CHAPTER FOURTEEN

TALES OF A CROSS-CULTURAL RESEARCH JOURNEY: NAVIGATING POTHOLES, ROADBLOCKS AND DEAD-ENDS

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Undertaking doctoral studies in a different cultural context presents a plethora of challenges for doctoral students. This chapter documents the experiences of one researcher navigating the early stages of her doctoral journey in a cultural context significantly different from her own. While the development of the initial research framework was careful, it has been the ethical considerations that have presented ongoing challenges, particularly when considering research from a critical perspective. This chapter highlights some important reflections for doctoral students undertaking research in developing countries, particularly in relation to communication, in-country ethics procedures, time delays and financial considerations. The difficulties encountered highlight the need to take a critical and reflexive stance throughout the development of the initial research proposal and to be flexible over the direction of the research. Because of a recent change in political circumstances, this nation will remain nameless throughout this chapter in order to protect those who may be implicated with the original work.

Introduction

Those who have journeyed in a low-income nation would know of the treacherous conditions of some of the roads encountered "off the beaten track". The relentless succession of potholes make travel painfully slow and, most of the time, incredibly uncomfortable. Dead-ends and roadblocks require flexibility, adaptability and constant re-navigation. Furthermore, the long, windy and dusty roads make visibility of the approaching terrain difficult, adding further delays and frustration to the

journey ahead. Navigating the doctoral journey through cross-cultural research is much like that "road less travelled": slow, uncomfortable and, at times, extremely difficult to navigate. This chapter describes the road less travelled of my doctoral journey through the initial stage of planning cross-cultural research from a critical perspective in a low-income nation.

Choosing to journey the "road less travelled"

The decision to pursue my doctoral studies in a cultural context very different from my own was born out of my experiences volunteering on a series of educational projects in this nation. My educational involvement centred largely on the implementation of student-centred pedagogy. This took the form of contributing to the writing of national teacher education material as well as training teachers to implement student-centred approaches at school and district levels. As a white, Western, educated female, this educational context contrasted significantly from my own experience of being a primary school teacher and school leader in New Zealand, Australia and England. From my own successful experiences of training teachers to implement student-centred approaches in Western contexts, I came to this low-income country convinced of the need to bring pedagogical change and idealistic about the ease with which this process of pedagogical change would be implemented.

However, my passionate belief that student-centred pedagogy would be the "answer" to this nation's educational woes was quickly dissipated when faced with the realities of daily classroom life. After spending time observing, training and teaching in classrooms, I soon found implementing student-centred approaches incredibly challenging. Despite my experience and a wealth of ideas, I soon began to question whether the expectations to rapidly implement student-centred approaches were realistic given the teaching conditions, lack of resources, limited teaching facilities and crowded classes. I began to consider: Who decides that student-centred pedagogy is the most appropriate pedagogical approach for this nation given the current barriers to implementation? What is the agenda behind its rapid and urgent implementation?

These questions were the foundation from which my doctoral journey was to begin. I used the questions to frame my initial search for literature as I sought to understand more about student-centred pedagogy in non-Western contexts and the agenda behind its rapid global implementation. I uncovered a growing body of recent literature that highlighted the widespread failure of implementing learner-centred pedagogy in non-Western contexts (Barrett 2007; Chisholm and Leyendecker 2008;

Schweisfurth 2011; UNESCO 2005; Vavrus 2009; Vavrus, Thomas and Bartlett 2011). Furthermore, I found that other academics had also begun to question the agenda behind its swift global expansion (Biraimah 2008; Carter 2010; Chisholm and Leyendecker 2008; Guthrie 2011; Tabulawa 2003). In particular, Tabulawa (2003) claimed that student-centred pedagogy was, in fact, a front for the globalisation of neo-colonial and neoliberal ideologies in non-Western contexts. This confirmed that my own experiences were supported by a growing body of literature that had asked similar questions of student-centred pedagogy in a range of different non-Western contexts.

Establishing a research strategy from a critical perspective

The doctoral highway proceeded as I sought to develop a research methodology and strategy that would frame the research from a critical perspective whilst being sensitive to the complexities of dominant power relations associated with traditional cross-cultural research (Hall 1982; Kai-Ming 1997; Pryor and Ampiah 2004; Soto 2004; Tuhiwai Smith 2012). Working in a cross-cultural context where the colonial legacy has been at the forefront of perpetuating discriminating ideologies, Tuhiwai Smith (2012) highlights the importance of ensuring that careful ethical consideration is given to all aspects of the research process so that the "footprint" left behind by research seeks to empower rather than oppress. Analysis of educational research in this nation revealed that research has predominantly been conducted by donor-funded Western researchers relying heavily on positivist paradigms. Such research has drawn criticism for several reasons: firstly, Tuhiwai Smith (2012) draws attention to the fact that it has often been Western researchers who have become "experts" on the indigenous peoples they have "researched". A Western lens has, therefore, framed interpretations and analysis of cultural realities with indigenous knowledge being consequently placed in the "expert hands" of the West. Tuhiwai Smith argues that this ultimately seeks to further disempower and disenfranchise the already oppressed and marginalised "Other". A second point of criticism has highlighted that positivist research, while convenient for making national and international comparisons, does little to provide meaningful, contextual understanding of educational realities at a local level (Kai-Ming 1997; Pryor and Ampiah 2004; Stephens 2007). Tuhiwai Smith thereby sets the challenge to develop "operational definitions of phenomena which are reliable and valid" (44).

As a Western researcher, the ethical implications highlighted in this critique of cross-cultural research are significant and permeate every aspect of the research process. In order to conduct research in a manner that seeks to redress traditional Western domination imposed by cross-cultural research, it became imperative that considerable consideration be given to the development of the research design. Furthermore, the necessity to take a reflexive stance throughout the research process became increasingly apparent so that every aspect of the research strategy could be considered from a critical perspective. Cannella and Lincoln (2011) emphasise the need to identify the ethical implications of research designs to ensure that the perpetuation of traditional power relations are, as much as possible, identified and challenged. Aligning ethical considerations with an appropriate theoretical framework that would enable the power of knowledge to be placed in the expert hands of the *teachers* in this nation became the next challenge on my doctoral journey. Hermeneutic phenomenology was chosen as this framework as I believed it would enable teachers' voices to be heard and would empower teachers to be co-constructors of the research process (Heidegger 1962; Husserl 1970; Flood 2010; Pascal et al. 2011; Sharkey 2001; Titchen and Hobson 2005; van Manen 1997). This theoretical framework enabled me to draw a detailed "roadmap" of the intended research process, which, in turn, supported me to construct a clear research strategy for the road ahead.

Navigating the ethical highway

Developing a research strategy from a critical perspective was the beginning of an ethical highway riddled with potholes, roadblocks and dead-ends. The necessary first step of obtaining ethical clearance from the Ministry of Education (MINED) to conduct research in this country proved to be a slow, uncertain process uncovering a plethora of further ethical considerations. This procedure required the willingness of a government body within the country to support the research through a formal affiliation process. In this instance, affiliation with the National Education Board (NEB) was granted with the promise that the necessary formal paperwork to apply for National Ethics Clearance would be given.

The need to affiliate this research with the NEB raised a number of previously unconsidered ethical considerations. For example, as the NEB is the local employer of teachers, I had to think through the implications of how this affiliation might be perceived by teachers: the fear of losing their jobs and/or the perception that their research involvement might enhance their career prospects needed to be considered as these possibilities could

limit teachers' willingness to speak openly and honestly about their experiences of implementing student-centred approaches. While the Participant Information Sheet (PIS) that outlines the details of this project and requests consent from participating teachers clearly outlined that teachers' contributions would remain confidential, I could not discount the possibility that fear of being identified might influence responses. This ethical consideration highlighted the need for clarity of communication both prior to, and throughout the research process alongside the importance of establishing relationships of trust with participants. It also highlighted how affiliating with a government organisation further compounded asymmetrical power relations, rather than reducing them.

A further ethical consideration that required careful navigation related to financial incentives for participants. Perceptions of Westerners having significant wealth (Maranz 2001) has been reported to have led to misunderstandings over participants receiving some form of financial gain (Halai 2006; Hamza 2004). As a government-affiliated project, it was important that financial matters were clearly communicated from the outset so that the NEB would not be subjected to financial misunderstandings. I myself have witnessed how schools can be exposed to significant pressure if community members feel that their association with a Western project has not resulted in financial benefit to the community. Because of this, it was necessary to carefully weigh up the implications of financial incentives and how this might impact on expectations of future Western researchers. A textbook donation to the participating schools as a gesture of appreciation was considered to be an appropriate way to bring sustained benefit to the school community. I realised that clearly communicating details about financial incentives in the PIS given to schools, principals and teachers at the outset of the project was, therefore, imperative.

Challenges encountered on unfamiliar terrain

The second important step of applying to the National Ethics Committee (NEC) for clearance meant that all PISs needed to be in the local language. Navigating the unfamiliar terrain of working with translators proved to be yet another unanticipated speed bump on the doctoral journey. A process of back-translation (Werner and Campbell 1970 cited in Brislin, Lonner, and Thorndike 1973) was used to check the accuracy of the translated document. It was a challenge to find skilled translators who had excellent levels of written literacy, particularly in English. At times translators' skills in written translation were not to the level that was needed for this project. Thankfully this was identified in the

back-translation process. Some of these translations had to be discarded and additional translators sought. This was a costly and lengthy process. Furthermore, the compulsory confidentiality agreement for the translators caused some concern. Some translators wished to discuss their translations with colleagues to check accuracy; this was not appropriate. This caused stress to some translators. These dead-ends further delayed the ethics application process and added to the pressure of working within a tight doctoral timeframe. In hindsight, it would have been better to provide potential translators with a mock sample of the translation work prior to commencement to ensure that all translators were aware of the skill level required for this project.

There were other translation difficulties relating to the fact that a number of words and terms were not directly translatable. While this was anticipated, I realised how completely reliant I was on the contextual understanding and accuracy of the translators concerned. I consequently felt as though here I was driving blindfolded. I could be confident in the translations only after several translators identified the same difficult words and provided me with similar translations for each of these words. The translators with educational backgrounds had a much more realistic understanding of appropriate translations. Translation took considerable time, with issues regarding access to internet and the translators' own life circumstances (all translators had multiple jobs) impacting on the translations being completed in the anticipated timeframe. Open dialogue was maintained throughout the translation process which helped me to understand the tensions, difficulties, and challenges the translators faced when working between two very different cultural and linguistic frameworks.

While the process of submitting an application to the NEC revealed many roadblocks and potholes, there have been other aspects of this initial doctoral journey that have added to the slow and challenging journey thus far. Communication has been one of these ongoing challenges. The need to regularly communicate with officials from the NEB and translators has proved at times to be extremely difficult. Slow, intermittent and expensive internet connections in this low-income nation present difficulties; responses to emails can be slow or non-existent. Printing or downloading documents there can be expensive, something to consider when attaching documents for translation. Poor quality phone connections make verbal conversations difficult and the New Zealand accent was difficult for many nationals increasing the likelihood of miscommunication. Email conversations tended to be more accurate. Clear and transparent communication is imperative in cross-cultural research; nevertheless, this was a continuous pothole throughout this initial doctoral journey.

Ethical dead-ends and re-navigating highways

Up until this point, I had encountered potholes and roadblocks; however, I hadn't anticipated the possibility of driving into a dead-end at this stage. This came quite unexpectedly when a change in the political climate in this nation occurred shortly after obtaining affiliation from the National Education Board. This has had significant implications for the government's relationship with the West and, in particular, Western researchers. This shift has had a devastating impact on my intended research. The promised formal paperwork for submission to the NEC was not returned in the anticipated timeframe and the government introduced a lengthy and stringent process for obtaining ethics approval for all research. It soon became evident that this process would be lengthy, costly, and with no guarantees that approval would be granted.

It was at this point that I began to understand the implications of having my research affiliated with this nation's government. For a start, one of the requirements was for all data to be reviewed by the MINED for approval before export for analysis. The risks associated with the possibility of data being judged to be critical of the government became apparent. While this had obvious implications for the completion of my own doctoral journey, it also highlighted the fact that the government could have ultimate control of the scope and the direction of my research. The possibility of having to restrict and redesign my research out of fear needed to be considered. Lack of freedom to address wider social, cultural, economic and political structures ultimately undermine the theoretical foundation, framing and underpinning my research. This in itself conflicts with the critical lens through which I, as a researcher, choose to position myself and this ultimately limits my academic pathway. The decision not to name the country in this publication highlights the severity of the current political climate and the limitations that these ethical tensions have on the way research can be conducted and ultimately published. The realisation that my research may be restricted due to external regulations caused me to contemplate the significance of this government affiliation.

Furthermore, it also highlighted the possibility that my research may place participants at risk if their contributions were considered to be "critical" of their government. While my own university's ethical clearance regulations requires the researcher to guarantee participants' confidentiality, this raises tensions when affiliating with a government agency that also requires access to participants' consent forms and data. It was at this point that I realised that participant confidentiality could be compromised. I also became aware that a citizen found to be "critical" is

likely to face severe consequences. Freedom House identifies this country as one of the "not free" nations in the world (Amnesty International 2011; Freedom House 2012). It also notes that academic freedom and general freedom of speech within the nation, particularly among teachers and students, is severely limited. The realisation that my research may inadvertently lead a participant to comment on an aspect of government policy that would later be deemed "critical", alongside the fact that my guarantees of confidentiality may not be upheld, required me to seriously reconsider my research in its current form.

Another difficulty involved implications for the local contact person if my data or final thesis were deemed to be critical of the government. This would ultimately result, at the very least, in the loss of their current position. This would have serious financial and social consequences for this person and his/her extended family. The ethical tension of placing a number of people at risk through their involvement, association and affiliation with this research has become more apparent through this recent political change. Such considerations are imperative as the widespread consequences of an interpreted criticism of the government could be severe.

Furthermore, publishing research that may be deemed critical has considerable implications for future researchers which could be devastating. This nation needs research to ensure policy is grounded in contextually and culturally specific and relevant research that seeks to support and develop the infrastructure of the country, according to the local needs. The possibility that the "footprint" of my research, no matter how careful I might have been, may impact negatively on future research required careful consideration.

It was for these reasons that I decided to "re-navigate" this research nine months into my doctoral journey. With the pressures of a tight doctoral timeframe, the uncertainty of gaining timely ethics approval, the current political climate, participants' safety and the restrictions on my own professional freedom to research through a critical lens, it was evident that this ethical highway had hit a dead-end. While disappointing, the journey up until this point has provided a rich foundation for my research to continue to move forward on a new highway that will focus on the globalisation of learner-centred pedagogy through a critical lens. My experiences have not been wasted; rather they have informed my understanding of the implications of international policy through my own lived experience of implementation at a local level. The complexities of cross-cultural research have certainly been highlighted and, had the political environment been different, I am certain that this research would

have been navigated with much greater success. While my initial desire was to use a research methodology that sought to empower local teachers as co-researchers and co-constructors of knowledge, this has been challenged by the overwhelming complexities and ethical tensions of engaging in cross-cultural research in the current political environment of this nation. It is my hope that, at some point beyond this doctoral journey, an opportunity to engage in co-constructed research in a cross-cultural context will be available again.

Considerations for those embarking on the doctoral journey

While my cross-cultural doctoral journey hit an unexpected dead-end, for those considering doctoral research in low-income countries, it is certainly possible so long as careful consideration is given to a range of factors prior to embarking on the journey. Information on the ethical requirements for conducting research in the chosen country is important. Lengthy delays in communication and applications can be expected and should, as much as possible, be understood and appreciated from the perspective of those living in the local context. Additionally, delays in communication will impact on the timeframe for doctoral research and should be factored in to the initial proposal.

Another consideration is the high cost associated with conducting research in a different physical locality. Alongside travel and accommodation expenses, there are additional considerations of paying translators, donations, research visas, travel insurance, updating vaccines, and in some instances, fees for an ethics application in the partnering country. Visas place time limits and, therefore, an element of "coming and going" will be required throughout the project. Funding a project over a sustained period of time involves inevitable unforeseen costs at some point on the doctoral journey. Committing to such a project requires a significant financial investment so careful planning is required to undertake a project of this nature.

In all instances, having contacts "on the ground" will certainly help to navigate this research process with greater clarity. Having formal introductions through a known contact to officials in positions of responsibility is invaluable and certainly more successful than "cold" emails and phone calls. Awareness of local working conditions helps to understand that delays can, at times, be the result of interruptions to internet access, unscheduled public holidays, changes in job personnel, and illness. Awareness of these conditions will result in a more realistic

research timeline and greater flexibility for navigating unexpected challenges and delays.

Choosing to take the "road less travelled" and conduct cross-cultural research from a critical perspective has certainly been challenging. The constantly changing and unpredictable landscape requires a great deal of patience, perseverance and adaptability. While I am still in the early stages of my doctoral journey, the ride to date has been slow, bumpy and at times, incredibly uncertain. Despite this, the experience has been invaluable and has allowed me to understand the challenges facing education in this particular nation from a much wider perspective. While the journey ahead looks different from the original roadmap, the "road less travelled" has been an insightful, rich and unique experience that will continue to frame and form the basis of my newly navigated doctoral journey.

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