

Preparing Students and Faculty to Engage in Interdisciplinary Research: Are We Up to the Challenge?

Tamera Keiter Humbert, D.Ed., OTR/L
Charla Lorenzen, Ph.D.

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Abstract: The purpose of this paper is to highlight the strengths and challenges of a small, interdisciplinary research project between a foreign language department and an allied health professional program.

Introduction

Interdisciplinary research typically involves the utilization of various disciplines and multiple participants to further investigate real-world issues and to provide, implement, or facilitate active engagement in resolving the identified concerns or dilemmas (Beers & Botts, 2009). Working within an interdisciplinary research team brings unique challenges and rewards including: developing trust between research partners; understanding the language, communication and translation of concepts between disciplines and/or participants; negotiating shared values and issues of power; maintaining openness and dealing with challenges throughout the process; making sense of and integrating research results between disciplines and/or participants; acknowledging the important cultural influences of the particular disciplines/ research partners and/ or participants; and in effectively and efficiently engaging in collaborative participatory research (Bracken & Oughton, 2006; Buller, 2008; Domino, Smith, & Johnson, 2007; Fraser & Schalley, 2009; Ryser, Halseth, & Thien, 2009). The benefits of such work include having a broader understanding of the real-world issues and concerns, acknowledging and inviting multiple parties to investigate and support the research, facilitating researchers' and students' ability to engage in and deal with inherent conflicts; developing collaboration, trust and respect for others; and promoting participatory research (Domino, Smith & Johnson, 2007; Huzair, Borda-Rodriguez, Upton & Mugwagwa, 2013; O'Toole & Kirkpatrick, 2007; Scialfa, Pichora-Fuller, & Spadafora, 2004).

Background

Health care practitioners are expected to engage in culturally relevant practice and research; however, there are multiple considerations when confronted with language differences within such scenarios. Working collaboratively with a language specialist adds layers of complexity to research including potential misunderstandings and misinterpretations but there is also increased potential for cultural capital from such work. A year-long interdisciplinary cross-cultural research project focusing on the reflections of faculty and students when translating and analyzing transcripts of non-native speakers was completed at a small liberal arts college. The process included one student and one faculty member from a foreign language department translating interview transcripts into English and a student and faculty member from a health-related professional department coding and analyzing the translated transcripts.

The interdisciplinary research team was able to identify multiple conflicts within the process of translating and completing thematic analysis (Differences in Words/ Constructs; Cultural Considerations; Interview Protocol Considerations; and Confusion with Questions and

Responses). However, despite these challenges, rich data and insights were gained through the analysis. The primary insights gained through the collaboration included 1. When conducting cross-cultural research, health care practitioners/researchers need to be attentive to language and cultural differences inherent in that relationship and be respectful of the impact that these cultural differences may have on the results of the analysis 2. Despite the challenges and errors noted in language use, the relationship between the researcher and participants still supported rich data gathering and analysis. This project reinforced the tension frequently noted between a purely academic empirical analysis of data (in this case the language translation) with the real-world limitations and challenges of research (in this case conducting research with non-native speakers).

Application to Adult Education and Further Conversation

Based on reviewed literature and insights gained through completing the research project, the ability to engage in interdisciplinary research requires time, professional identity and skills, sensitivity and respect, and negotiation. Considering the multiple layers of challenges faced within the collaborative, interdisciplinary research process, the question posed for adult education is “how are adult educators and those working in higher education working through these challenges and preparing students and faculty to engage in such work?”

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