Dare to differ and use tools divergently!

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Thought Seed:

Many of us use a lot of potatoes in the kitchen. Sometimes in the potatoes we take out to peel and cut, there are many 'eyes' in these that have to be removed. For this, we either use the edge of the knife, or if we have a special potato peeler, we use the sharp edge which helps us dig around the eye to remove it. Having cooked the potatoes we may want to mash it, to make a filling for either samosas or masala dosais. If we are cooking in a hostel with a minimal kitchen, we take a tumbler or a small vessel and mash the potatoes with that. If we are cooking in a fully equipped kitchen we are likely to have a potato masher which we use. Is it always necessary to use only a special peeler or a masher? Won't a knife or a vessel do? When do we use one or the other? Is one better than the other? Who gets to decide? Is it the person who cooks, or the one who eats? If you did not reveal how you mashed the potatoes (using the back of a ladle, or a steel cup, do you think the person eating the dosai will know about it? Does it really matter?Is it only the experienced cook who will know how to use the back of a cup to mash potatoes, or a bottle to roll our chapatis? Will a young novice cook not know about this? Think deeply about tooling (use) and tools, which is better and why?

Research proposal first or research data first? That is the question:

When we begin to do research, or plan to start a research project, we spend a lot of time thinking of what to do, how to do it, what kind of data to collect etc. We write up the draft proposal, with its research questions, hypotheses (if we are doing work in the quantitative paradigm) and then begin data collection. This is like planning a full menu beforehand, collecting all the ingredients needed, the cooking vessels etc. even before we light the stove. But this is not always the case. There are times when, as experienced teachers, we have given students a series of assignments, or class tests, and suddenly, during the course of a discussion with a colleague, or a more experienced peer, we realise that the work we have done with our students is actually valuable, and that we could analyse what has already been done, and treat it as data to write up a research paper. This is similar to the way in which, in an emergency, or because we are inspired, we just go into the kitchen to make something without a plan; we look at what is available, and the dish emerges as we select, chop, fry what we have chosen to work with.

Tools or tooling? How do we decide?

Does tooling (use) make the tool or are tools made for that specific purpose? In the Demystifying Research Column 10 (Deepa, 2023) in this journal, we had written about the use of tools, some which are those that are deliberately intended to be used as tools like a screwdriver or a hammer and others which are incidental ones, like the edge of a spoon being used as a screwdriver or a bottle as a roller to roll out chapatis. We had also written about how even a piece of bandage cloth, gum tape or a

piece of torn tyre also functions perfectly as a tool in the hands of a skilled person. Dedicated tools work like designated data collection tools, where the menu is pre thought and pre planned and are seen as deliberate. At other times, tooling seems to happen in an unplanned manner, without any prior hint to the researcher, and therefore become incidental tools. The menu here evolves as the cooking proceeds.

When we apply this tooling idea to our field, the language classroom, and the research we wish to carry out, the tools we use for such research could be deliberate or incidental. We are sure that the questions that are running through your head are: "What is an incidental tool and what is a deliberate tool? How can the work that I do in the classroom or what I get my students to write become screwdrivers or spoons in my hand?" In other words, what kind of text is likely to be an incidental tool and when is it a deliberate tool?

In order to answer some of these questions, we have chosen, as an example, to work with one specific area of research in the language classroom namely disability studies. Within this huge domain we are going to stay with the work that has been done with students who are visually impaired.

Tooling Examples:

A decade ago, one of us, the second author, wrote an article titled "Terrible Testing Times" (Durairajan, 2013). The discussion in that article was about visually impaired students who had major problems with the scribes whom they had to use for their public or entrance examinations. Walking past this group of visually impaired students, we had overheard a bit of the conversation about the travails of the PhD entrance examination they had taken. They were talking about how the examination was daunting and frightening, largely because of scribal problems. When the need came up to write an article for the special issue on disability studies

for a magazine, 'Teacher Plus' we decided to get a few more insights from these students; we had an informal, unplanned tea time discussion with them and had used their statements as data in that article. Every one of the statements made by the students which were quoted in that article was purely incidental data because it was not collected with any research project in mind. One of the students had said: "*We end up changing the words that we dictate to make sure they (the scribes) understand. I will start using one word and if I find that the scribe does not know that word, I have to use a simpler one. Often, we change the structure of the sentences that we dictate according to the scribe's level.*" Another person provided what could be seen as 'triangulation' or corroborative evidence when he affirmed: "*Examinations are a psychological terror for us. Within the first 10-15 minutes we can assess the performance of the scribe; if that person is good, then we get an added energy and we do very well. If not, we are half dead even before the first half hour is over.*" These speakers (students) had not intended to provide such evidence. They were only discussing their problems and were sharing experiences. We, as authors, had used their statements as data with due ethical permissions taken from them afterwards to both quote what they said and also refer to them by name in our research. This is a classic example of texts (in this case spoken) being used as an incidental tool, the way a spoon is used as a screwdriver to tighten the lid of a pressure cooker when we are in a hurry in the kitchen or like using a ladle to quickly mash up boiled potatoes for masala dosai. The statements made by the visually impaired students are an example of tooling with spoken texts that emerged as data from a casual conversation that excited us enough to want to write about it. It was thoroughly unplanned, immediate and incidental. A cafeteria conversation actually made us want to delve deep into this realm of disability studies seriously.

Deliberate and/or incidental: Further exemplary differences

To help us understand the difference between an incidental and a deliberate tool, we are now going to critically examine an experiment or rather a research exercise that we had carried out about two years ago. One of us, the first author, had the opportunity to teach a group of students in an undergraduate inclusive classroom where there were both sighted and blind/visually impaired (BVI) students. We wanted to bring about a change in the negative perspective of students in classrooms by enabling collaboration between those two groups, perceived as a community of practice, with "equivalent status people working helpfully toward a shared objective" (Deepa, 2022: 21). With this aim in mind, the plan was that across the class hours, consisting of "activities focusing on reading, writing, vocabulary and presentation skills" (Deepa, 2022: 22), the 25 sighted students would be put into 5 groups, with each group having one BVI student. In the class experiment, team tasks had been assigned; at the end of each task, students had been asked to record their observations in a Whatsapp chat group. Thus, the tasks themselves, along with the 'observations' were the 'deliberately' designed dedicated tools used by the teacher-researcher in the classroom. As expected this experience was like a revelation to the sighted students for it became a huge learning experience for them. They learnt the value of 'inclusiveness' and as one of them put it, they moved from "what can I learn from them! I can only help them" to stating that they learnt a lot from their BVI FRIENDS (caps in original) and that they learnt about "their working patterns, … and their way of understanding the surroundings, concepts, way of interaction with each other and many more things" (Deepa, 2022: 22).

This apart, something else happened during this experiment to the nature of the tools themselves. The nature of the deliberate tool or experiment got turned on its head: the five BVI students, during the reading comprehension task, had asked why sighted students needed to read out the texts to them for questions to be answered. Instead they said that they would like to use their laptops and read out or rather 'listen' to the computer generated voice and then 'read' or rather speak out the texts to the sighted students. Then there was another BVI student, who insisted that he would get the text printed in Braille and then read it out to the blindfolded sighted partner. This was not there in the original plan of data collection but emerged as the research was being conducted. This became incidental data that was written up. This also meant that the sighted students who were blindfolded, had experienced what it meant to listen to a reading comprehension text being 'read' out to them. This experience was very insightful for the sighted students. As one of them put it, "We sighted people don't observe the basic things carefully as of my opinion. I came to know this on the day of the blindfolded activity" *(sic)*. Another student reiterated this by stating: "I learnt to appreciate small senses which we don't usually notice because of them. I understood the world in their point of view" *(sic)* (Deepa, 2022: 22).

This description of the sighted students being blindfolded, and the BVIs' reading the texts, is an example of how a deliberate tool can be turned into a modified one because of an incidental or unexpected happening in the classroom.

It is all in the mindset: Dare to differ yet write about it!

The teacher-researcher here had two options. She could have said: "No. I cannot permit such

a role reversal. My experiment will go for a toss". Alternatively, she could have chosen, as she did, to go with the flow, be authentic with the nature of the experiment, document the happenings and incorporate the resultant findings, an outcome of modified tooling, into the research study.

This type of incidental tool use is much more than using a spoon as a screwdriver. It is a question of whether we perceive what happens as a plan gone awry, and therefore to be dropped, or accepted as something different that is happening; we tell ourselves that this is an incidental happening, but interesting and real, let me therefore 'go with the flow' accept it, document and see where it takes me.

This is why such tool modification is much more than the use of a spoon as a screwdriver. It is like how, when you are boiling the last packet of milk, to make some planned yummy payasam(kheer) and if by accident, a bit of a jumping drop of lime juice which you are squeezing nearby, splashes into the milk, which gets curdled along with your plans of a sweet treat. We could choose to throw it out, or decide to make it into paneer, and make a curry with it instead. It is all in the constructive mindset.

Boxing issues:

Like lesson plans, we often enter the classroom with one plan, but something totally different takes place. Do we drop it as a failed class, or look at what we were able to achieve and value it? Similarly, in research, it is easily possible that something totally unexpected can happen. It may not fit the work done in the area, or may not even fit within that paradigm. As creative researchers, we need to have the courage to not just use a spoon as a screwdriver, but also to convert milk originally meant for payasam into an incidentally spicy paneer curry when needed instead of either dropping, manipulating or creating false data. We are not required to fit our research into boxes, for research is not a

commodity to be shipped safely, rather it is an honest account of our research journey so that readers/ future researchers may be informed credibly about what has been done and found. In all research work, it is the data that ought to be primary; we should have the courage to look for evidence in the literature to support our findings; if that does not exist, we need to be able to say so, and state that something different and interesting is happening. Unfortunately, we get caught within the box and feel that if it has not been done before, it is wrong. We need to develop a constructive mindset. In research we must not get upset if the results are not congruent with our hypotheses; if we do, then that means we are biased. We should not change or manipulate or mis-present our data to suit the oft expected results, because it would be unethical to do so and will defeat the very purpose of research. We must be open-minded, unbiased, truthful and constructive with our approach to research and write up our research as truthfully as they ed Growing a daringly creative mental muscle will go a long way in keeping us happy in the whole process rather than box ourselves up as mashed up couch potatoes!

Happy daring!

References:

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