Doing “What Works”: A Substantive Grounded Theory of Teacher Perceptions and Uses of Technology in a Korean University General English Department

A dissertation submitted in fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Thomas E. Webster

BFA, MFA, MEd

Principal Supervisor: Associate Professor Jeong-Bae Son

Associate Supervisor: Professor Patrick Danaher

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“To maintain the state of doubt and to carry on systematic and protracted inquiry – these are the essentials of thinking.” (Dewey, 1910, p. 13)

Foreword

This dissertation attempts to be first and foremost readable for researchers and teachers alike. The research and insights of various scholars, therefore, are called upon to support or dispute specifics throughout the account when and as needed (rather than be restricted to one separate chapter).

In the interest of objectivity, it is important that a set of principles be established at the onset which clearly frames the author’s motivations and intentions. The first of these is a general pro-technology bias. It is a fact that technology has made significant inroads into education and is not showing any signs of diminishing in the future. The choice, then, as the author sees it, is not if teachers should use technology, but how or in what way. Second, this study is a qualitative case study that is structured to be as credible and trustworthy as possible, but its methods are designed to discover a theory, not verify or dispute the results of other theories. For instance, the use of a survey questionnaire (along with interviews and observations) help provide a degree of triangulation; however, its main purpose is to help define and clarify properties that have emerged during the preceding interviews rather than check the consistency or reliability of previously discovered facts. Consequently, quantitative calculations are kept to a minimum and, as with to the literature review in this dissertation, used only on an as-needed basis to help underpin or illustrate the results (Dunne, 2011). Third, every attempt has been made to detail the processes involved during each step of the study to allow readers to follow the course of the reporting and determine the motives and justification therein. Finally, it is expected that particular aspects of this dissertation’s findings may need to be modified not only by other researchers, but also by the author in future studies – this should not be seen as a flaw but as an essential part of the process in the development of theory. A large part of the motivation to explore this topic comes from the need to learn something about which there is very little known. Research, like life, is indeed a process of humble beginnings and multiple revisions. It is hoped that this dissertation is both informative and concise.
The purpose of this dissertation is to investigate what teachers experience as they considered the use of technology in their Korean university English classes. It was a qualitative study which attempted to provide a grounded explanation of the complexities that led teachers to begin adopting technology in their teaching or, in some cases, to reject it outright. This case study involved the general English program of a major women’s university in Seoul, Republic of Korea (where the researcher currently works as a faculty member).

This study assumes the perspectives of teachers and viewed the complicated decision and implementation process through their thoughts and actions. It was believed that only through the perspectives of teachers could the messy business of implementation be properly understood and explained. A grounded theory of investigation therefore underpinned a mixed-techniques approach. The impetus for this method was reached after a close reading of diffusion of innovations theory by Everett Rogers (2003) and therefore similarities to and differences from this theory are likewise considered where appropriate and in conclusion.

Data for the study were collected through three main techniques: semi-structured interviews, a survey questionnaire, and classroom observations. An iterative, grounded method of analysis was used for all three techniques, aided by the application of both qualitative and quantitative software programs (Atlas.ti 5.0 and SPSS 16.0 respectively). The study first employed thirteen semi-structured interviews to identify phenomena and concepts which were further explored in a subsequent survey questionnaire (along with some aspects of Rogers’ [2003] theory), which was administered to all full-time and part-time instructors (16 and 34 respectively) in the General English Department at Park University (a pseudonym). Information from both sources helped to select theoretically a set of five teachers to participate in classroom observations and follow-up interviews to explore developing categories and their properties, aspects, and dimensions. Furthermore, teachers participating in all four strands of the study were consulted throughout the research in order to clarify and/or verify concepts and perceptions.
Results from the study are organized under a substantive theory entitled “what works”. This expression is not to be confused with the term as associated with evidenced-based research (EBR), although certain similarities can be found. This theory of “what works” explains the complex interactions that transpire both in and out of the classroom as teachers attempt to balance adaptation to changes with personal and administrative goals. Concepts of roles and responsibilities as well as self-efficacy, image, satisfaction, and sociability all interweave to reinforce “teacher psychodynamics” which formed the basis for decision making. It was found that within this system teachers’ professional uses of technology were influenced by personality factors, previous learning experiences, teaching beliefs, and beliefs about technology. However, the decision to use any resource (technological or otherwise) was found to be dependent on what worked. Teachers were interested (to varying degrees) in ideas about the benefits of technology; however, in the final analysis, they employed it only if it consistently worked for them in the classroom. As one teacher explained, “As a teacher, you’re never done…so you can only do what works”. A final element in this process was the willingness or aptitude of teachers as lifelong learners given that teaching with technology involves continuous renewal and adaptation.

Further implications indicate a general disconnect between contemporary educational practices and the learning needs of a majority of students. It is posited that the use of technology in education exacerbates this disconnect, leading to inconsistencies in application and a limitation of potential benefits both for technology and for education in general. Final recommendations suggest the need for debate on the reconciliation between longstanding educational beliefs and practices and the current and future needs of students.
I certify that the ideas, experimental work, results, analyses, software, and conclusions reported in this dissertation are entirely my own effort, except where otherwise acknowledged. I also certify that the work is original and has not been previously submitted for any other award, except where otherwise acknowledged. The methods and techniques employed in this study met the approval of the University of Southern Queensland’s Ethics Committee for investigations involving human research.

Signature of Candidate: ________________________ Date: __________

Endorsement

Signature of Principal Supervisor: ________________________ Date: __________

Signature of Associate Supervisor: ________________________ Date: __________
I would first like to gratefully acknowledge the efforts of both of my supervisors, Associate Professor Jeong-Bae Son and Professor Patrick Danaher. Their patience and open-mindedness allowed me the freedom to follow my own path throughout this study and dissertation. Thank you both for your trust as well as sensible guidance when needed. I would furthermore like to thank Cristy Bartlett in the Faculty of Education and the staff in the Office of Research and Higher Degrees at the University of Southern Queensland for their hard work and assistance.

I would also like to thank my wonderful wife, Dohyoung Oh, for enduring the last five years with a husband who could generously be described as “distracted”. I could never have completed this dissertation without your love, moral support, and fresh fruit. Many thanks as well to my son, Barrett Oh Webster, born on January 18, 2010, for being such an easy-going baby during the final stages of the write-up.

I would further like to thank my colleagues who took part in the study. I enjoyed learning about your lives and teaching and hope that I was able to represent them both fairly and accurately. I would also like to thank my friend, Dr. Bruce Barnes, for our many conversations on research and our days spent together with the Scorpion Hike and Bike Club. Finally, I would like to thank my close friend, Greg Skwarok, for being a faithful and uncomplaining brother for over 13 years. Your moral support has helped me in too many ways to mention.

This dissertation is dedicated to my mother, the late Ruth A. Webster, who passed away on May 2, 2010 after a long and fruitful 88 years of life. Her energy and passion for life are reflected in my own humble attempts to better myself and the world around me including this dissertation. The world is not the same without our Ruthie.
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### Acronyms and Key Terms

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Acronym</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>CELTA</td>
<td>Certification in English Language Teaching to Adults</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DELTA</td>
<td>Diploma in English Language Teaching to Adults</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ESL</td>
<td>English as a Second Language</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EPIK</td>
<td>English Program in Korea</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FEFC</td>
<td>Further Education Funding Council</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GDP</td>
<td>Gross domestic product</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>*ICT</td>
<td>Information and Communications Technology</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>KCE</td>
<td>Korean Committee on Education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>KORETTA</td>
<td>Korean English Teacher Training</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>KOTESOL</td>
<td>Korean Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LCD</td>
<td>Liquid Crystal Display projector</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MOE and HRD</td>
<td>Ministry of Education and Human Resources Development</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MEST</td>
<td>Ministry of Education, Science, and Technology</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NCEP</td>
<td>National Committee on Education</td>
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<tr>
<td>POI</td>
<td>Post-Observation Interview</td>
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<td>SSI</td>
<td>Semi-Structured Interview</td>
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<tr>
<td>TIT</td>
<td>Technology in Teaching Survey Questionnaire</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Technology</td>
<td>Any electronic device such as computers and their supporting peripherals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOEIC</td>
<td>Test of English for International Communication</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UNHDR</td>
<td>United Nations Human Development Report</td>
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*The term “ICT” is used throughout the dissertation as it is considered a more general term that encompasses other more specific areas such as Computer-Assisted Instruction (CAI), Computer-Assisted Language Learning (CALL), and Content-Based Language Teaching Through Technology (COBALLT).*