

# Am I a researcher yet?

*Kieran Dhunna Halliwell, St. Mary's CofE School, 2015*

If you'd told me a year ago that I'd be writing about our research this summer I wouldn't have believed you, mostly because I had no understanding of what research was or how it worked, and because there was a pervading perception that research is 'for academics only'. I am not what is stereotypically considered academic. Until recently, I rarely read books that had more than 24 pages and had no concept of educational theorists or that Ken Robinson was anything other than a man who likes to present.

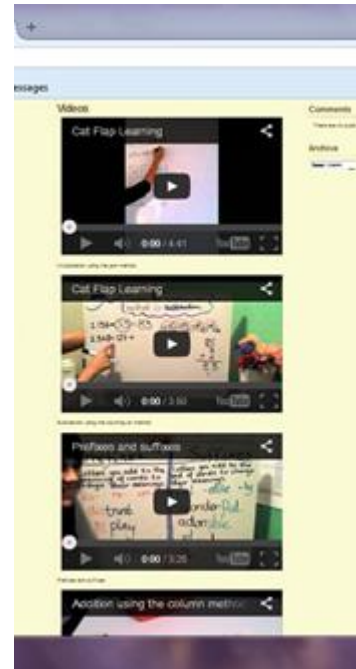
Although I wasn't a bad teacher, I was unaware. I was unaware of other professionals. I was unaware of theorists. I was unaware of how what happens in a classroom links with theory, policy and what is considered professional. But naïve as it may sound, you cannot understand what you haven't been exposed to, and I know I was not the only one to be in this position.

Now, one year later we are getting ready to write about what we found out and to share it in a professional capacity. Phrases like "writing up our research" and "preparing a paper" seem surreal. They're surreal because I still don't *feel* like a researcher. In fact, I feel a bit of a fraud and am waiting for other professionals to expose me to an extent! Academics and other people who research can namedrop other writers and projects and analyse them with ease, speaking with authority on a variety of educational topics. I often observe conversations on Twitter hoping to be able to join in but my lack of wider reading is an obstacle; instead of joining in, I google the names and theories mentioned. There are some wonderful people that discuss ideas and suggest books or papers to read, but with many papers still behind paywalls it is hard to keep up sometimes. However, a year ago I didn't know education books existed, outside of what the PGCE reading list suggested – unless you are already integrated into scholarly endeavours, research can seem an abstract idea which in turn hinders it from being integrated into classroom practice.

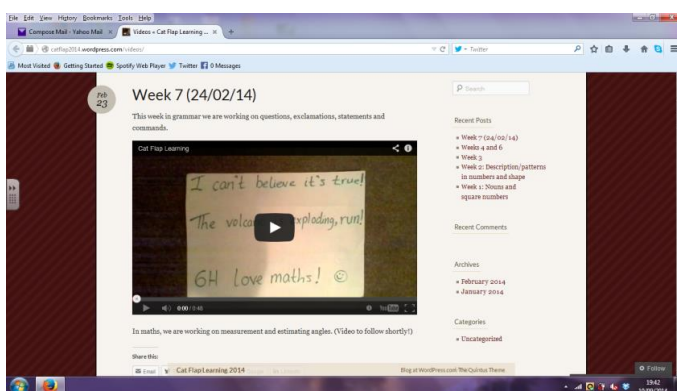
I still have questions about the education structure and am still working out where I fit in. Often, I think I ought to know the answers as my peers

seem to have an inherent understanding. Is being a researcher the same as being an academic? Are they the same or intertwined? For me, those that write papers are like the Jungle Book scene of elephants marching, whilst I am the baby elephant at the back trying to keep up, wondering what everyone's talking about. Educational theory is a jungle, composed of various tribes and schemas. Not only as a new researcher, but as a new teacher, it is hard to navigate.

The research I've been working on with Dr. Pete Bradshaw, a lecturer at the Open University, is called 'The Floating Teacher'. It centres on the use of videos in the classroom and is a variant of the flipped model, whereby learners access content from class and tutors online from home. I had seen examples of the flipped model but found my attention drifting from the videos I was watching, as they either seemed clinical in their presentation, didn't feature people or moved too quickly for me to take in what they were saying. As a learner, I respond to people and anything with a personal element and wondered if the lack of a personal element was hindering children from engaging with these kinds of materials.



Our project offered something different in that the videos featured me, the children's teacher, and were



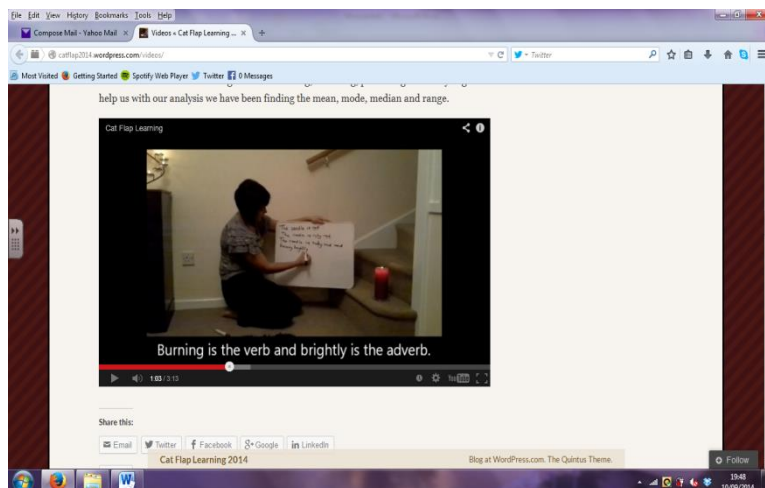
usually filmed from my home in an informal style. Often, children are curious about their teacher's lives away from the classroom – they remember little details such as your pets names, favourite colours and area you live in. Knowing these details helps

them to create an understanding of you as a person as well as a teacher, contributing to positive relationships which can then positively impact learning. Our videos were filmed to deliberately include the teacher as a main focus to see if this helped children not only engage with the materials, but retain the learning focus in memory. To watch someone

they already know and are familiar with meant the learners are not creating new schemas when viewing the videos but adding to an already existing model of their class teacher giving a similar style of delivery. This could be leaving more mental resources freed up to focus on taking in the necessary information we wanted them to learn.

The original project intended to have a control class and a class using the videos in English and Maths to support learning, with access to the materials being available from home as well. Usage was going to be monitored and would form the basis of how we'd measure, along with questionnaires and observations. However, as an NQT with limited support for innovation, things were scaled down to focus only on my class and how children used the videos in lessons. As a new researcher, this was one of the first and most valuable things I learned; the vision is the easy bit, but translating a vision into practice takes time and needs to be realistic. At a later date we may do a project with the original design, but only when my skills as a teacher and understanding of research are developed enough for it to be successful.

From September 2013 to March 2014 learners in my class were able to access the videos in English lessons, to help with grammar during guided reading and during maths lessons. The videos used in grammar and



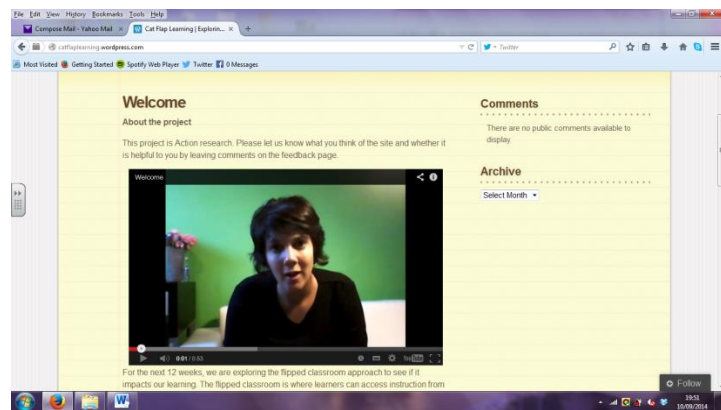
English were the same, used as a teaching focus for the week. On a Monday, the teaching focus would be briefly taught by me as we introduced guided reading. I would explain how to use something and its purpose, then

play the video and be narrating it as we watched as a whole class. This was the only discrete teaching I did of grammar in our timetable. During lessons, I would be working with an individual or group and learners would play the video from my laptop, displaying it on the interactive whiteboard, writing their names up on a board to register their usage. Children could play videos as much as they needed it and did not need to ask permission

to do so. This developed a lot of learner independence and whilst there was some excitement at being able to continually replay the videos, we could see from observation and work produced that they were being 'taught' by it. The most common usage was in grammar and children of all levels began to take more risks with including the things they'd been exposed to in their writing.

The structure of content and style evolved during the course of this time, from a children's TV presenter to focused teaching points. We found learners were very quick to catch on to any catch phrase and background items in the early videos, some commenting in general conversation and repeating phrases I'd used – the power of this kind of media is that some children will be able to repeat it word for word. However, this does not necessarily mean they have an understanding of the teaching content.

Although the project was originally intending to measure learning with a data focus, the most interesting parts were what we noticed day-to-day and in observations. As we progressed, the data became secondary to an extent. Throughout the project, the children were quick to notice any changes to setting or structure and would often comment on items in the setting before teaching content began. When the background changed from green (The Green Room) to my lounge, they knew it was because I'd moved house and were able to ask if that was my lounge. They would even recognise if I'd filmed the video that morning because of the clothes I was wearing! Their interest in watching any new videos was immediate excitement at what they might see in relation to me as a person, but once teaching content began their questions and focus would transfer to that – the background elements weren't as interesting as the learning content once 'teaching' had begun on screen.



When the background changed from green (The Green Room) to my lounge, they knew it was because I'd moved house and were able to ask if that was my lounge. They would even recognise if I'd filmed the video that morning because of the clothes I was wearing! Their interest in watching any new videos was immediate excitement at what they might see in relation to me as a person, but once teaching content began their questions and focus would transfer to that – the background elements weren't as interesting as the learning content once 'teaching' had begun on screen.

Interestingly, the maths group did not use videos in the same way as my own class. They were interested to watch and displayed similar

comments, but rarely used them as a learning aid during the lessons. This may have been something to do with setting as a year group, or that the learners felt confident in the tasks being asked of them; it is an area we will have to look at again in future.

The most beneficial aspect of this project for me as a teacher was the fact it effectively cloned me, allowing 'me' to be accessed by more children at any given time. With no TA, this method allowed me to work with individuals who needed me most but still be teaching the rest of the class, despite them working independently. In questionnaires, learners commented on the fact they didn't need to wait for me to help them and could just get on with their work.

The journey of practitioner to researcher in the classroom has not been an easy one, but is certainly one I would recommend. In fact, practitioner and researching in the classroom should run parallel to each other rather than be seen as two separate entities. Research is not for HE only, which has been a wide reaching perception that is slowly beginning to change. It is an academic discipline in that to do it well, you need to be focused on what you want to know, how you will find it out and whether you are being ethical, but this does not mean those without Masters or Phd's are incapable of doing it. For many, further qualifications aren't affordable – part of the issue isn't with capability, but with access.

As far as my practice goes, I found watching and editing the videos gave me time to reflect on myself as a teacher and consider my delivery, and more interestingly, my speech (the slight lisp is something some learners sensitively commented on – great for those with a stammer to see I can struggle to enunciate sometimes too!). To be a teacher researcher is demanding, particularly in the current educational climate where you are accountable for everything; to research is not seen as something teachers do in the classroom to develop practice but as an add-on, which needs to change if teachers are to become more involved in exploring practice. The value of it needs to be recognised.