

Title: "Notepad is NOT bad: Employing Yahoo! Notepad as an online research diary in educational enquiry based on a PhD study"

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By

Mahmoud Mohammad Sayed Abdallah

Assistant lecturer of Curriculum & TESOL/TEFL Methodology at Assiut University College of Education, Assiut, Egypt, and PhD student at the Graduate School of Education, College of Social Sciences and International Studies, University of Exeter, Devon, England, UK.

Homepage: <http://mabdallah.bravehost.com/>

E-mail: msayed40@yahoo.com

mms203@exeter.ac.uk

Abstract: *Reflective tools have been gaining ground in educational research. Diaries, especially electronic ones, can be effective in enabling researchers to organise and reflect upon their research. Online diaries are flexible Web-based facilities since the recording process can be conducted quickly and smoothly. Here, I report on using Yahoo! Notepad as an online diary in my PhD study. This facility was kept right from the start to record all significant events and updates (e.g., contacts, resources, reminders, must-do tasks, notes, comments, procedures, scripts, and essential readings). This practice organised the research process by enabling me to: (1) organise work into relevant folders based on topic; (2) monitor my progress by, for example, reviewing the tasks I have accomplished, and the tasks remaining ahead; (3) save useful readings and textual resources for future reference on a regular basis; (4) create some preliminary drafts of the ideas I should tackle, and update these drafts when something new comes to my mind; and (5) create reminders to be reviewed on a weekly basis so that nothing is missed or*

forgotten. Some examples and illustrations are provided to help other researchers to understand the utility of this free online tool.

Reflective tools have been gaining ground in social research in general and educational enquiry in particular. Diaries in particular are sometimes effective as they enable researchers to organise and reflect upon the research process. Computer and Web-based facilities have produced electronic diaries as tools which are more flexible than traditional paper-based ones. Here, I report on using Yahoo! Notepad as an online (Web-based) diary in my PhD study that was kept right from the start of the research process to record all significant events and updates (e.g., contacts, resources, reminders, must-do tasks, notes, comments, procedures, scripts, and essential readings). This practice organised the research process for me by making me able to: (1) organise my whole work within relevant folders based on topic; (2) monitor my progress by, for example, reviewing the tasks I have accomplished, and the tasks remaining ahead; (3) save useful readings and textual resources to refer back to them on a regular basis; (4) create some preliminary drafts of the ideas I should tackle, and update these drafts when something new comes to my mind; and (5) create reminders to be reviewed on a weekly basis so that nothing is missed or forgotten.

It sounds important to me here to provide a brief description of my current PhD study in which using Yahoo! Notepad played a vital role. My study is titled: Web-based new literacies and EFL curriculum design in teacher education: A design study for expanding EFL student teachers'

language-related literacy practices in an Egyptian pre-service teacher education programme.

With the dominance of the Web in education and English language learning, new literacies have emerged. These literacies need to be integrated into the Egyptian pre-service EFL teacher education programmes so that EFL student teachers can cope with the new reality of language teaching/learning. Therefore, the main objective of the present study is to develop a theoretical understanding of the interchangeable relationship between new literacies and TESOL that involves an investigation into the possibility of expanding Egyptian pre-service EFL student teachers' language-related literacy practices by integrating some Web-based new literacies into their education programme, with specific reference to the context of Assiut University College of Education (AUCOE), Assiut, Egypt, in which I work (http://www.aun.edu.eg/faculty_education/).

This requires accomplishing minor objectives represented in: (1) identifying the range of those Web-based new literacies that Egyptian EFL student teachers need in this ICT-dominated age; (2) identifying those Web-based facilities beneficial to them, and why and how they can be beneficial; and (3) generating a design framework that includes some design principles based on both literature and empirical data, which should have some implications for EFL curriculum design in teacher education.

To accomplish this, a design-based research (DBR) methodology drawing on a pragmatic epistemology is employed as the main research paradigm informing this design study. This involves a flexible three-stage research framework as a research design: (1) the preliminary phase, which acts as a theoretical and empirical foundation for the whole study, and informs a preliminary design framework; it involves reviewing relevant literature and obtaining empirical data through documentary analysis (100 documents), online questionnaire (n=50), and semi-structured interviews (n=19); (2) the prototyping phase that involves two iterations (36 participants in the first iteration, and 30 in the second) conducted in the Egyptian context to test the proposed design framework. Each iteration acts as a micro-cycle of the whole design study, and thus involves its own objectives, learning design, research methodology and procedures (in line with the main DBR methodology), and results; (3) the assessment/reflective phase which, based on the prototyping phase results, presents a final design framework for expanding EFL student teachers' language-related literacy practices. This involves implications for the EFL curriculum design process within the Egyptian context in general, and AUCOE in particular.

Results indicate that throughout the two iterations, it has become evident that the process of expanding EFL student teachers' language-related literacy practices by integrating some Web-based new literacies into the AUCOE pre-service programme is quite feasible once some design principles are considered. Some significant conclusions and educational implications are provided, along with some main contributions to knowledge in TESOL/TEFL, language-learning theory,

research methodology, and educational practice as far as the Egyptian context of pre-service EFL teacher education is concerned.

From this brief summary, it might be clear that the task is not easy; the study includes many aspects and dimensions that need a flexible tool to manage work throughout the three main phases of the project. Thus, in the preliminary phase, for example, I had to conduct a comprehensive literature review on both methodology and main terms such as *literacy*, *Web-based new literacies*, and *Web-based facilities*, and *design-based research*. Since design-based research is an emerging paradigm in educational enquiry, I had to review a vast amount of books, articles, and previous studies employing it. Moreover, I had to consult main figures in the field on the appropriate format of design-based research that should fit in with my research purposes. These tasks needed an online tool to organise my ideas so as not to lose focus throughout my research journey. It is very likely that any researcher who investigates a new and complicated topic like this will be easily distracted between different ideas, approaches, and accounts. The main advantage of my online diary thus was to hold everything in one place for me so as to easily compare and contrast ideas, and develop my personal appreciation or approach based on a developmental, iterative, and dialogic process.

My intention here is to provide some examples and illustrations to help other educational researchers to understand the utility of this free online tool and think of using it to manage their own research projects. This does not mean that I intend to force a specific standard format of

how to employ this online diary to be used by all researchers in the same way. Instead, I am going to give these examples and illustrations with the aim of inspiring other researchers who might think of more innovative ways to employ this useful tool in ways that suit their own purposes and research objectives.

At the beginning of my research journey, I needed something online to organise the whole research process and to act as a single place to check regularly. This idea was reinforced by my supervisor who perceived this as an innovation that would help me so much, especially because I do not like to use traditional paper-based notes for recording research updates.

For organisational purposes, I divided the diary into some sub-folders that represented and covered the fundamental research aspects corresponding to the main research topic (e.g., literature review, research problem, research paradigm, research framework, data collection methods, and research procedures). Each folder included many notes relevant to the main title of this folder; each note detailed a specific element or event (e.g., latest updates from supervisors, conclusions of certain e-mail contacts related to specific topics, parts to be included in certain chapters, and reminders of important things to do at certain points of time in the future). The flexible nature of the notepad as an online diary allowed for easily adding notes under any folder, and also updating and deleting these notes at anytime. What distinguished this diary was that notes could be easily added, moved, deleted, and updated, and so was the case with the root folders. Hence,

it was a flexible and helpful online tool that was regularly checked on a weekly basis to remind me of the essential tasks to do. This way, it helped with time management and keeping a record of the research procedures followed so far right from the start of the research work. Being online or Web-based was a significant advantage of this diary; it was accessible from any place at anytime, and thus the recording process could be conducted quickly and smoothly.

The organisational facilities enabled by Yahoo! Notepad helped me to keep an online diary in an ideal, flexible format. This played an extremely important role in organising and managing the whole research process. For example, I kept a weekly reminder using the Yahoo! Calendar to remind me to review my research diary on a weekly basis, sometimes including the title of the following note to start with. This research diary included memos, reminders, readings to be done, future tasks, supervision notes to address, and new studies to include in the literature review section. The technology made the diary feasible as it was possible to: divide the diary notes into folders; copy the same note into multiple folders; update notes so that they move to the top; and delete or reduce other notes.

Moreover, the complicated nature of my PhD topic that addresses many educational, methodological, linguistic, and technological aspects required creating such a flexible tool. It was quite easy and manageable to navigate through my online notepad to locate something using the 'search notes' facility enabled by Yahoo! Notepad (for more on this, please visit: <http://info.yahoo.com/privacy/uk/yahoo/notepad/>). It was

also possible to create many folders whose titles reflected the particular aspect of research that certain notes would fit into. Thus, I created the following folders:

1. PhD related issues;
2. PhD-approaches to literacy;
3. PhD-data analysis;
4. PhD-definitions;
5. PhD-educational implications;
6. PhD-interventions;
7. PhD-literacy approaches and new literacies;
8. PhD-literature review;
9. PhD-new literacy practices;
10. PhD-previous studies;
11. PhD-rationale;
12. PhD-reminder;
13. PhD-research diary;
14. PhD-research methodology;
15. PhD-supervision;
16. PhD-theoretical framework;
17. PhD-thesis-writing-up
18. PhD-tools-online questionnaire;
19. PhD-tools-open and semi-structured interviews;
20. PhD-Web/Internet and Web-based learning.

Because these folders existed along with other folders already in the notepad and which were not relevant to my PhD study, I intended to

add *PhD* as an initial part or prefix in each folder's name. This way, all PhD folders were grouped together based on alphabetical order.

This online diary helped so much with *reflective* learning during the research process. In other words, I could reflect on what I was doing and improve myself each time I checked my diary. In particular, this diary helped me to:

1. Establish relationships between old stuff and new stuff, and compare between many aspects and dimensions in a dialogic fashion;
2. Determine those aspects in my research work that needed to be improved, and how they could be improved;
3. Understand the educational aspects and concepts I was dealing with, and create clear-cut divisions between them so as to distinguish them;
4. Identify those obstacles that were hindering or interfering with my learning;
5. Record relevant arguments and pieces made by educationalists and researchers in the field to come out with my personal appreciation and critical analysis while I was reviewing literature;
6. Modify my already existing arguments based on new developments, events, and updates through using the 'update note' facility enabled by Yahoo! Notepad;
7. Create my personal educational database that I could access from anywhere at anytime and which I can easily print out if required;
8. Share online with my supervisors certain aspects that we had to work on together;

9. Construct online research tools making use of many ideas and resources that could be saved as notes in the relevant folders.

Throughout the different stages of the research process, this notepad was extremely beneficial; in the prototyping stage, for example, it helped with organising the interventions I used with EFL student teachers in Egypt. Also, it helped with keeping an online version of the participants' feedback reports which were analysed to be used in improving any subsequent designs. In addition, participants were guided into how to use this tool themselves to reflect on their own learning. In their feedback reports, they indicated that how Yahoo! Notepad was effective as an alternative to Word processing applications. They felt that everything was saved for them online with no need to restrict themselves to a certain computer which might crash at any time.

During the data analysis process, this facility was effective as well; through it, I could organise and re-organise my data and transfer them between the notepad and other applications (e.g., Microsoft Word and NVivo). This helped so much with the qualitative data analysis I conducted many times throughout this stage.

Finally, I would like to invite any educational researchers who are planning to initiate their research projects to think about using this tool: It is always a good idea to refer back to one place that holds and connects everything for you whenever you are stuck or whenever you need guidelines. Moreover, you will definitely feel better about yourself if you write your personal notes. Any research project is assumed to be

peculiar. Part of this peculiarity, in my reckoning, is to keep your personal reflections throughout the whole research process within a flexible tool. Of course I strongly recommend using other tools along with this diary, especially as far as backing-up your data is concerned. But try to allocate one place to refer to on a regular basis in order to carry on with your research process. The research process is assumed to be a spiral, dialogic, and iterative endeavour, not a direct, linear one. Therefore, such reflective tools will organise things for you and encourage you to reflect more on what you are doing. There is no reason why one should delay writing personal accounts that describe what s/he is doing to a later stage in the research process; this should be done right from the start. Never assume that you should not write unless you are 100% confident of what you are doing. The research process is a developmental thing by nature, and the more you write, re-write, draft, and re-draft, the better the consequences will be.