

DEVELOPING MY IDENTITY AS A RESEARCH EDUCATOR:
A JOURNEY OF SELF-REFLEXIVITY

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Abstract

The notion that teachers should incorporate research into their own craft has gained traction over the past decade, becoming an increasing imperative. In the case of Colombia, for example, preservice education programs have incorporated research methods classes to their curricula along with the writing of a research paper for their senior thesis in addition to the traditional student teaching experience.

Amid all this push to increase the research knowledge base of prospective teachers, an element of discussion remains amiss: what it means to prepare said teachers to become researchers. This issue is, for the most part, uncharted territory in the literature. Who gets to become a “research educator,” a term I have begun to use recently (Mora, 2014), still remains quite hazy. Should research educators be faculty members with PhDs? Should they be master researchers, according to national or international guidelines? What levels of professional development should we demand of these educators?

Those are questions that are currently surrounding my own practice, shortly after finishing my doctorate at a “Research I” University in the United States in 2010. Specifically, this paper will zero in on my work as a research educator between 2011 and 2014, the time I was an Assistant Professor at my home university. I will share some of the issues I have encountered in the research education of three groups of students: (a) my students at the Student Research Group on Second Languages, where they are learning to do research within the field of second language literacies; (b) my graduate student at the Graduate Specialization in ELT and (c) my own master’s advisees at the MA in Learning and Teaching Processes in Second Languages.

This paper is grounded in three main ideas: (a) self-reflexivity, drawing from the initial understanding of reflexivity (Archer, 2007; Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992; Mora,

2011, 2012) as reflection with social and scientific foundations that leads to social change (Mora, 2014), but specifically framed in teacher education (Clift, 2009; Zeichner, 2006); (b) Self-Study of Teacher Education Practices (S-STEP, Bullough & Pinnegar, 2001; Loughran, 2007; Pinnegar & Hamilton, 2009), a research approach highly favored by teacher educators in the U.S. and Australia as a rigorous way to understand the evolution of personal practice over time; and (c) Auto-ethnography (Anderson, 2006; Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011; Muncey, 2005; Wall, 2006), as a methodology that values personal experience as build-up for larger research endeavors.

This topic is increasingly relevant, in particular in Latin America, as I explore the different negotiations and transitions in which U.S.-trained doctoral graduates must engage to actively participate in the new teacher education realities of our home countries. This paper will also make recommendations for “Research I” institutions to help their international graduates in education and linguistics programs in the almost inevitable transition from their school classrooms to teacher education programs.

Colombia in flux: A push for more research...

and questions about “who bells the cat”

In the last decade, three events show how research in Colombian education has become more essential in teachers' practice. First, pre-service teacher education programs now feature a stronger research component, with more research methods courses and a senior thesis requirement. In addition, universities have created more student research labs (*semilleros de investigación*, Quintero-Corzo, Munévar-Molina, & Munévar-Quintero, 2008), research units devoted to training undergraduate (and sometimes master's) students as they learn to conduct research.

The second front features the growth of master's and doctoral programs. Pressed with the current realities that advanced education remains lower than in other parts of Latin America (Revista Semana, April 13, 2014), graduate programs have increased, especially in education, in the past five years. This growth shows the interest in educating new cadres of researchers who might lead policy and educational reform and rethink research in our country.

Finally, there are more efforts to demystify the traditionally “esoteric” (Mora, 2012b) view of research. There is more interest in educating teacher-researchers (*maestros-investigadores*) who engage in applied research that can help make a difference in actual practice. These efforts also include professional development, more academic publications, and professional conferences in educational, pedagogical, and formative research.

Nevertheless, the matter of *who* becomes a “research educator,” a term I have recently coined (Mora, 2014c), remains hazy. When I talk about research educator I am talking about academics in teacher education programs who are also in charge of helping students learn to do research, as opposed to the aforementioned teacher-researchers. We

know very little about how and where these research educators learned their craft or who should lead this responsibility. Education programs usually default this task to willing faculty, yet we may not even know if these master teachers are actually doing research. Sometimes programs ask faculty with doctoral degrees to teach these research courses, since research is at the core of doctoral preparation anyway. However, there is a very big difference between being formally trained to *do* research and another to be trained to *educate* researchers.

I encountered these issues upon returning to Colombia in 2010. I had finished my Ph.D. at a “Research I” university (Research I refers to a US classification of institutions mostly devoted to research rather than teaching). My background featured a specialization on qualitative research, my experience as a research assistant on two federal grants, and my dissertation. With that, I embarked on what is now a five-year “journey of self-reflexivity” to rethink how to educate researchers in tertiary education (World Bank, 1994) cycle. This paper, then, is the outcome of this journey and the lessons I have learned about qualitative research, research education and my own teaching. I want to share my reflexivity (Mora, 2011, 2012a, 2014e) about what being a researcher means in light of mentoring students about the art of doing research. This paper will discuss my lessons about what research educators should know as they work with novice researchers, as a way to help pre-service and graduate programs in education be more strategic to make research more meaningful for our future teachers. This paper will also discuss doctoral programs’ social responsibility to help future Ph.D.’s be better research educators, especially those who return home or work in different research cultures from those at “Research I” institutions.

Toward a Self-Reflexivity of Research Education Practices

In the process of looking back at one's practice over time, there is always a potential pitfall: To leave the experience as nothing but a contemplation or "navel-gazing" exercise. It is here where a solid conceptual foundation provides key elements that move what may start as that contemplation into a truly transformative (Kumaravadivelu, 2003) exercise. What I propose, then, is a process of *self-reflexivity on research education practices*, or S-RREP . To frame this, I will rely on three specific constructs: (a) the notion of reflexivity (Archer, 2007; Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992) and my own expansion of the idea (Mora, 2011, 2012a, 2014e) (b) Self-Study of Teacher Education Practices (S-STEP, Bullough & Pinnegar, 2001; Loughran, 2007; Pinnegar & Hamilton, 2009), and (c) Auto-ethnography (Anderson, 2006; Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011). I will briefly explain each of the concepts as a prelude to a working definition for S-RREP (the acronym I have proposed for this framework).

Reflexivity. The notion of reflexivity (Archer, 2007), is mostly inspired by the ideas of French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). One important consideration when defining reflexivity is not to equate it with reflection. Although there is reflection in a reflexivity exercise, the latter always goes beyond "an individual act of introspection or a collective exercise within a closed group" (Mora, 2011, p. 5). In fact, reflexivity, whether as a personal or collective endeavor, is always social (Archer, 2007; Schirato & Webb, 2002) and scientific (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). In addition, reflexivity must always lead to a change in the practices (Bourdieu, 1990, Mora, 2014e). In my own research (Mora, 2011) and proposals for education (Mora, 2012a), I have used reflexivity (Mora, 2014e) to ground my ideas on the need to deeply understand one's reality, contexts, and participants as an obligatory step before engaging in change. Without

this social element, any proposals may fall prey to mere contemplative exercises or worse, attempts to pontificate about a field from a presumed position of “expert.” As Mora (2014e) posited,

The ultimate goal of reflexivity, then, is not simply to reflect on practice, but to *transform* it for the benefit of one’s community and its members. Reflexivity imbues any scientific endeavor with a solid ethical dimension as one must always keep track of the Other as an essential partner and agent of change.

Self-Study [of Teacher Education Practices]. Self-Study is a research approach highly favored by teacher educators in the U.S. and Australia as a rigorous way to understand the evolution of personal practice over time. The emergence of Self-Study is, as Bullough and Pinnegar (2001) hinted, further evidence that “researchers now accept that they are not disinterested but are deeply invested in their studies, personally and profoundly” (p. 13). It is this deeper investment what helps Self-Study researchers fall prey to the dangers of self-contemplation I pointed out when I introduced this section. Self-Study, as informed by research methodologies (and, quite tangentially, linked to participatory methodologies such as Action Research), keeps in mind that teachers must frame their inquiries as researchers. Practitioner inquiry in a Self-Study should be rigorous and critical as these are the essential conditions “to better align [one’s] teaching interests with [one’s] teaching actions” (Loughran, 2007, p. 12).

The goal of a Self-Study inquiry is to “contribute professional knowledge about what [practitioners] learn from their research” (Vozzo, 2011, p. 313), always within the sense that keeping the lessons at a personal level will not be enough. Inquiries may stem from the self, but they always return to the social construction of teaching practice.

Autoethnography. As was the case in the previous two ideas, the personal dimension of one's inquiries becomes essential for autoethnography. Autoethnography, as a hybrid between autobiography and ethnographic approaches to research (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011) aims to open a space for researchers to document their life histories and the effect they have had on their craft or inquiries. Rather than simple reminiscence, autoethnographies may force researchers to confront academic (Holt, 2003) or deeply personal (Wall, 2008) accounts of their lives. This personal involvement in the inquiry is fundamental for autoethnography. As Anderson (2006) explained, "the autoethnographer is someone who helps form and reform the constructs that she or he studies" (p. 382). As "a member and a participant in the social science community" (Anderson, 2006, p. 380), an autoethnographer not only records personal experiences. Autoethnography involves the recording of personal accounts as an exercise in engagement with the social setting as a required step for researchers to participate in the necessary actions that promote change in the scientific community.

Framing S-RREP: A vision for Research Education Inquiry. A deeper analysis of the three ideas that inform my thoughts on this paper (Reflexivity, Self-Study, Autoethnography) provides interesting points of convergence. All three ideas strongly link the personal dimension (Noffke, 1997) to the inquiry endeavor. This link helps reinforce the idea that researchers are not (nor can they ever be) detached from their objects of inquiry (Bullough & Pinnegar, 2001). However, all three ideas send a word of caution to researchers. They remind us that just because they promote inquiry from personal narratives, the outcome of such inquiries cannot be devoid of rigor and a concern for social engagement (Anderson, 2006; Archer, 2007).

If the field of research education is, as I have argued, uncharted territory in many areas, this also provides an opportunity to introduce new frameworks for inquiry. Relying on the conceptual underpinnings from these three ideas, I would like to propose a *Self-Reflexivity of Research Education Practices*. This would be a qualitative approach where teacher educators can reflect about what it means to engage in mentoring and educating teachers who actively engage in research. As a reflexivity exercise, it would invite these educators to confront their own construction of their research epistemology and practice, including their influences and inspirational examples. Drawing from Self-Study, this inquiry would be data-driven, and rely on their own analysis of teaching and research resources (both pooled and created). It would also provide these research educators to look back at their practice, discover the different “epiphanies” (Anderson, 2006) that have triggered meaningful changes and reflect on them more deeply to help others establish what the identity of a research educator will ultimately look like.

An Eight-Year Journey: Thinking and Re-thinking My Research Educator Identity

My journey as a research educator, from my beginnings as a research assistant and master’s student in 2002 until today, has already spanned 12 years. However, my narrative for this paper will primarily focus on my work as a research educator between August 2011 and December 2014, which also comprises my journey toward tenure at Universidad Pontificia Bolivariana, in Medellín (Colombia).

I will present my insights about becoming a research educator using a chronological, narrative format (Clift, 2009). I will discuss my lessons around my work with three groups of students: (a) three cohorts from the Graduate Specialization in ELT;

(b) my students at the Literacies in Second Languages Project (Mora, 2015); and (c) my advisees at the MA in Learning and Teaching Processes in Second Languages. In this narrative, I will share how I have evolved from being a novice researcher (Clift, Brady, Mora, Stegemoller, & Choi, 2006) to becoming a mentor of my pre-service and in-service teachers in these three scenarios.

Three scenarios for practice. Before I begin my analysis, I find it fitting to provide a brief description of the three settings where my practice has evolved.

The research cycle at the Graduate Specialization in ELT. The Graduate Specialization in ELT is a program that serves as an intermediate stage beyond the bachelor's degree and the master's degree. While not necessarily an introductory cycle to a master's degree, a specialization does serve a tangential purpose of helping some students who are considering the master's get ready for it by becoming more acquainted with the rigors of advanced education.

The research cycle for this program comprises three courses:

- *Foundations of Qualitative Inquiry*, where students learn some of the foundational elements that comprise research and begin to think about the potential problem they would like to develop for their degree project.
- *Research Practicum*, where students learn about data collection and continue refining their proposals.
- *Degree Seminar*, where students consolidate their research projects and engage in the final stages of writing their degree papers.

I taught courses in this cycle between 2012 and 2014. However, for this paper I will only include my reflections for my work in 2012 and 2013, as my participation in the

program in 2014 was more limited, in part due to my occupations in the MA in Learning and Teaching Processes in Second Languages.

Student Research Group on Second Languages (SRG-L2). When I was hired at my university, one of my primary duties was chartering a Student Research Group (*Semillero de Investigación*) in the field of second languages. I relied on my own background as a trained qualitative researcher and my own literacy research that guided my dissertation (Mora Vélez, 2010) to charter the Student Research Group on Second Languages (SRG-L2) in 2012. SRG-L2 began with a group of five students doing research on urban literacies (Mora, Gómez, Castaño, Pulgarín, Ramírez, & Mejía-Velez, 2013; Mora, Ramírez, Pulgarín, Mejía-Vélez, Castaño, & Gómez, 2014). At present, SRG-L2 has 11 researchers working on two projects and has spawned a larger international project, the Literacies in Second Languages Project (Mora, 2014f).

MA in Learning and Teaching Processes in Second Languages. This graduate program began in 2013 as a response to the lack of graduate-level programs in the field of second language studies outside Bogotá, the capital city of Colombia. The program has a strong background in qualitative research as the best option for teachers to reconceptualize and recontextualize (Mora, 2014d) their practices. As Program Coordinator and instructor, I am currently advising six students working on five master's theses in areas related to literacies in second languages (Mora, 2013, 2014f).

The evolution of my craft as research educator. For this analysis, I revisited the syllabi and resources I used in my research classes, class notes from my courses and SRG-L2 meetings, student evaluations, and my own recollections of my classes, research meetings, and advisory sessions. I read the data, making notes about elements that I found salient in this evolution. I confronted this evolution with my own evolution as a researcher,

both as part of teams (Clift, Brady, Mora, Stegemoller, & Choi, 2006) and as an individual together with my background in teacher education and literacy. All these elements provided the backdrop for the subheadings that drive the narrative below.

The learning curve of research education is not that different from that of a novice teacher. I wrote my first proposal for a research methods course right upon my return to Colombia in 2010. I poured in this proposal quite a few ideas from my research methods classes at Illinois, including the sequence and scope of the course. When I had to teach the first iteration of *Foundations of Qualitative Inquiry* in 2012, I took some of these ideas and adapted them. Some of the resources I handpicked for these classes were very similar to what I had read when I was a graduate student. In fact, as I was writing this paper, I realized that I not only took examples and ideas from them. I referenced them often in my classes (it is no mystery for my students that my admiration for Professor Robert Stake is a huge influence for how I teach my classes, for example) and even used examples from their classes as my own explanations. As I developed the next versions of my syllabi, it became easier to detach myself from just using these initial ideas. I began to develop my own metaphors, such as the “umbrella” metaphor to explain the implications of choosing specific approaches over declaring one’s study as qualitative (Mora, 2012c), or “you’ll want to build a plane you can fly and land” (Mora, 2012c) to explain what it means to develop and execute a research project. I realized that metaphors are actually the easiest way for me to making the powerfully complex tenets of qualitative inquiry accessible to students and leading young scholars into understanding this research paradigm.

Balancing what I wanted to teach and what they needed to learn. One of the problems I first encountered on the first iterations of my research courses was a very idealistic view of what sort of? / kind of? / research my students should do. That was the

source of a few tensions and even some unnecessary panic for my graduate students. Over the years, my lessons are reaching that balance between the kind of research I like to do and the kind of research my students need to do, especially in the graduate programs.

There is a second area where balancing these two realities has entailed a process of un-learning and re-learning for me: how I talk about research and my students' own research. I have to remember that, just because my students are very fluent in English (and all of them really are), I cannot take for granted that my message will come across as intended. In my teaching, I have faced miscommunications and some students have felt as if I were disinterested in their research. I had to learn to develop, once again, the necessary sensitivities as an instructor to teach students that research is, above all, a journey of discovery.

Really transferable lessons. While I had to engage in a detachment from some of my experiences as a graduate student when teaching my classes, I also realized that there are other lessons I learned that were essential to develop my research educator persona. I could actually rely on my master's thesis (Mora Vélez, 2004) and dissertation (Mora Vélez, 2010) to document at a more personal level how one is supposed to frame a research problem and how I myself had used those lessons to frame my current research projects. I had tangible examples that offered a true vicarious experience (Stake, 2010) that I was able to use to show my students that (as Morpheus in *The Matrix* would say) I not only knew the path, but also had walked it. In fact, when I began to rely on the vicarious experience instead of just the experiences of taking research classes, I was able to help my students make better sense of their proposals. I noticed this as I compared the proposals my students wrote in my research classes in 2012 and 2013.

My roles as leader and mentor. When I began my teaching post, I had under my belt over six years of research experience working on two grants by the U.S. Department of Education and a number of publications derived from both projects (Clift, Brady, Mora, Stegemoller, & Choi, 2006; Clift, Mora, & Brady, 2008; García, Bray, Mora, Primeaux, Ricklefs, Engel, & Garley-Erb, 2006). However, I neither had led a research team nor did I advise students. Once again, I fell back on the lead researchers' styles to begin to mold mine. I crafted the work dynamics at SRG-L2 by blending my experiences on the two research teams where I had served. I created a more horizontal working dynamics (Clift, et al., 2006) where I wanted my students not to see themselves as my "research assistants" but as my "co-researchers." In the case of my advisees, I had to revisit what I learned from my two advisers at Illinois (Profs. Clift and Willis) and how they helped me gear my research and my writing. I have discovered in this past year advising students that helping them gear their writing is perhaps the most difficult feature. How much correction is too much correction? How far should they rely on what they learned from my literacy class (which in the end was the reason they chose me as their adviser) and where should they take their own direction? Those are the questions that I am answering with their help. Advising, I have realized, also means being ready to learn from your students.

Research Education as a Space of Praxis and Advocacy

As I continued this self-reflexivity, I kept returning to two questions: *How did I get here?* and *Why did I become a research educator?* (Mora, 2014c). While it holds true that I knew I wanted to educate researchers, there was also this seemingly logical nexus between holding a Ph.D. and teaching research. I feel blessed that I had great mentors on my journey as a doctoral student, but we cannot leave such an important endeavor as educating

transformative intellectuals (Kumaravadivelu, 2003) who use research as their main tool to serendipity or volition.

Research education needs to become a rigorous exercise of scholarship. We need to make that distinction between one's formal training to do research and the required training and sensitivities to educate researchers. What are the new competences that research educators require? One thing that I believe is paramount is that research educators attain a true *praxis* (add references here). A research educator must *know* about research theories and key authors in the field, but he or she must also *do* research on a regular basis. As I have discovered in my practice, it is difficult to maintain a true sensitivity level and be able to engage with students in the vicarious experience of crafting research unless one engages in the exercises of profiling a research problem, doing fieldwork and analysis, and writing about it for professional conferences and publications.

As we engage in deeper reflexivity about educating the next cadres of teacher-researchers, research educators must imbue their work with a sense of advocacy (Mora, 2014a). We need to start questioning the social responsibilities of graduate programs (both those that trained us and those where we serve) in social and human sciences about the kind of research we foster. We need to keep in mind that we are educating these teachers *in* and *for* qualitative inquiry. Research education needs to keep in mind its “professional, personal, and political” (Noffke, 1997) dimensions. If we look at research from a critical perspective, we need to help our students recognize that doing research has implications and help them engage in the necessary critical consciousness, or *conscientização* (Freire, 1979; Mora, 2014b) to promote research as a true agent of change and not just a mere intellectual exercise.

In this discussion about becoming a research educator, I cannot ignore an important element: The social responsibility of Research Universities abroad. I bring this as part of my reflexivity because I cannot deny that my research identity is inextricably linked to my eight years of education in the United States. In fact, there is a reality of advanced education in Latin America: That the occurrence of Ph.D. holders' being trained abroad is still recurrent. The United States and the United Kingdom, for instance, are still top destinations for students from Latin America or Asia. In many cases, some of these international students return home, as I did, to become faculty members and do research, sometimes educate researchers.

As strong as one's training as a researcher at these institutions might be, they need to provide more efficient support networks for international students. We may not be ready to teach research, for example. We may not have the necessary training to handle "small-budget" (or even "zero-budget") research. Some of us may not have the luxury of having teams of doctoral students or even post-doctoral fellows. This poses a new set of challenges that add more uncertainty to the profiling of a research identity.

Coda

Working with future researchers has been both an exciting and humbling experience. As I reflected on my journey, I realized that I had to learn plenty of things all over again. I realized that helping my students develop their own sense of Self as researchers meant developing my own sense of Self as a mentor. As I always tell my students, who you are shapes what you research. Who I am keeps changing and with that, I find myself facing new challenges. Writing this paper has helped me see what lies ahead and what new forms of self-reflexivity I need to advocate for in years to come.

Author's Notes:

1. This paper summarizes part of a journey that covers both where I come from and where I am heading. I would like to dedicate this paper to my research mentors at the University of Illinois, Renée Clift, Arlette Willis, Liora Bresler, Bob Stake, and Georgia García, for shaping my initial research identity. I also dedicate this paper to my research team at the Literacies in Second Languages Project, as working with them is reshaping what I know about research education. Without their confidence in me, I could not become the mentor that they deserve
2. This paper draws inspiration from the notes for the presentation “From novice researcher to mentor: A self-reflexivity exercise on educating teachers-as-researchers,” shared at the Tenth International Congress of Qualitative Inquiry (University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, USA) in 2014. This paper revisited the original ideas and devised a new conceptual framework to analyze the data.

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