

The Research and Teacher Learning Study

The RTL study was primarily an interview study, designed to learn more about the whether or what teachers can learn from research. This overview is designed to help students see how a general research question eventually gets translated into a more specific set of questions, and how those, in turn, get translated into an interview guide. Many aspect the RTL study are not described here – sampling decisions, decisions about what studies to ask teachers to read, and so forth. Instead, the focus is on the interview in particular. The numbered points below represent parts of a reasoning chain that appears in many research projects.

1. Context: The RTL study was one of several studies conducted by the National Center for Research on Teacher Learning. Each study examined one source of teacher learning—e.g., what teachers learned from preservice courses, what teachers learned from mentors, etc. This particular study focused on what teachers learned from reading research texts.

2. Premise, Study Rationale: Researchers have complained for decades that teachers do not attend to research findings. Agencies that fund educational research want to see evidence that it is useful or influential to practice. Several hypotheses have been put forward as to why teachers don't appear to rely on research, including these:

- Research is not relevant, as it does not address questions of concern to teachers
- Research is not persuasive, as it relies on a way of thinking that does not match the way teachers think about their practice;
- Research reports are too dense, filled with jargon, etc
- Teachers need to conduct their own research, which would then automatically be relevant and persuasive
- Teachers need to conduct their own research because then they would understand the language and logic of research and would find it more useful to them

3. General Question: What do teachers learn from research, if anything?

4. General Strategy: Ask teachers to read and respond to actual research articles.

Note: These first four steps in the thinking are what most students have when they begin planning a study. That is, you begin with some issue or problem you want to address, and you have a general question and a general idea of what you want to do. Next all of this needs to be refined and turned into a project.

5. Refinement of the Research Question

- a. There are two general issues to study: what teachers could learn from conducting their own research, and what they could learn from reading research conducted by others.
- b. Teacher research can be quite different depending on the context. Most teachers conduct research as part of programs that facilitate teacher research. Each program, in turn, has its own orientation. Therefore, we need to include multiple programs, each with a different orientation toward teacher research. This will allow us to see whether teacher learning differs depending on the type of research they do.
- c. Research is not monolithic. There are many different genres. If we want to learn what teachers learn from research, we need to distinguish among genres. Therefore, we need to ask teachers to read multiple studies.

So we will compare teacher learning across different types of teacher research and different types of research genres done by others.

6. Translating Research Questions into Interview Questions

a. Premises

a. What people learn from research or anything else will depend on what they already know and on their values and beliefs. Therefore we need to ask some questions about their current views about teaching, as these will provide a context for how they respond to the research.

b. Beliefs and values about teaching are hard to ascertain. We need ways to make our questions as concrete as possible to get teachers to talk about real practices rather than generalizations.

c. When we ask about research that they did themselves, we need to learn the entire process of doing the study—how they got into a teacher research program in the first place, what motivated them, how they decided what to study, how they decided how to study it, etc.

d. When we ask about research that they read, we need to do two things: On one side, we want to learn their responses in their own words. On the other side, we need to make sure we have asked them about particular features of the study that might be relevant to their response—things like samples, statistics, etc.

e. We will get better responses from teachers if we tell them in advance the questions we will be asking, so that they will have some time to think about them. Therefore we will send them an outline of the main questions.

B. Outline of Topics to be Addressed in the Interview

Part A. Main issues to be addressed regarding their beliefs and values:

1. What do they think counts as “good teaching?”
2. What are their own teaching goals?
3. What are the sources of their ideas? Do they read about teaching? Do they read research?
4. How do they think research should contribute to practice?

Part B. Main issues to address in the interview about teacher research:

1. How did they get into doing a research project in the first place?
2. What did they actually do—what did they study, how, etc?
3. Did they read any other research about their topic prior to conducting their own study?
4. How did they weigh their evidence and draw conclusions from the study?
5. What value do they think the whole exercise had for them, in retrospect?

Part C: Main issues to address in the interview about reading research:

1. What is their general response to each study they read?
2. What features of the research—methods, authorship, vocabulary, etc—contribute to their response?
3. Do they find the study relevant to their own teaching?
4. Do they find the study persuasive?
5. How do the various compare in terms of relevance or persuasiveness?

7. Translating These Topics into an Interview Guide (Part A Only)

The topics above represent an outline of what needs to be covered in the interview. An interview guide translates those topics into a script for how the interview will be actually carried out. It tells you what you will say as the interview moves along, and how you will respond to things the interviewee says. This particular interview format is semi-structured. Some interview guides are much more open ended than this and others are much more structured than this.

Part 1: Views About Teaching

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this study. Our goal is to learn more about what kinds of research seem useful (or not useful) to teachers and why.

Later on, I will give you some examples of research studies to read and respond to. But first, I'd like to learn more about you. My questions are designed to get a sense for how you think about teaching and will provide a context for understanding your responses to the research you will be reading.

0. Before we start, could you just remind me again

What grade you currently teach?

Have you always taught at this level?

Where is your school?

How long have you been teaching?

What was your major field of study in college?

1. First, try to think about the best teacher you know of. This could be someone you actually had as a teacher or someone you know about as a colleague or have observed somewhere.

1a. Why do you think this person is such a good teacher?

[If nothing is said about the teacher's practice:] What kinds of things does he/she do in the classroom?

[If nothing is said about student work:] What kinds of things do the students do?
What is the climate like in his/her classroom?

Are there particular things (she, he) is especially good at helping students learn? Why?

Are there particular types of students (she, he) is especially successful with? Why?

2. Now I'd like you to tell me about your own teaching.

2a. What is your favorite subject to teach and why?

In your mind, what is this subject about?

2b. What is your least favorite subject to teach and why?

In your mind, what is this subject about?

3. Now I'd like you to think back over the last two or three weeks and recall a particular lesson that you were especially pleased with. What happened that day that made you satisfied with the lesson?

If I had been observing your class that day, what would I have seen?

[If nothing is said about the teacher's role] What would have seen *you* doing?

[If nothing is said about the students] What would I have seen *your students* doing?

What do you think the value of this lesson was for the students?

4. Now try to recall an event that you were especially disappointed with. What happened that day that disappointed you?

If I had been observing your class that day, what would I have seen?

[If nothing is said about the teacher's role] What would I have seen *you* doing?

[If nothing is said about the students] What would I have seen *your students* doing?

What do you think the students learned, compared to what you had hoped they would learn?

5. Suppose you were in the middle of a lesson in (your favorite subject) and a student said, "This is boring. Why do we have to learn this."

How would you respond, and why?

6. Now, imagine that, at the beginning of the year, your principal calls each teacher in to learn what their goals are for the school year.

6a. What would you tell the principal your goals would be for (*your most favorite subject*)?

6b. What would you tell the principal your goals would be for (*your least favorite subject*)?

7. Now I would like you to imagine that you are teaching seventh or eight grade and the students in your class are writing reports. One of your students, Jessica, hands you this report:

[Hand interviewee Jessica's report]

7a. What do you think Jessica understands and does not understand about writing reports?

7b. How would you respond to Jessica? Why?

8. Now here is a copy of some math homework from Bill.

[Hand interviewee Bill's math paper]

8a. What do you think Bill understands and does not understand about subtraction?

8b. How would you respond to Bill? Why?

[There is another section on beliefs about research, then a closing section in which the teacher is given some articles to read in preparation for the next interview]