Behind the Research with SGPE

Learning from within: a longitudinal case study of an education research group

Author(s):

Brian A. Burt, (Iowa State University, Ames, Iowa, USA)
Kathryn Lundgren, (Iowa State University, Ames, Iowa, USA)
Joshua Schroetter, (Iowa State University, Ames, Iowa, USA)

We are excited to provide this blog post for our article, “Learning from within: A longitudinal case study of an education research group.” This article is the first of a series we are writing that examine the inner workings of our own research group and the outcomes associated with participation in research experiences in such a group. Because we are writing about our own group, we were not sure what information would be of most interest to readers of this blog, so we informally polled colleagues and organized this post around three prompts, to which we respond below.

I imagine there could have been an unlimited number of themes that surfaced from the focus group data. How did you wind up focusing on learning and professional identity development?

(Kathryn) As we reviewed our data, we found many different themes and ideas represented in our interviews. The actual selection of the themes was a major learning opportunity for all of us. We worked together to code and determine what overarching themes were present, and then we were able to see what stories our data gave us. We wound up focusing primarily on the process of learning research and on professional identity development because these were themes that almost every participant shared. We were able to see how these themes impacted each member of the group, and our data provided really great evidence of how these two themes are fostered within our research group.

(Joshua) I echo what Kathryn said. To be honest, there was a lot that surfaced from the data and there will be many opportunities to expand on this research in the future, but the data showed that the strongest themes were learning and professional identity development and we wanted to tell the story that was in the data. It also helped that our own experiences matched what we were finding. Being part of the group provided opportunities for learning and growth and it was exciting to see that the older members were experiencing that as they participated.

(Brian) I agree with Kathryn and Joshua. When we first began discussing this study, we had no idea what we were looking for or what we might find. In fact, as the principal investigator, I was concerned that we might not have enough data, that group members were having such disparate experiences that patterns wouldn’t emerge. But that wasn’t the case.
What was it like analyzing your own research group, and working and writing collaboratively?

(Joshua) Analyzing our group presented a new challenge: disconnecting ourselves from the interview data took on new meaning. Knowing that what we said in an interview could eventually become a theme for future research was daunting, but valuable. We could often confirm that our own interview responses were pointing towards specific themes and since we shared similar experiences to other members, we knew we had sound findings. Collaboration presented its own unique experience, mostly a fun one. We regularly discussed the data in detail to check our interpretations of the findings.

(Kathryn) I agree that analyzing our own group created new challenges of distancing ourselves from our own experiences as researchers and as participants. It is pretty funny to participate in a focus group and then go listen to other focus group interviews over and over again, picking them apart to extract themes for writing. It’s a unique experience. I believe that our autoethnographic project helped to create a very strong collaboration among all of us. It was nice to hear everyone’s perspectives and experiences. And, like Joshua said, when one person shared an experience similar to our own, we felt a greater sense of comradery.

(Brian) It is important to note that Kathryn and Joshua were intentionally selected to analyze this study’s data and co-author this manuscript with me. While they were in the group, their data were not included in the analysis (in the article we exclusively analyzed data from the first cohort; Kathryn and Joshua were a part of the second cohort). Thus, as insiders to the group but outsiders to cohort one’s experiences, they provided valuable insights that might have been overlooked if I analyzed the data by myself or if an outsider analyzed it.

What’s next for the research group? What stories have yet to be told?

(Brian) Our diverse group has evolved over time; we are now in the 6th cohort of group members. Fortunately, we have longitudinal data capturing members’ learning, professional identities, participation, and a host of other outcomes related to their research group experiences. We’ve recently decided that our data is leading us to tell the stories about the importance of building community in research groups, the role of self-efficacy in researcher development, and the role of the supervisor in researcher development. We believe our future manuscripts will contribute to the growing knowledge of the science of team science and will offer useful “how-to” strategies for others aiming to construct research groups.