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Accidental ethnography: A method for practitioner-based education research

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Abstract

This article presents and discusses Accidental Ethnography (AccE), a methodology for practitioners to examine past experiences and contribute their findings to scholarly discourse. Accidental ethnography is the systematic analysis of prior fieldwork. It utilizes extant data "accidentally" gathered (i.e. the data were not collected as part of a predesigned study) to provide insight into a phenomenon, culture, or way of life. The accidental ethnography method—a nascent method in research literature—was developed to provide a means of in-depth exploration of past practitioner learning experiences beyond personal reflection. This article organizes, advances, and systematizes an accidental ethnography method for practitioner–researchers. We propose here a method that encompasses broader intentionality on the part of the researcher and a potentially unorthodox chronology of steps in the ethnographic research process. For practitioners in education, where much is learned through action and reflection, accidental ethnography offers a methodological approach for rigorous reflective research by front-line practitioners who have traditionally had difficulty finding time to make rigorous contributions to the discipline. This article introduces the methodological approach, elaborates the accidental ethnography research process, situates the method within action research methodology, and provides an example of an accidental ethnography project.

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The variety of methods used in educational research speaks to the multifaceted nature of the field. However, most methods are grounded in the same essential process—the design of future research. This article contributes to the development of a praxis-oriented methodology for practitioner-based research, which we have named Accidental Ethnography (AccE). AccE is a method in which practitioners who have become researchers utilize pre-existing data from their prior experience to explore important phenomena. AccE is a reflexive, reflective, and praxical method of inquiry in which the researcher examines data that were gathered from day-to-day processes in the workplace in order to share important findings and to provide insights into educational practice.

We argue that AccE provides a useful avenue for bridging research and practice (Fuji, 2015; Poulos, 2009). In this paper, we develop methods for practitioner-oriented research that utilizes extant data to bring as-of-yet underutilized and unexamined practitioner knowledge into educational research (Anderson & Herr, 1999; Bensimon, 2007; Zeichner, 2007). We see AccE as a methodological approach that builds on other types of naturalistic research in the interest of empowering practitioners to share the knowledge they have built in working with their respective communities of practice.

In this article, we define 'accidental' as post hoc practitioner data and experiences that can be used as research data not collected within a planned research study. The article is organized into five sections. (1) We first define AccE and highlight the uses of the method generally. (2) We then place AccE in the context of practitioner-oriented qualitative methodologies, and describe its contribution to increasing the scope of praxical, reflective, and reflexive methodologies. (3) Next, we outline the research process of AccE. (4) We then give a brief example of AccE. (5) Finally, we discuss the technical aspects of AccE including specifics on issues of human subject clearances.

AccE defined

AccE is the systematic study of past practitioner experience that includes the collection and analysis of extant data from the practitioner's organization (school, non-profit, or business) to serve an ethnographic purpose in reporting on an educational experience, culture, or innovation of significant merit and contribution to the field.

The deep and rich field-based experiences of practitioners remain an underutilized source of data that can contribute to innovation and organizational improvement (Bensimon, 2007; Zeichner, 2007). The vast and varied experiences of practitioners remain largely untapped and unable to contribute to the broader research

community because, in part, practitioners do not usually plan scholarly research while undertaking a new project. However, during their work, practitioners often discover important phenomena that could contribute to research knowledge and organizational improvement, if explored rigorously, reflectively, and praxically (Eady, Drew, & Smith, 2015). These data need refocused and methodologically rigorous methods to ensure trustworthiness of results, which is what we begin to develop here. For the most part, this approach is accomplished with a reorientation and recasting of traditional ethnographic strategies, which results in an altered approach to data collection. This reorienting and recasting of ethnographic methods results in an opportunity to utilize data that is collected as a normal part of organizational operating procedures in the field.

Some examples of extant data utilized by AccE include participant achievement scores, demographic data, organizational records, and other routinely collected data, in addition to the reflections, notes, and observations constructed by the researcher in cooperation with the organization. These data are not usually used for research purposes beyond the walls of the particular community or organization, which may use the data for internal improvements. This extant data use as well as method for collection contributes to the ''accidental'' nature of AccE.

Literature review

To demonstrate the efficacy and need for post hoc, accidental scholarly research, we build on and adapt current uses of accidental ethnography for practitioner-researchers, and pull from other applied fields, such as political science, communication studies, and healthcare (Fuji, 2015; Goepp, Johnson, & Maddow, 2008; Poulos, 2009). After we discuss past AccE methods, we briefly situate AccE within action research methods, other practitioner-focused methods, and ethnography. In this light, AccE reorients and recasts other methodological approaches because it explicitly focuses on past information and experience that was not collected as part of a pre-designed study and includes reflexivity and memory-work (Fraser & Michell, 2015; Onyx & Small, 2001) from the practitioner in cooperation with the community or organization.

Accidental ethnographies

Poulos's (2009) book *Accidental Ethnography* is the most thoroughly developed work on the subject. He approaches accidental ethnography as a *way of being*, rather than a particular method for writing and research. Unlike AccE, Poulos does not advocate for a particular methodology. Instead, he sees accidental ethnography as a process of being attuned to the possibilities of stories in one's life and utilizing those stories to find important meanings.

We approach AccE differently. We do utilize finding stories from one's life as a practitioner to be the baseline for AccE, especially the reflective attunement to the world that Poulos discusses. However, we see certain requirements incorporated

into the process of AccE to allow for quality assurance and trustworthiness of findings. The most important difference is that AccE is explicitly about past data from practitioner's work, data that were not intended originally as research data, and that the method is a reflexive and praxical process.

Fuji (2015) advances more specific methods for her version of accidental ethnography, which she sees as a compliment to the formal data collection process of planned research. She examines accidental ethnography as a method for researchers to better understand their context and social position in the field. Fuji defines her version of accidental ethnography as a way of "paying systematic attention to the unplanned moments that take place outside an interview, survey, or other structured methods" (p. 525). Her accidental methods are meant to assist the researcher in deepening and complementing their formally designed study. In contrast, AccE utilizes the accidental and happenstance findings of *past* researcher experiences to contribute to theory and practice, instead of a compliment to a more traditional research intention and method.

Finally, Goepp, Johnson, and Maddow (2008) utilized an accidental ethnography method in Kosovo during a nurse training session because of unforeseen occurrences that caused them to explore the roles of nurses during mass casualty events. The events prompted the authors to re-think curriculum design for nurse training to better meet the nurses learning needs. Utilizing their observations allowed Goepp and colleagues to develop more impactful and helpful curriculum for the nurses. Methodologically, the accidental data collection was limited to direct observation, but was supplemented by interviews.

Goepp et al.'s (2008) study is closer to the AccE methodology that we advance, as it highlights the value of accidental learning that can take place during practice and the value it could have for theory development and practitioner knowledge. The AccE approach allows for practitioners to capitalize on the unforeseen learning that happens in practice, but it adds specific data collection methods and analytical approaches that will provide more robust evidence about the learning that takes place in practice. It also extends the timeline of available data to past work.

Action research, ethnography, and practitioner methods

AccE is well suited to the philosophical underpinnings of Participatory Action Research (PAR) (e.g. Barnett, 2016; Kemmis & McTaggart, 2015; McIntyre, 2007) and Action Research (e.g. Bradbury, 2015; Hendricks, 2016; McNiff, 2013; Rahman, 2006; Stringer, 2013). It focuses on the co-development of questions; the meanings made in practice and reflection, and engaged scholarship as a means towards social justice. AccE is an expansion of temporal scope for a method of practitioner-based investigations into specific phenomena of learning and meaning making that contribute to theory and practice. AccE takes an historical approach to action research practice, and utilizes data that were not originally intended for research. Therefore, AccE expands on the terrain of PAR and action research because the researcher is a practitioner first, and then engages in research post hoc.

AccE is also distinct from methodologies such as Autoethnography (Anderson, 2006; Chang, 2008; Ellis, 2004) and Collaborative Ethnography (Campbell & Lassiter, 2010; Lassiter, 2005, 2008), although it shares many similarities with these methods. Autoethnography is one way to reflect upon lived experience to delve into life's patterns and meanings. However, this method does not explicitly provide methods for understanding the effect of an organization on others. AccE is focused on the learning of a group, community, or organization, and utilizes practitioner-researcher experience as just one part of the research process, relying on extant data from the organization to test memories and corroborate findings.

One already developed past-oriented methodology is secondary data analysis for either a case study or a quantitative analysis of longitudinal trends in education (Silverman, 2010). Usually, these secondary source data are utilized without the inclusion of the researcher as actor or instrument, which means that the analysis, while useful to the field, may lack the affective and subtle nuances of personal experience that ethnographic and autoethnographic methods provide. AccE incorporates both secondary source data analysis with autoethnographic methods.

Finally, AccE is distinct from other practitioner methods, such as Stories of Best Practices and methods that align with appreciative inquiry (Coghlan, Preskill, & Tzavaras Catsambas, 2003; Whitney, 2004) in that the focus of AccE is for practitioners to enter the scholarly realm as research authors, in an attempt to bridge theory and practice. This way practitioners can bring the findings forth themselves, through a process that gives credibility to their work. Furthermore, AccE is not only a story of "best practices" but can also offer cautionary tales or a discussion on the limits of best practices, theory, or research.

Method overview

AccE follows many hallmarks of robust ethnographic and action research including diverse data sources developed *in situ,* and the researcher as a reflective, interpretive instrument (Spindler, 2014). AccE is founded on the principle that important research is often "accidental"—but not anecdotal or journalistic. Simply because a research project did not begin with the usual prerequisites, the findings and lessons from deep, reflective, and systematic analysis of data can still be a legitimate, important contribution to knowledge for the organization, for other practitioners, and for theory.

AccE methodology addresses issues of quality and trustworthiness through its six practices. Although not prescriptive, the practices are meant to ensure AccE research contributes findings of merit. Quality is a point of debate in qualitative research (Feldman, 2007; Friedman & Rogers, 2009; Guba & Lincoln, 2005; Ravenek & Laliberte Rudman, 2013; Saldaña, 2012; Tracy, 2010). Based on the conditions of qualitative research quality end goals found in Tracy's (2010) work, we find that AccE practices align with the eight "big tent" criteria: "(a) worthy topic, (b) rich rigor, (c) sincerity, (d) credibility, (e) resonance, (f) significant contribution, (g) ethics, and (h) meaningful coherence." (p. 839). AccE is a method for

sharing practitioner contributions based on past experiences and practices, so AccE practices are designed to support practitioner-scholars with guidelines that will ensure scholarly rigor.

The six practices below outline the process of AccE. These practices are not necessarily sequential steps. However, certain techniques are needed to undertake AccE rigorously which provides trustworthiness and ensures quality (Merriam, 2014) in the researcher's interpretations and the broader contributions to the field.

(1) *Initiation:* AccE is typically initiated by a significant experience that sparks a connection between research learned by the practitioner and their experiences in the field, such as a workshop, returning to grad school, a conversation with a supervisor, or an experience at a conference. This is a Deweyan "unsettling moment" in which the normal flow of experience is disrupted, sparking a comparison between practice and theory. This is likely to include a close reading of literature, which precedes the reflection in the next step.

(2) *Reflection:* The initial Deweyan unsettling moment, along with reading, would spark a deep reflection on the practitioner-researcher's work experience. They may experience conscious-raising moments that foster deeper knowledge about their practice and wider issues within the field. Suggested foci for reflexivity are on power, positionality (Merriam et al., 2001), practitioner assumptions, and learning moments. During this reflection, writing is essential to more deeply understand the work. This reflection allows the researcher to uncover deep learning, the assumptions that one worked under, and the possible implications of their work.

(3) *Re-examination:* AccE work also re-examines disciplinary literature to find a space for the experiences that could enhance theory or practice, such as in Goepp et al. (2008). Sharing reflective experience along with empirical data is most valuable when situated in current discourses to contribute to theory testing or theory building. The reflective work is used to better understand and situate how one's past experiences fit, or do not fit, with current understandings.

(4) *Collect data:* Upon finding a particular focus, the accidental ethnographer would collect all possible extant data from the organization, including personal journal entries, for deeper analysis. These data must include pre-existing data, but may include additional new data collected as part of the project. The need for empirical data is a hallmark of AccE, which makes this method different from a reflective essay or journalistic memoir. Reflection upon past work experience is likely to be biased. To make the information deeper and more grounded, AccE incorporates data analysis and hypothesis testing. Examples of data and the ways that data are handled are included below in the example.

(5) *Coding:* Once the data are collected, it must be coded. AccE work is well suited to the use of emergent coding, relying on emic understandings of the culture and context of the practitioner-researcher. AccE research can also utilize a pre-determined coding scheme based on the researcher's reflective understanding of the organization. Coding allows for the researcher to test their experiential understanding and learn new information from their experience.

The organization's data can also be used to uncover new trends and themes to explore. Coding the external information allows the researcher to compare reflective material and make the findings more textured and rich. The final product synthesizes the results of the coding with one's reflections on experience to add depth to the research.

(6) *Recursive consultations:* Regularly loop the research and reflection back to practice. Co-create meaning with the practitioners on site so both the AccE researcher and practitioners can learn lessons from the AccE inquiry. This way, the findings can be brought directly into action. Also communicate with the organization to check the work and ensure that they will permit the publishing of your findings, in addition to providing feedback.

These practices demand reflection and continuous return to the research site in order to identify ways to improve practice. Without the return to practice, the work is less robust, but may still be enlightening and contributory to the field. Despite the similarity in the practices to some traditional ethnographic work, the AccE approach is different in that it does not start with an unanswered question motivated by curiosity—rather it begins with a set of extant data motivated by a desire to share an experience with researchers and practitioners.

An example of AccE

The section that follows is a step-by-step summary of an AccE project, drawn from practitioner experiences in Peru. Through exposure to educational scholarship and independent research the author underwent an initial educational disturbance (Dewey, 1997) upon return to graduate school. He recognized that there was very little literature that accurately discussed the complexity of on-the-ground work in education development as he had come to understand it. The author then deeply examined the potential to utilize the data and experiences that he had prior to coming to graduate school to contribute to scholarly debates. Often, the response of traditional researchers to any practitioner who wants to use "old" data is simply, "no." The data have to be pre-planned; one must go through a traditional rigorous process of proposing and clearly delineating all procedures for collecting and analyzing data prior to entry into the field. But this represents a loss to the field and does not create as true an experiential reflection.

Consequently, we worked to make the data of past experience relevant to future research and practice. We asked ourselves, "In what ways can past experiences and 'old' data, beyond mere descriptions of researcher identity in pre-planned interpretive qualitative studies, be analyzed to contribute to important debates in applied fields?" What follows is a step-by-step description of one AccE project.

(1) *Initiation:* Methodologically, Levitan spent four years in Peru providing educational access to female secondary-level students. (2) *Reflection:* He immersed himself in the literature throughout his MA graduate studies, and found that he had little or no time to write about his experience until he arrived at graduate

school for his PhD. (3) *Re-examination:* At this point, he re-engaged with the literature, focusing on schooling, success, and women's empowerment, as well as his own positionality, assumptions, and the issues of power inherent in his work (e.g. Doucet & Mauthner, 2006; Freire, 2000; Hesse-Biber, 2012; hooks, 2000; Hornberger, 2000; Spivak, 2006; Stromquist, 2001). (4). *Collect data:* As Levitan began to reflect on what he had learned and how to share it with a broader audience, he collected all possible extant data and organized it. (5) *Coding:* He then pulled the data together and performed a sort of hybrid document content analysis. He highlighted the relevant data, identifying emergent codes and areas that fitted with the emerging theory. He looked carefully at areas that disconfirmed his emerging theory and revised ideas accordingly. Essentially, he coded supporting evidence, new themes and counter evidence. This led to analysis of themes separately and comparatively to develop conclusions grounded in the data.

(6) *Recursive consultations:* During this process, he discussed his thoughts, data, and findings with colleagues at his old work site and his two faculty mentors to determine in what ways others' experiences and understandings of their work reflected or did not reflect his own. He shared evidence with his colleagues at the work site to collaboratively construct and understand the knowledge gained through the AccE practices. He discussed the extant data, such as field reports, enrollment data, needs assessments, interview and meeting notes, emails, and student surveys, with experiential data and compared his findings with their understandings. He then synthesized emergent trends and themes, utilized appropriate analytical frames, and is in the process of looping back the findings to the organization through return visits to the site each summer.

What follows is a small portion of Levitan's AccE write up:

July 23rd 2013, 8:00 am: After the two-hour hike to Silvia's[1] Father's house in Soccma, a rural community in the Peruvian Andes, I sit down to a breakfast of boiled potatoes, corn, and goat meat. Soccma is a Quechua (Indigenous) community high in the Andes Mountains, about 13,000 feet above sea level. The town buildings and houses are made of brown adobe brick. The houses sit close together where the lone dirt road up the mountain ends.

I visit Soccma for my work as the director of education and development at the Mountain Valley Project (MVP). MVP is a grassroots educational non-profit that offers access to secondary school (grades 7–11) for young Quechua women from rural communities who otherwise could not attend. Developed collaboratively with parents and other Quechua community leaders, MVP provides a safe residence, supplementary educational programming, nutritious meals, and school supplies for girls who live too far away from the one high school in the district to commute. The project began because the goddaughter of one of the project's co-founders wanted to continue her education after primary school, but could not because she lived 3 hours from the nearest secondary school.

As a grass-roots, community supported and directed project, MVP faced many obstacles for overcoming barriers to school success for the students. It also took some time to figure out what success was and looked like for the students and their

parents. After four years, MVP was able to co-create a definition of community success and found that specific multi-pronged supports were necessary to facilitate a learning environment where the students would be successful. We also found that these supports only worked when they connected with students' identities, and we learned collaborative and culturally grounded ways to generate them (see Levitan, 2015 for a discussion on the learning process). Although MVP was a collaborative community project with a lot of local support, there were aspects of culture and identity that none of us had realized would be important. For example, we learned together that even "basic" supports, such as a healthy diet and tutoring would not work if the supports were not grounded in affirming the students' deep and often implicit sense of identity.

This significant learning, which was mostly implicit, experiential, and practice-based, was uncovered upon the author's return to graduate school when he realized that there was little research discussing identity as a core element of the educative process, identity's fundamental importance for student wellbeing and academic success, and the process of integrating principles of identity responsiveness into a comprehensive educational setting—sparking a deeper look into the author's experience and the literature. This experience highlights practices 1, 2, 3, and 4 in the AccE process. What follows is the learning trajectory that the authors uncovered through reflective practices and collecting past data from the worksite.

Although the first barrier to overcome school access is distance, once students are able to enroll in school there are more barriers to success. We found that when girls from rural Quechua communities entered secondary school, they faced cultural barriers to social and academic achievement, such as bias from teachers about their intelligence, bigotry from peers, and a machista culture that devalues women's contributions (Creighton & Park, 2010). Through our regular discussion with the students we discovered that these factors inhibited their wellbeing and success.

Literature on feminist approaches to education (Doucet & Mauthner, 2006; hooks, 2000), critical approaches to education (Freire, 2000), and progressive approaches to education (Dewey, 1997) brought out important themes and highlighted the issues MVP students faced—practice 3 of the AccE method. The initial experience and memory of the project's events sparked data collection of past notes, meeting minutes, and staff reports, which were then coded to highlight significant themes.

Staff observed that students had a difficult time concentrating. The students were diligent with their chores and polite with each other and adults, but when it came time to work on a challenging problem, five out of the six of them had a difficult time completing the task. Instead of acting out, however, they would stare at the page and then offer a guess. One student said it was like things got all blurry when she went to do math problems. At the end of the first year of the project, all of the students were failing almost every class, despite being bright, respectful, and motivated students who had extensive skills and knowledge outside of the school context. As one student said, the information that the teacher tells her "does not go into my head."

We found that students' primary schools did not prepare them for secondary school. The one-room, multi-grade schools that students in rural communities attend are usually taught in Quechua, while secondary school is taught in Spanish, for example. Also, many of the students would only be in school for a few hours a day because they would need to go herd animals or take care of younger siblings.

Because of the many barriers to access and success, approximately one-third of girls from rural communities drop out of secondary school by the time they are 15 nationally (CEPAL, 2015). It is likely that the percentage is higher for rural Quechua students based on the barriers they face. For example, 50% of MVP's first cohort left school after two years because they were frustrated. As we reflected and talked with students and parents about their difficulties and successes, MVP learned how to address the issues. As of 2015, our students were at a 95% retention rate. To facilitate academic and community defined success, and to overcome the many barriers students face, we found that a multi-pronged approach that supports students' physical, emotional, and intellectual wellbeing and is grounded in students' identities works best.

Interventions we attempted in isolation, such as extra tutoring, social justice workshops, improved nutrition, socio-emotional support, and learning workshops were not successful. However, with the interventions integrated into a holistic program grounded in students' identities, the students have reported feeling more comfortable in school and have found greater success. For example, the third cohort, who started school in 2012, has been able to quickly transition to their new social environment and parents and students report that they feel more successful. In 2014, all but one student was passing every class.

One of the most important findings that the team at MVP learned during the AccE investigation was the importance of identity and the ways in which healthy identity development supports better learning. One of the many challenges in adolescence is to figure out who one is, or what identities an adolescent wants to take on, and they need to negotiate the identities imposed on them from society as they enter adulthood (Butler, 2011; Dubois, 2007; Stets, 2005; Stets & Burke, 2014).

Upon arriving in a new town where they will live and go to school, the students' familiar web of relations and identities in their rural community is disrupted. The students now have access to different friends, different cultural understandings, and different ways-of-being, which can be a daunting experience. As most people who have moved to a new place can attest to, it takes some time to navigate how to "fit in" and "become yourself" with new friends and social norms. The students in the project also carry with them their communities' histories of marginalization and face extant bigotry against the communities from which they come, so they face an added level of stress and identity questioning (Dubois, 2007). The students brought this issue to light by talking about problems with new friends and their new teachers, as well as questioning who they wanted to be—focusing on their community and background.

Research has shown close emotional attachment to identities (Stets, 2005; Stets & Burke, 2014), and that self-confidence is tied to certain identities, which is affected if one's salient identities are being devalued in a new context. The implicit messages in school and in the media—media the students have access to for the first time—tell the students that they should change to be more like others. Understandably, during times of conversation about the project, the students expressed that they did not wish to be more like others; they wished to be themselves. They expressed this idea by focusing their out of school time on their own communities and traditions, while passively ignoring talk about subjects that represented the ''outside''. To address issues of identity devaluation from the school and larger society, the staff began to valorize the students' identities and ground the educational programming on a strength-based paradigm in the students' community norms.

Through the recurring, reflexive process of speaking with staff and students in the AccE method, we learned that when the students enter a school that is not geared toward their knowledge and understanding they suffer academically and emotionally, and we learned ways to respond. For example, the staff and teachers at the dormitory worked to provide a counter-narrative to the implicit devaluation of the students' identities within the school through working with students to feel strong and proud of their backgrounds and communities, while also providing a secure space for the students to explore new identities. Certain activities were especially helpful. For example, students were asked to be teachers for important lessons in which they had expertise. MVP would facilitate ''tours'' of the students' home communities; each student would volunteer to be a tour-guide (being a tour-guide was a well-respected profession in the area, due its proximity to Machu Picchu) of their community and point out the great things about it. We would also validate the students' rural identities and indigenous knowledges by unveiling our ignorance of many topics and show our sincere curiosity and respect for the students' knowledge, like plant identification, the different uses of edible herbs, and community traditions.

We found that students' identity development was healthier when we began discussing intercultural understandings, place, and community as well (Davies, 2006; Kim, 2012; Tisdell, 2006). When the community grounded programming was in place, and students' identities were supported and valorized, we found that the students would in turn be more open and interested in learning about different communities, as this type of conversation seemed to no longer represent a threat to their identities. They would ask more questions and be more engaged in understanding what other places were like.

We found that these practices also supported the girls' academic learning, as passing grades, self-reports, and the reports from parents, teachers, and staff all improved. Although there are challenges each year, and MVP is still learning how to address student learning, we are making great strides through co-construction of an identity valorization approach. The ideas and practices that allowed for a significant turnaround developed implicitly, through dialogue,

thoughtful trial and error, and reflection upon experience (Dewey, 1997; Freire, 2000; hooks, 2000).

For the author, becoming aware of these issues also took a significant amount of critical reflective and reflexive work on his own theoretical assumptions about culture, identity, and oppression. He arrived in Peru with nascent feminist, critical, and postcolonial assumptions (e.g. Freire, 2000; hooks, 2000; Spivak, 2006), but soon had to amend and remove some of those ideas to have a more grounded understanding of the intersubjective reality within the context of the Peruvian highlands. He performed this work through deep introspection and dialogue with parents, students, and staff.

Upon the completion of the AccE investigation, Levitan returned to the site and discussed the findings and explicitly integrating the identity work more fully into other activities, as the identity validation had been occurring implicitly through the caring approach of the MVP staff. Upon return to the work site, the discussion of findings was also member-checked. The students said that they like the more explicit emphasis on their culture and personal identities. This is an example of practice 6 of the AccE method.

The methods for AccE developed, then, accidentally. We expanded upon and refined the methods above for further discussion, debate, and development. We believe that this method presents opportunities for practitioners who become researchers to contribute to the discipline. There are, however, practical issues and challenges inherent in this approach.

Practical considerations

Because of its emphasis on using prior experiences and data accumulated outside the traditional research trajectory, AccE presents certain unique opportunities and challenges as a research method. This section highlights the opportunities provided through AccE, as well as the challenges that practitioner-researchers may face when utilizing this technique.

Opportunities

AccE can be deeply in-depth and offer personal and unfiltered information for the field. Because it is based on practitioner experience over time, it contains a longitudinal component that is particularly well-suited to ethnography and too often missing in traditional research where long-term engagement can be difficult. The data collected for AccE are also practice-based, as it contains external artifacts, notes, statistics, and reports that are grounded through the personal connection between researcher and data. The personal context is also supplemented with external data, creating robust reciprocal evidence with a high degree of applicability to the practice setting. Because there is no pre-designed question, the AccE method can expose new, grounded, and unexpected findings.

Additionally, this method provides opportunities for a practitioner who has done work in the service of others without a pre-determined research agenda to contribute to larger debates. The work of the practitioner is valuable in and of itself, but the reflective process of AccE can bolster thoughtful, reflective research that critically analyzes the practitioner's work. Sharing the findings, both positive and negative, that are lived and that are supported by data offers the organization helpful feedback. The opportunities facilitated through AccE benefit both the discipline and the organization.

Challenges

While these opportunities demonstrate the potential of AccE, there are also considerable challenges to this approach. The opportunities for a practitioner's experience to create meaningful research are not necessarily common. Merely existing as a practitioner does not qualify someone to conduct AccE. Rather a careful and complete reading of a literature, establishment of a theoretical framework, deep reflexive thinking, and an understanding of qualitative methods, either through reading or engagement with a research mentor, facilitates high quality AccE work.

AccE is a research method that requires sensitivity and delicacy. One of the reasons many scholars say that past work should not be researched is that there are ethical and bias issues, the researcher is "too close" to the data. For example, organizations may be hesitant to have their data shared, and this must be respected unless there is a compelling, ethical need to share.

The interpersonal relationships and the ties to the organization can also make research bias a pitfall. This is why we have included the necessity for deep reflection. Without deep reflection on positionality, lens, and potential bias, AccE research is not robust. The Accidental Ethnographer must look as carefully at themselves as the data. This means interrogating one's self, one's motivations, one's power dynamics, perceptions of power, and listening to one's emotional responses when reflecting upon past work.

Another challenge is that the data are messy. There is little form to the data an Accidental Ethnographer gathers. Unlike systematic data gathering in traditional research, determining what constitutes useful data may be difficult, and it may require a significant amount of time to wade through old documents to find valuable pieces of information. Some of this can be mitigated by the personal knowledge of the data that the researcher collects. However, rigorous ethnographers will go over as much data as is feasible to find evidence and counter evidence. Also, because of the lack of planning and preparation for the study, important data may have been lost.

There are ethical concerns for which the accidental ethnographer must be accountable. The first and most important ethical consideration is whether the research will harm anyone or expose individuals to significant risk. Naturally, AccE must find ways to align with the human subjects protections that are necessary for all research projects. There may be times when AccE is inappropriate

because it threatens to do harm. There is also the question of trust, and ensuring that the practitioner colleagues understand that the data will be used with discretion and confidentiality.

Perhaps most importantly, the colleagues need to know that the AccE project is something that will be beneficial for practitioners in the organization and beyond—there is a real and significant benefit to AccE research if handled properly.

IRB clearances

It is imperative to discuss with your institution's review board (IRB) what you are doing. The technical term for the data you analyze is secondary source data, but there are specific considerations as to confidentiality and Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) protections that you must discuss with an expert. Below we outline some recommendations to facilitate the alignment of AccE research with IRB.

Gaining IRB approval for AccE presents specific difficulties because it does not utilize the expected timeline for systematic research. Formally, AccE uses secondary source data, since another institution gathered the information for purposes other than research. This means that coordination with the cooperating research site is essential, beginning with a letter of agreement from the field site.

Although the data pull from secondary sources, it is not likely to be IRB exempt, as the data likely have identifying information and involve human subjects. To facilitate the IRB process, it may be necessary to remove identifying information, especially from anything that could be seen as confidential FERPA information. If you include video, audio, or photographs as data for your analysis, which is often helpful, this is identifiable information and will require IRB review. Generally, identifying information, such as names spoken on audio recordings and videos (for example, if there was a school play that was video-taped) can be handled with a waiver of consent as long as it has minimal risk to participants. The information that one gathers in AccE typically has low risk, but it still requires clearance to ensure that human subjects are handled properly.

Conclusion

This article has introduced AccE and argued for the viability and usefulness of this approach to qualitative research. We have also argued that this is a different method for reflective, past-oriented interpretive research. We presented an example and overview of AccE research to demonstrate its potential, and the processes for undertaking AccE projects. In the future, this theory needs to be more fully explicated, linked to related work, grounded directly in existing methodological underpinnings, and exemplified with cases of its use to bring the theory into sharper focus and to create an intuitive and useful methodological form.

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