenda's in my teaching... But I am sure if I continue my travels the horizons will always be endless and all my experiences and stories I tell will be educating ones” (Agherdien 1999, 18).

The above is a report of two individuals working on an assignment on their own rather than a class working through a taught module. However, the foundations of the work they have each done are to be found in the paradigm of 'becoming more experienced', and the theoretical insights from enactivism and the Discipline of Noticing. It is clear that they have been looking at issues that are important to them rather than at one's which have been pre-determined by the lecturer or the discourse. It is also clear that they have written critically and yet with passion. I would argue that what they have done is far more likely to lead to future changes in practice than traditional academic courses would have enabled.

However, the ultimate irony of the module on Researching Teaching is that it is based on a call to move away from a 'getting an education' paradigm, yet it is being offered within an institution which has been established for the purposes of serving that paradigm - the university. Offering such a module will immediately bring with it concerns of assessment standards and peer evaluation. It will of necessity have to bear up to scrutiny from within both the department and university from members of the academy steeped in the 'getting an education' paradigm, and will ultimately be judged on the views of internationally respected academics who agree to act as external examiners of the course. The Researching Teaching module will ask students to enter into conversation about

similar events face-to-face, and will demand that they accept the challenge of entering into conversation and hermeneutic listening. In a paraphrase of Agatha - this module scares me and I know I am taking a risk!

However, it seems appropriate to end this paper with the final paragraph from the essay of the student who was scared because she realised that her essay was being submitted in an institution which generally 'emphasises the development of intellectualism from a rational perspective'.

"I end my travels weary, the road has been inconsistent, road signs were not always clear and I had to buy more leather suitcases along the way. These bags of mine are now filled with stunning jackets of audacity, and the most stunning new shawls of growth. I kept those bundles of wrapped insecurities but they are a bit worn now. There are loads of new learnings, some I'll keep and the rest will be gifts. These are all pretty heavy but the actual cause of the weight is my priceless collections of past and new experiences! Hey I discarded that skimpy shawl of enthusiasm!" (Lebethe 1999, 20).

The optimism and jauntiness of this piece of writing, together with the courage and enthusiasm that both Agatha and Gabeba showed in tackling the assignment, gives hope that the risk involved in offering the Researching Teaching module will prove to be worthwhile. The fact that both obtained firsts for the assignment suggests that standards do not have to be compromised in tackling teaching from a new perspective.

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