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Collecting data in one's home country: Negotiations, supervisors and ethics

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China

Abstract

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, Chinese students studying in doctoral and postgraduate programmes outside of China numbered over 600,000 (2017). A number of these students may return to China to gather data. This article explores tensions between compliance with the bounds of formal ethical approval and further research opportunities that may arise in the field of one's home country while studying a PhD enrolled in New Zealand. It also reports on negotiation in approaches between socio-cultural contexts of doctoral study in New Zealand and data gathering in China by acknowledging the tensions using two decision-making experiences in one Chinese doctoral scholar's journey of collecting data 'at home'. One is the negotiation of the ethics of situations and the other is how combined reflective journaling and timely supervisor feedback supported researcher decision-making. Some recommendations to new researchers who are going to collect data from their home country are shared.

Keywords

Negotiations; supervisors; ethics; data collection; reflections.

Introduction

I am a Chinese student. I did my master's degree in educational technology at Putra University of Malaysia from 2014 to 2016. After returning to China to continue teaching for one and a half years, I applied for the PhD degree in 2017. I officially got my enrolment in 2018 at Waikato University. Currently, I am in the third year of my PhD journey. My interests cover teacher education, students' cognitive development and e-learning. Students in China, Malaysia and other Asian countries have an extreme workload for learning and long study hours that restrict their participation in extracurricular activities (Yuan & Moran, 2018). My research concerns revolve around exploring ideas to facilitate effective and efficient ways of teaching to enable students to have time for participating in extracurricular or entertaining activities. My PhD research project, titled 'Mediational metacognitive engagement in flipped learning: A case study in a middle school in China', highlights elements like teacher agency, talk, leadership, assessment and instructional activity design which are further broadening my vision of effective teaching. The overarching question of my research is, 'How do teachers and their students mutually engage in talk to facilitate metacognition development?' The aim is to inform teachers' professional understandings of metacognitive engagement in the context of flipped



learning classrooms. The study used a design-based workshop series to share the knowledge of a framework with teachers in terms of philosophy, theory and practice for effective teaching. I developed this framework for implementation. These workshops aimed to enable teachers to engage in mediational metacognitive thinking with each other and their students within the flipped learning context in a middle school in China.

Driven by the aims of my research requesting a middle school with flipped learning context in China, I searched online and found the target school, Chang Le (CL). According to the public information available, the school has been using flipped learning approaches for nearly a decade with consistent development in adopting teaching and learning through the use of digital technologies. The school is one of the largest experimental schools of flipped classrooms within the country. The pedagogical approaches and technologically equipped classrooms within the flipped learning context of this school aligns nicely with my research scope. After I discussed with my supervisors, they were also interested in the target school as a potential research site. Subsequently, I found the email address of the principal on the school website, then sent a brief introduction about myself to him and a request for an online talk. Fortunately, I got a reply promptly and scheduled the meeting through WeChat with the principal. The meeting lasted about forty minutes. It was an informative meeting and we discussed the purposes and duration of the research field work. Moreover, during the meeting, we discussed their problems in the process of implementing flipped learning approaches, and how my research could be designed to provide professional learning for teachers of the school. The result of the talk was satisfactory for both of us, and as a result, the principal of CL confirmed the agreement to be involved. I would have to send the official information letters and consent forms to the principal. For teacher and student participant recruitment in this school, I would meet them in person when I arrived at the school in China to seek their consent and voluntary involvement. As an insider researcher knowing the social culture of the school in China, I was sure that once I got the confirmation from the school principal, it was very likely that teachers would agree to participate if I could clearly explain to them the nature of my research and how they might benefit from it.

The data gathering proposal to conduct a designed workshop intervention research in a middle school in China was approved by the Education Ethics committee. To make this research happen, after I got my formal confirmation enrolment, I went back to my home country, China, to collect data. In China, I completed the data collection over four months, from May 2019 to September 2019 before coming back to New Zealand. The participants consisted of six teachers and the twelve English language classes they taught in middle school in China. Data collection tools used in my research were interviews, observations, documentary analysis and researchers' reflective journals. The procedures of data collection were designed using a cyclic approach (Dewey, 2007) as shown in Figure 1. In the first cycle, I observed their current teaching practice. In the second cycle, I trained the teachers on using the designed framework to improve teaching. The third cycle focused on classroom observation of teachers' professional practice based on their learning from the workshops.

In this article, I discuss support via the use of technology using two cases from my experience. Both cases are about researchers' concerns in negotiating situational factors in the field that require flexibility and adaptation and the other case discussed the kinds of opportunities that arise beyond what was approved by the ethics committee.



Figure 1. A cyclic approach of data collection.

Technology use

Technological support is more critical when we have to communicate across countries in different hemispheres. Development in China enabled me to keep very good and timely communication with supervisors as well as being able to have a digitally equipped office provided by the school. After getting the preconditions of the internet and devices sorted, I printed out a timetable to mark the time difference between China and New Zealand to have a clear awareness of the work time of my supervisors. The routine I wrote down: my morning of 8:00 am is equivalent to 1:00 pm in NZ. When I had my mind clear of the time difference, the next thing to consider was the appropriate communication tool to conduct the supervisory meeting. Technically, China has no access to Google products, such as Facebook, Gmail, and Zoom, but the University of Waikato primarily uses Google products. My supervisors tried hard to get me in contact by installing and learning to use WeChat; however, it didn't work. We spent almost two weeks negotiating and figuring out which tools might be best for our communication. Finally, we solved the problem by downloading and installing software called VPN to assist me in establishing a connection using Facebook and Gmail. My first supervisory meeting happened between China and New Zealand after all the obstacles had been cleared.

Negotiating opportunities and ethical approval

Educational researchers face the conundrum of how to develop a study protocol that meets ethical and regulatory obligations to participants as required by the ethics committee while maintaining the flexibility to adapt the research to natural settings and circumstances (Birk & Shindledecker, 2020). This may be especially challenging for early PhD researchers who are collecting data independently for the first time in their home country with a physical detachment with their supervisory team (Gregory, 2003). As insider researchers, ethical norms of the researched context are so ubiquitous that one might be tempted to regard them as simple common sense with most people thinking of ethics as rules for distinguishing between right and wrong (Resnik, 2015). Moreover, it is timely for early researchers to recognise some common ethical norms but interpret, apply and balance them in different ways in light of their values and life experiences, especially within a tightly scheduled research plan. Therefore, data collection in the home country is a situational mediated activity (Birk & Shindledecker, 2020). There are tensions between compliance with ethical approval and further research opportunities 'at home'. My experience illustrates some of these tensions.

There was tension between two different approaches to ethics in the socio-cultural contexts of my doctoral study and my research study. Hence, communication and negotiations between different interested parties on the changing situations were imperative. In particular, educational research that involves working with teacher participants makes field work more situational when embedded in the specific background of the school (Sales & Folkman, 2000). I was doing designed-based workshop intervention research; in that sense, things might not always happen as planned. Plan B is likely to be needed at some point because of the nature of the designed intervention research. In the case of field work, where the student and the supervisors are geographically apart, it is the timely communication and decision making by the team that makes the best Plan B possible when any further research opportunities are appearing 'at home'. Therefore, whenever I was facing ethical decision making, communication with the supervisors was important. I will share two experiences derived from my journey of data collection in China to reveal a way of communicating with my supervisors. The reflective exchange of emails between me, as an insider, situated in my home country and my supervisors, as outsiders to the Chinese context, situated in New Zealand, illustrates negotiation between opportunities and the boundaries of ethical approval.

Case 1: Changes of the time

Before I went back to my home country, I developed my ethics protocol in terms of commencing time, procedures and participants. However, the educational research in the school is situational, and sometimes I had to change my time to fit the teachers' activities within the school management. For instance, my sixth workshop was rescheduled due to the changes in the teachers' plan. As I had emailed to my supervisors the day before, I would have had a workshop with teachers on that day. Due to the unexpected changes, I immediately informed my supervisors through the reflective report email as shown in the data below:

In the morning, there should have been a workshop conducted with teachers; however, the arrangement changed to fit with the teachers' schedule. The reasons for changing were that: 18th, 19th, 20th of June are the days of Zhongkao examination, which will make a difference on which high school students could apply to. It is a big event. Hence, it changed the original plan... (the researcher, email to supervisor)

I received feedback promptly from my supervisor that the changes were not an ethical decision, as it was still in the time range written in the ethics protocol. Further advice was added: "Although you cannot control everything, you do need to take notes on as much as you can, especially the reasons behind any changes and decisions made." In approaching engaging with choices, insider researchers need to be explicit about how they attend to experience, come to understanding, make judgements and make decisions as to what to do (Brannick & Coghlan, 2007). My supervisors understood that I am not in a position to be able to control everything. However, as a researcher, I believe that I must update the news to ensure the members know what is going on and keep a good rapport with my supervisory team.

After such emails, they knew of my changes and gave their views on these changes: "All sounds very positive." "You are doing good work." Through the changes in negotiation and frequent communication, I made sure that I had a good consensus over my plans with my supervisors and felt supported and motivated. This exchange gave me confidence and encouragement to conduct my research and stay on track of the research. Routinely, when any actions were made during the daytime related to research, I had a habit of sending a reflective report through email to my supervisors to inform them what was going on and get some suggestions for the next day's further actions. This habit benefited me a lot to keep myself on track, and also let them know where I was and where we were as a team. However, during data collection, sometimes a bigger change may happen due to the situation of the ongoing research. Case 2 in the next section elaborates upon another experience related to a change in the original data collection plan.

Case 2. Gathering evidence in the high school

My study aimed to facilitate students' thinking in problem-solving by using the researcher's predesigned framework. The research found that despite the fact that most of the teacher participants felt the ideas in my framework benefited them when they engaged in assisting students to solve a relatively complex problem, the students of Year 7 did not have enough complex problems to solve because of the learning aims at this level. Moreover, as the research school is a blended school with Years 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, my project and the professional learning in the workshops are known by Year 12 teachers. They showed great interest to learn more and try out the framework in their class. For the nature of learning, students of Year 12 are faced with preparation for the GaoKao examination, and they need to increase their ability in solving relatively complex problems timely and correctly.

Considering the diversity of cognitive development among different ages and levels, I found that there was a necessity to see what the perceptions of high school students were. I perceived the new research opportunities for gathering more evidence of the framework in facilitating students' thinking, and also of getting more valuable data on the teachers and students' talk when they used the framework. Nevertheless, there were tensions between the two different approaches to ethics in the socio-cultural context of my doctoral study in New Zealand and my data gathering in China. I was expected, by the teachers and the school principal, to conduct the workshop as soon as possible to meet the teachers' desires for new knowledge gained from my framework, and I wanted to use that opportunity to gather more evidence. However, this extension had not been in my original ethic protocol that was approved by the ethics committee. In particular, I was concerned and felt caught between compliance with ethical approval and further research opportunities 'at home'. I needed suggestions and support from my supervision team before making an ethical decision. Therefore, I sent my first round of emails to my supervisors:

... there is a big change here ... The reason for taking high school participants is that high school students are facing the examination of Gaokao, so they have more complex problem solving and it will be more helpful to them to use this framework to solve problems ... and also get more data for the research.... (Email, the researcher to supervisors after 5th workshop)

I was keen to take the opportunity to gather more data for my research. I got my feedback the next morning. My supervisors indicated that this was beyond the original ethics approval and if I included data from more teachers, I should have teachers' formal consent and also indicated that a memo of changes submitted to the Education Ethics committee of the university to be approved would be needed. After I got the recommendations from my supervisors, I realised that I could do it only if I could get my consent form signed by the high school teacher participants and a memo of changes sent to the ethics committee for approval.

... today, I met high school teachers and got their consent forms signed ... Provided a brief tutorial on the lesson plan about a Gaokao examination paper of 2019. We were discussing how to use the framework to analyse the paper so that a tool of thinking can be provided to the students ... they showed great interests on the framework... (Email, the researcher to supervisors, 2019.6.23, 4:44)

In the extract above, communication and reflection are critical to get and keep things on track. By reporting the actions to my supervisors, I got my reply back the next morning, as it was 11:00 am in New Zealand and 7:00 am in China. It suited me well to just get suggestions and materials they shared at the start of the day. It motivated and encouraged me to face up to the new challenges of the day.

Moreover, my supervisors also showed concerns on the overall size of the project resulting from adding new participants: "You have done so much work. The next stage will also be a challenge to conduct analysis processes with all the evidence you have." As a researcher, I was taking on the role to teach the teachers to think of their teaching, but I am a learner myself, so my supervisors were taking

on the role to remind me to think of my research consciously. To keep the team in a consensus and also to address their worries, in the reflective report of that day, I wrote to my supervisors:

... high school students are older than the secondary junior students and they are more mature ... thus, they are more likely to perceive the instructions from teachers in the talk. Moreover, after the class, high school students are more capable to show the changes to the researcher. It will help to get more useful and valuable data, rewardingly, it will provide the students with what they extremely need for the skills in problem-solving... (Email, the researcher to supervisors, 2019. 06.24. 07:52 Monday)

They added this advice: "...Remember your loyalty to the participants in your research. They are your experts. It is their experience, work and perceptions that matter to your study. You are not researching your abilities and success as a teacher of teachers", and my supervisors reiterated for me to "give them your best researcher self". My supervisors showed great concerns about my responsibilities and potential power that I might have to the teacher participants.

Hilsen (2006) also articulated that power and responsibility are unavoidable issues for those who intend to intervene in other people's lives. Ethical considerations should be made consistently to evaluate what we do and what we do not do as researchers. The back-and-forth emails worked well in my situation. My supervisors agreed and stood by my side by saying, "It sounds exciting for you" at the end to confirm the effort I made.

Discussion and recommendations

My experiences of data collection in my home country showed up tensions between compliance with ethical approval and further research opportunities 'at home'. There are a few tips for the new doctoral students who are going back to their home country for data collection or who need to communicate with their supervisory panel online.

Technological support

Contact with the supervisors is critical, and it is on top of any other issues as the starting point. The technological preparations to maintain communication include both hardware and software. The hardware is essentially about the devices used: it could be a smart cell phone, computer or iPad that can download and install the software. Besides, you would have to find a place or office that enables you to work in peace without being disturbed by others and equipped with a working desk and access to the internet. And then, for the software, it would be a wise action to talk with your supervisors before your departure to the home country, in terms of which software suits everyone in the team. There are exceptional situations in a country like China, that Google products are not accessible, hence there is a necessity to solve this problem first. For example, I used VPN to assist me to log in on Facebook and Gmail to make my supervisory meeting and daily reflective email happen.

Reflective report emails

Buber (1970) stated that dialogue for meaning-making only happens in a turn-taking talk between different parties; it is supposed to be mutual, open and equal. Such dialogue may provoke awareness and challenge team members' fundamental assumptions and help to theorise (Louis & Bartunek, 1992). Researchers as PhD students need dialogue to make the ongoing situation clear and transparent to themselves and to those with whom they are engaging in the inquiry team including supervisors. From supervisors' perspectives, they have a responsibility to provide advice on ethical considerations as well as practical aspects of post-graduate research (Rashid, 2020). This ranges from what they can do to ensure the research outcomes are of benefit and do not cause harm, what they do to protect the reputation of the university, and how to avoid adverse consequences for the researcher. In my case, as I have shared

above, the emailing of a researcher's diary or journal entries may serve such a function to keep the team on the right track. This was an efficient way to maintain regular communication with my supervisors. The daily exchange of reflective emails with your team informs them of your research activities and outcomes and opens the possibility for feedback and support. To report and reflect your journey is critical (Holian & Coghlan, 2013) and it may help supervisors provide guidance more specifically and wisely.

Negotiating expert knowledge

The supervisors know the context in which doctoral student is enrolled and the student researcher knows the context in which the research is to be conducted (MacIntosh et al., 2007). Therefore, the researcher and supervisors need to collaborate and communicate even more often than they were able to meet face to face. I maintained a set routine of fortnightly meetings and weekly exchange of emails with my supervisors during my stay in New Zealand. Contrastingly, when I went back to China, we communicated almost daily to keep each other informed of the ongoing situation. Besides, researchers need to attend to the experiences that provoke ethical challenges, be intelligent in how they understand what is going on and what is at stake, be reasonable in making judgements and understand and be responsible for the actions they take. In my case, I raised new opportunities for researching high school participants and faced challenges with cautious and efficient negotiation with my supervisors. Researchers who strive to be attentive, intelligent, reasonable and responsible can work in conjunction with academic supervisors to design and deliver successful, worthwhile, ethical research projects.

In summary

Lastly, based on my experience, I feel that timely communication with the supervisory panel is the key to successful data gathering from the home country while studying in New Zealand. For making the timely communication happen, preparations on the hardware like office, internet and software, like VPN, Facebook and Gmail, are needed first. When it comes to the part of negotiating tensions between opportunities and ethical approval in different socio-cultural contexts, evolving dialogic approaches are needed among different parties. Reflective report emails could be an effective and critical way of keeping rapport positive between supervisors and doctoral students and also was a system of timely updates to ensure successful data collection.

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