

# Teacher research as creative disruption

**Daniel Xerri** describes the importance and benefits of carrying out classroom research.

## Instituting disruption

For most of my teaching career, the term 'disruption' had negative connotations. When I was a student teacher, one of the foci of my PGCE course was classroom management, which is the process by which teachers minimise disruptive behaviour so that lessons go according to plan. Disruption in the classroom was one of the things that created a lot of stress for me as a novice teacher.

This is an experience shared by many educators and has long been reported in the research literature, from Dunham's (1977) study on the effects of disruptive

behaviour on teachers, to a study investigating how teachers' classroom management strategies are related to stress and student behaviour (Clunies-Ross *et al*, 2008). Despite the fact that many teachers of English are likely to associate 'disruption' with something negative, the term has taken on positive connotations in a number of disciplines and industries.

Clayton M. Christensen, the originator of the theory of disruptive innovation, considers disruption as a force for good. Disruption is defined as 'the process

by which an innovation transforms a market whose services or products are complicated and expensive into one where simplicity, convenience, accessibility, and affordability characterize the industry' (Christensen *et al*, 2008: 11). An example of a disruptive innovation in the field of technology would be the invention of the personal computer, while Netflix can be considered as having disrupted the movie rental sector. In *Disrupting Class*, Christensen *et al* (2008) argue that the use of digital technology in education can act as a disruptive innovation if



it were to customise every student's learning experience, something that is still not fully happening at present.

Waldman (2010) borrows the notion of disruption from Christensen's theory and combines it with Schumpeter's (1976) concept of creative destruction. In economics, creative destruction is the 'process of industrial mutation ... that incessantly revolutionizes the economic structure *from within*, incessantly destroying the old one, incessantly creating a new one' (p83). While disruptive innovation concerns the development of a new need, creative destruction has to do with the eradication of the existing order and the creation of a new one. Their combination leads to the idea of creative disruption, which describes how a particular field institutes disruption within itself so as to break flawed practices, identify where improvement and change are necessary, and facilitate future growth (Thurber, 2012; Waldman, 2010). Teacher research can act as an example of creative disruption because it diminishes language teachers' dependence on external researchers for evidence of what works best in the classroom, and constitutes a highly valid form of professional development.

### Benefits of teacher research

Traditionally, research is considered to be an activity conducted by academics and professional researchers. In the educational sector, this might consist of a researcher formulating a question to investigate and then collecting data from the classroom and from teachers and learners. The researcher would likely visit the learning context in order to collect the data and once that happens they would leave to analyse it and publish it in some form or another. The study would involve the participation of teachers and learners, but their level of participation would likely be limited to supplying the necessary data. Once the study is published they might get to learn about its findings and how these could impact their practices, but this very much depends on whether the researcher makes an effort to give

back to the learning community that would have supplied the data in the first place. This traditional model of classroom research is still very much the norm around the world; however, over the past few decades a different kind of classroom research has risen in popularity, mainly because teachers play a pivotal role in it.

**“Perhaps the main value of teacher research is that its impact is sometimes much more immediate than other kinds of classroom research.”**

Teacher research is defined as research conducted by practitioners in a systematic fashion in their own contexts for the purpose of better understanding their practices (Borg, 2013). Given that it enables them to be knowledge creators rather than mere consumers, teacher research is highly beneficial. It empowers language teachers by allowing them to investigate the questions they might have about their practices, context and learners. Rather than relying on external researchers to provide them with answers that might not always be relevant to their concerns, teachers can engage in research in order to produce answers to the most pressing questions they might have. By positioning themselves as researchers, teachers can cleave their dependence on that kind of classroom research that might at times disregard their ability to contribute to knowledge creation. This does not mean that teachers should stop engaging with the

research produced by academia, but in order for them to benefit as fully as possible from research they should also engage in it themselves.

Perhaps the main value of teacher research is that its impact is sometimes much more immediate than other kinds of classroom research. This is because it can lead to direct changes in the context in which it is conducted. Those teachers who research their classrooms can immediately utilise what they learn to make changes that will be of benefit to them and their learners. On the other hand, the effects of other kinds of classroom research might take longer to trickle down to the learning context because the researcher is not an active part of it.

Another reason why teacher research is important is that most often the educational research produced in academia is not made accessible to teachers since they lack the resources to read it and it might be packaged in such a way that it appeals to academics but not necessarily classroom practitioners. This is one of the factors behind some teachers' alienation from research. The chasm between research and practice might seem too wide to them and it leads them to renounce the potential value of learning from research. In the process, teachers might end up seeing themselves as being in binary opposition to researchers while limiting their conception of who is entitled to do research and who is most likely to profit from it. Perhaps the best way of bridging the gap between research and practice and underscoring the value of research for language teachers is by enabling them to engage in it.

By facilitating learning in practice, teacher research is also a highly potent form of professional development that practitioners can assume complete responsibility for. It 'encourages teachers to reflect on their practice, and therefore leads to potential change. It plays an important part in reflective teaching, where personal and professional development occur when teachers review their experience in a systematic way' (Field, 1997: 192).

By being grounded in practitioners' contexts and experiences and focusing on their practices and learners, teacher research might serve to develop their knowledge, skills and beliefs in a more effective manner than if they were to attend a one-off in-service training session delivered outside their school.

**In practice**

If teacher research is to act as a form of creative disruption it is essential for education to recognise its value and to facilitate it as much as possible. This would serve to disrupt the traditional model of classroom research by correcting the flawed practice of limiting research only to academics and professional researchers. In order to achieve this, however, teachers of English would need to be provided with the necessary support for them to conduct research within their own classrooms.

Support would first entail adequately developing teachers' research literacy so that they possess the knowledge and skills to do research, as well as suitable conceptions of what research consists of and of how they and their learners might benefit from it. In this way, teachers would be able to devise research questions based on what they are curious to learn more about, collect and analyse data in a systematic manner in order to answer their questions, write about their research,

and share its findings with learners, colleagues and the professional community (DeMott Painter, n.d.). They would also be able to critically interrogate their attitudes and beliefs in relation to teaching and learning, as well as engage in discussions about the connections between practice, theory and research.

Another level of support would be constituted by the recognition that language teachers are given as teacher-researchers. Research would need to be made part of teachers' job description and they would need to be provided with the time to engage in it and to disseminate its results. Schools would need to act as environments where research is acknowledged as being part of teachers' professional identity and a major contributor to a school's ethos and the learning of its community. If all of this were to be achieved, then teacher research would help to drive not only the growth of teachers, learners and schools but also of education more broadly.

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**Daniel Xerri** is a teacher educator at the University of Malta and the joint co-ordinator of the IATEFL Research SIG. He holds a PhD in Education from the University of York. Further details about his talks and publications can be found at: [www.danielxerri.com](http://www.danielxerri.com)

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