

Activity 5.1: Data Analysis Memo

Review the Data Analysis “Memo to Myself” written by teacher researcher Scot Baird with feedback provided on it by author Nancy Fichtman Dana. Discuss the following question with a partner or a small group: How might writing data analysis memos such as these and receiving feedback on them from others assist you during the sense-making step of data analysis?

Memo to Myself: Scot Baird

So far, data collection has been relatively easy. The hard part's going to be doing something with it. I feel my interviewing technique and subsequent transcription skills still leave something to be desired. Transcribing interviews is hard. It's kind of like meeting someone in person versus just reading their resume. It's not quite the same.

A big advantage that I have when it comes to data collection is that as an online teacher, all my communications are captured either in my personal notes or in Google voice data logs. I can look at exactly how much I talked to an individual student, when I talked to them, how long I talked to them, and who initiated the call. If the conversation was significant, I usually have notes on it. I also have access to a heat map of when students access the course and the exact date and time assignments were turned in. I can also tell how long a student took from one assignment to the next. I can tell how frequently a student accessed the course and how long they stayed on. This is proving to be a very fertile source of supporting information to the insights that I am gaining from the interviews. Online teaching produces a lot of incidental data.

Excellent! Indeed, online teaching can produce a lot of data naturally.

Since much of the data that I collect and the observations that I make are done in the course of my normal day, if I think something might be potentially interesting, it can be saved to computer where it is tagged and saved in a searchable format. Data collection becomes part of my day. I generate a lot of data that probably will never be used, but that's OK.

Excellent . . . For teacher researchers, data collections should be a part of, rather than apart from teaching practice. 😊

As much as I worry about my interviewing technique, even if I don't like the way I worded a question with a student or would like some additional information, there is frequently a second chance to get it. A lot of this information was stuff that I casually noticed in the past, but now, there is one big difference—I am doing data collection through the lens of a practitioner—researcher. This forces me to put a certain amount of structure around my efforts to assure that they eventually yield productive, practice changing information.

Indeed! Practitioner research is defined as “systematic, intentional study of one's own professional practice” – the structure you speak of here is the “systematic” and “intentional” part of that definition.

Beyond data collection, one of the other challenges that I have faced is in letting go of some of my preconceptions. I entered this investigation with a strong hunch that many of the problems that my students face could be attributed to the “digital divide.” I think that I was initially attracted to the simplicity of the solution and the ease of attributing the problem to a simple “haves versus have nots” issue. In interviews, I’m finding that students are talking more about communications and teacher support. Specifically, how much they need, when they need it, and how they want it delivered. They also have some issues with understanding the course interface and the flow of the class from one task to the next. This leads me in a different direction than what I had originally thought that I would be taking. It’s looking more now like I’m going to have to look at developing a different and better communications and monitoring plans for this constituency of students. Students seem to have figured out the technology part on their own.

This is really powerful Scot . . . Perhaps this paragraph provides the foundation for organizing/coding your data . . . This is kind of basic, but could you do a pass through your data coding for “communications” and “teacher support”? Two themes you mention you are seeing in your data here. Once you read through all of the data and code for “communications” and “teacher support”, just read all of the excerpts you have coded that fall into these two categories. Do other codes emerge? Can you further code the data that fell into “communications” and “teacher support” into additional categories within these codes? Or, does this exercise lead you someplace else? Just a thought . . . Not sure what you have actually done so far with analysis/coding. I remember you were also thinking of developing data posters per student and looking at the individual story analysis of each student’s data tells . . . Regardless, this paragraph indicates that you have let your data surprise you! That’s a very powerful component of practitioner research.

Qualitative research is still a little outside my comfort zone. Given a choice, I still tend to grab at numbers before I talk to somebody, but I'm getting better. Data and statistics will be used to support the findings of my interviews, but I want to get the main course right. Side dishes are important, but it's all got to work together to make the meal.

Love this metaphor! I know you struggle with quantitative and qualitative data – remember that words can be extremely powerful data – giving your students a voice through this research in what is and isn't working for them and why. Reflecting on this as their teacher and learning from it, reporting on what you learned, and providing evidence from your data (main course and side dish) to support your statements of learning . . . That's what the work is that likes ahead for you. 😊 It will take time – there is no substitute for doing a close and careful analysis, but you are on your way here.