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Editorial

Introduction to the Special Issue: Intuition and Practitioner Research

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ABSTRACT

This editorial introduction provides both an overview of thinking concerning the concept of intuition in the fields of psychology and education, as well as the articles contributed to this special issue. Whilst commencing by defining the term *intuition*, we also note the stigma attached to this way of thinking via an anecdote from one of our contexts of teaching. We then provide concrete examples of the kinds of rapid decision-making in which teachers engage on a daily basis, arguing that intuition is fundamental to pedagogical practice. The editorial next touches upon the relationship between intuition and reflection, and the ways in which reflection may help or hinder our momentary decision-making as practitioners. Before providing a brief summary of each of the articles composing this special issue, we finally link the importance of intuition to the process of classroom practitioner research.

Keywords: intuition, practitioner research, reflection, tacit knowledge, teacher decision-making

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"It is self-evident that much of what teachers and others do, in the heat of the moment, is not premeditated; it is intuitive." (Atkinson & Claxton, 2003, p. 1)

AN ANECDOTAL BEGINNING

While perhaps somewhat unconventional, we would like to begin this editorial introduction to the Special Issue with an anecdote. The (rather short) story takes place a number of years ago as one of us was joining the teaching staff for an additional language (L+) program at a university here in Japan. Hidden away in a rather lengthy guidebook for new faculty, a short section described research activity within the program. One sentence is particularly pertinent to the theme of the current Special Issue, attempting to encourage new teachers to remain research active, even while teaching a relatively large number of courses:

> *In order to maintain the highest standards of pedagogical practice, we would urge you to engage in research- and theory-based teaching, not intuition-based teaching.*

We can certainly sympathise with the intention. As practitioner researchers, we constantly combine research and teaching, and indeed hold theory up to the light as we compare it with experiences in our lessons. However, the complete disavowal of intuition as something that might have a place in teaching is representative of the widespread explicit belief that intuition is to be avoided at all costs, something on a stratum beneath more rational, considered thinking. Naturally, choices made based on intuition can end up being wrong or inappropriate for the situation. Yet, we would urge – and hope the papers in this collection support such an argument – that we must not conflate intuition with guesswork or hasty decision-making. As Claxton (2003) explains, the "sense of intuition as something both 'higher' and mysterious – knowledge that claims to be true, but which cannot substantiate its claim except by appeal to divine authority – lingers to this day" (p. 33). As the anecdote epitomises, for many, it seems there is a stigma concerning intuition. We would suggest that such a stigma is founded in an insufficient or misguided view of this thinking process. What actually is intuition, then?

DEFINING INTUITION

Defining intuition is no easy task. As Epstein (2010, p. 295) notes, "There are few phenomena in the history of psychology that have so many different definitions as intuition." This is saying quite a lot, as we can all appreciate the degree to which Psychology (with a capital P) is littered with different definitions, conceptualizations, theories, and findings concerning the psychology (with a small p) that we all live as humans every day. Regardless, in any engagement with the literature, a reader will most likely encounter expressions such as "elusive," "slippery," or "intangible" used to describe the concept of intuition. Despite this state of affairs, the intricacies of intuition have become better understood in recent years. There has been a wealth of research and theorising into this fascinating dimension of human life for several decades, and not just as it relates to educational practice: There are publications in connection with the medical field (clinical judgement, see for example Greenhalgh, 2002; Pretz & Folse, 2011), business practices (Lank & Lank, 1995; Sadler-Smith, 2016), and even aviation work (Simpson, 2001). More recently, there have been several edited volumes dedicated to intuition research (Sinclair, 2014, 2020).

Emergent from such work, an integral understanding is that intuition is a way of knowing, strongly related to expertise and mastery. It is a form of tacit knowledge that builds up with experience. Intuition is an automated process of cognition that allows us to (re)act quickly in a situation that requires immediate and decisive steps without diverting too many mental resources. Once a person is familiar with an activity to the point that they can do it well without seeming to expend too much effort, it becomes natural. With this familiarity comes the ability to rapidly engage "appropriate responses to the richness of the context, thereby permitting the successfully intuitive situational response that is the hallmark of expertise" (Addis, 2018, p. 21). Intuition is, however, intrinsically different to the 'training' that would make the motions of, say, a factory worker or someone else employed in a repetitive task able to act efficiently and with relatively few mistakes. Intuition is reserved for decision making in-the-moment. It may moreover be based on not only experience but also emotional cues (known as somatic markers – see Damasio, 1996) or other types of social intelligence that develop over time by knowing what is generally the best course of action in a particular situation.

A point we would like to emphasise is that although intuition per se is the moment of decision, it is defined by any action one takes or any action one does not take. It is therefore vital to include the context, the before and the after, as well. We cannot divorce the intuition from the historical context of action within the classroom.

THE RELEVANCE OF INTUITION FOR L+ TEACHING

In bringing together this Special Issue, we would like to argue that intuition is of especial relevance when thinking about our language classrooms. As has been noted countless times before, and as the papers in this collection will constantly reiterate, during the course of a lesson, teachers make hundreds, and possibly thousands, of high- and low-level decisions about how to proceed or the best course of action.

> *Teachers are continuously making rapid, subtle decisions about how to respond to the dynamic, complex environment that classrooms constitute. Yet they often reach those decisions with seemingly little in the way of conscious reasoning or decision making. (Brown & Coles, 2003, p. 165)*

This string of decisions will be familiar to any practising teachers or lecturers, although not all of them are made at the same level of consciousness. Some examples to show what these rapid decisions might look like in practice:

- "Should I correct this student now, or let them carry on speaking?"
- "Is it time to end this task or do I let the class continue a little longer?"
- "Do I have time to do this activity or should I skip it, and if so, will it affect what the students need to know for the test?"
- "I know this student is capable of more than her test scores."

We would anticipate such a list to be familiar to anyone who has recently taught a class, and yet the items probably appear strange when written out or parsed in such full sentences. These are the kinds of decisions that we as language teachers might make, but rarely need to articulate in our heads (see also Atkinson, 2003, p. 54). It is often a case of knowing something, but perhaps not being able to say why we know. These decisions just form and are acted on, by our intuitions, as we continue the lesson. For experienced teachers, this becomes a natural process, but of course it would certainly be useful to be able to articulate more about how we know these things, what social cues we are reading, how these can be better understood and how we can test their validity.

ON REFLECTION

Intuition-level decisions that turned out well are likely to go by without further thought. Naturally, however, we may not always be satisfied with each and every one of the thousands of intuitions made over the course of a lesson. We will likely reflect (or, perhaps, ruminate) on those that we were not sure about. This reflection will contribute to our deepening of an understanding that, once it becomes tacit, can then feed back into our intuitive level decision making. In this regard, Atkinson and Claxton (2003) attempted to reframe Schön's (1983, 1987) model of the reflective practitioner. Developing Schön's distinction between knowledge in action and reflection in action, they argue that thinking in the action is a product of intuition, which they term the intuitive practitioner. In these moments, "The teacher is not reflecting consciously but is functioning intuitively" (Atkinson & Claxton, 2003, p. 5). They contend that, whilst intuitive action may not be easily explained by the teacher and may seem to be unconscious, it is based on something more tangible, often developed through experience and confirmed with evidence from practice. A similar distinction was made as far back as 1945 in Ryle's famous paper named "Knowing How and Knowing That," which distinguished explicit knowledge from tacit knowledge (see Lum, 2018 for further expansion in relation to intuition and expertise).

One of Bruner's (1960) most famous contributions to educational theory also strongly invokes intuition and intuitive knowing as a valid manifestation of teaching expertise, although he points out that it should be coupled with more analytic thinking. Intuition allows teachers to act quickly, based on their familiarity with the context and content, "skipping steps and employing shortcuts in a manner that requires a later rechecking of conclusions by

more analytic means, whether deductive or inductive" (Bruner, 1960, p. 58).

Despite these links with reflection and types of knowing, it is worth returning to an additional caveat made by Atkinson and Claxton (2003), amongst others, that too much reflection can actually impair intuition and lead to overthinking. This is exactly why this Special Issue looking at intuition and practitioner research should be valuable, as much practitioner research by its very nature encourages in-depth reflection and data-driven observations about actions taken in-the-moment of teaching (Claxton, 2003). For example, Pinner (2019) described having reached a point of saturation he termed *hyper-reflexivity* after keeping a very detailed teaching journal during a year-long autoethnographic piece of evidence-based reflective practitioner research, concluding that too much overthinking eventually led to 'paralysis' (p. 214). This is what happens when the mind is overloaded with questions and too many of our cognitive resources are utilised trying to make sense of the strata of decisions that drive our everyday practice. Other research has shown that overthinking actually leads to worse decisions when compared with more intuitive choices (Leisti & Häkkinen, 2016; Thorsteinson & Withrow, 2009). In one famous study, Wilson and Schooler (1991) gave participants a choice of different brands of strawberry jam. Some students were told they would need to justify their choices afterwards. Those of the students who did not have to explain themselves ranked the jams in a way that coincided more strongly with a ranking that had been published earlier by tasting experts. The authors concluded that being forced to explain yourself can lead to impaired judgement. However, we would like to assert that, when done correctly, practitioner research can be used to facilitate better practice, in both reflective and intuitive domains.

PRACTITIONER RESEARCH

As if grappling with intuition in L+ teaching was not enough, this Special Issue is not solely dedicated to educators' psychologies in pedagogical practice. Rather, the papers variously address the particular role of intuition in educational practitioner research. This form of study involves "practitioners (teachers, teacher educators, learners, etc.) conducting purposeful, systematic, ethical, and critical enquiries into their own practices, in their own contexts, with the aim of extending understanding(s) of educational processes and human behaviour" (Hanks, 2017, p. 41). That is, teachers (sometimes hand-in-hand with learners) themselves become researchers of our own practice and educational experience.

If language teachers make a myriad of intuitive decisions every lesson, and practitioner research blends a teaching role with a researching role, it goes without saying that we as practitioner researchers will equally draw heavily on intuitions throughout our empirical endeavours. Especially in the course of a practitioner research project, we need to rapidly adapt in reaction to our reading of the educational contexts and the learners with whom we are endeavouring to deepen understandings. McNiff and Whitehead (2011, p. 35) remark that as practitioner researchers, we "look out for what might be a useful way forward, and try it out." While we certainly construct plans and hold intentions for our studies, practitioner research is particularly sensitive to possibilities for new directions of inquiry. What we therefore additionally hope to show in this collection of papers is that practitioner researchers may not stick rigidly to initial plans or understandings; yet equally, we do not simply snap our fingers and magically adjust our intentions and ideas. Intuition plays a key role.

Here, we have a slight conundrum. Reflection is one of the most common tools for practitioner researchers to obtain data and develop our practice and expertise. However, we have just argued that too much reflection, or overthinking things, can lead to 'paralysis' and dissatisfaction with choices that we have made. How then can we overcome this seeming contradiction? What is too much of a good thing? We would like to ground our response in one of the many criticisms levelled at intuition – that it may be incorrect, inaccurate, or based on untested assumptions. Reflection forces us to look at the data and form deeper understandings of a situation or outcome. More generally, practitioner research looks at a number of different types of data, and when done well, this data is then used to build up a more accurate and reliable picture of whatever is happening in the classroom.

A dilemma frequently mentioned for those attempting to implement practitioner research in education settings is the time and pressure that it might add to the already busy lives of teachers (Allwright, 2005; Dörnyei, 2007). Indeed, in opposition to one of the most well-known forms of practitioner inquiry, action research, Allwright (2005, pp.

354–355) stresses that it is 'parasitic' and could lead to 'burnout' due to the time-demands on teachers. However, in a variety of forms, many of us do nevertheless engage in practitioner research. As Burns et al. (2017, p. 13) have previously urged, "honest, reflective documentation of achievements and difficulties in implementing teacher-research (...) needs to be encouraged." We hope, then, that this collection will also furnish a unique, yet essential perspective on the thinking processes that emerge and impact during the course of the sometimes hectic experience of being a teacher and researcher in L+ educational contexts.

OUTLINE OF THE CONTRIBUTIONS

In addition to this Editorial Introduction, the Special Issue draws together a collection of six articles offered by contributors from around the world.

First, **Anne Burns** (University of New South Wales, Australia) and **Paul Williams** (Central Queensland University, Australia) share their experiences of working together on a professional development program involving action research. Their collaboration offers two distinct and interesting perspectives on the program, one from the researcher (Paul) and the other from the facilitator (Anne). The narrative takes place during the initial outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, and deals with the difficulties that arose and adaptations that the researcher had to make in order to accommodate the switch to emergency remote teaching. This fascinating narrative provides first-hand accounts and further commentaries on how intuition intersected with the teaching, research and the facilitation of the project. Due to the unprecedented issues they faced in-light of the pandemic, they relied on intuition and reflection as they responded to the needs of their participants and learners. They conclude with implications about how action research may act as a catalyst for researchers and teachers, recognising the role and value of intuition in teaching practices.

Richard Pinner (Sophia University, Japan) and **Judith Hanks** (University of Leeds, United Kingdom) conducted a series of focused discussions in an attempt to talk intuition into consciousness. In this study, the method and the data merge into one as a deeper understanding of the role of intuition in teaching and research emerges through a discursive process of questioning and explaining. This discursive pattern of knowledge creation has been advocated as a way of deepening and strengthening reflections, giving them a heightened validity through the involvement of others (Walsh & Mann, 2015). This paper also talks extensively about exploratory practice (Hanks, 2017), and the way teachers and learners may share mutual experiences and collaborate together in their learning journeys. The difficulty of delineating context from action is discussed, in relation to the way groups respond to specific circumstances. The authors discuss how they navigate the constant network of decisions that need to be made in-situ and in-the-moment as teacher/researchers during classroom practice.

Sam Morris (Rikkyo University, Japan), **Kie Yamamoto** (Wayo Women's University, Japan), and **Jim King** (University of Leicester, United Kingdom) discuss the power of stimulated recall in identifying the role of intuition in practitioner research. Using reflecting examples from the authors' own research projects, they highlight how they were able to identify intuitive moments in their own research, and the course of action these steered them towards. In the final section of their paper, they propose the practitioner researcher intuition in stimulated recall model, a tool which they hope will enable practitioners to appropriately question intuition and strive towards the creation of more valid and ethical research principles.

Richard Sampson's (Rikkyo University, Japan) contribution delves into the anatomy of intuition for practitioner researchers. The paper uses an autoethnographic case study approach to examine the author's experience of 'intuitive moments.' Sampson draws on data from his own practitioner journals written over three different classroom action research projects. As a result of the retrospective analysis, he structures the findings around the different forms of intuition previously delineated by John (2003), whilst adding an additional form. Sampson describes that these forms of intuition had different degrees of connection to his roles as teacher and researcher, though with constant overlap. The six forms of practitioner researcher 'intuitive moments' were: mood assessment, improvisation, problem avoidance, envisaging direction, learning opportunity creation, and student-personalised actions. Throughout the article and findings, Sampson stresses the need to consider intuitions as localised perceptions and adaptations situated within longer timescale-tacit understandings and experiences.

Next, **Anne Feryok**'s (University of Otago, New Zealand) article provides a fine lens on a case of intuition failing during a research interview. Aligning with Radford's (2007, p. 276) assertion that the (practitioner) research process might be enhanced via analysis that is "historical, exploratory, interactive and reflectively analytical," Feryok returns to data from an interview after almost ten years. By coming back to the data, Feryok was able to uncover the way that her intuitions from the start of the interview – in the form of assumptions about this particular interviewee and the direction of the interaction – fractured the participant's verbalised reflection of his identity (Rawls & Duck, 2017). Via examining the interview in full, Feryok concludes that the resultant mutual misunderstanding was resolved not by 'talking about talking,' but by the unstated commitment – another form of intuition – of both parties to continue the interview. While the interview had not drawn out the initially-intended research perspective, the article illustrates a specific case in which intuitions derailed a research interview as an interview, yet saved it as an interaction.

Finally, **Ema Ushioda** (University of Warwick, United Kingdom) shares a theoretical consideration of the ethical complexities of practitioner research into the psychology of language learning. Framing her arguments around what she terms a person-focused (rather than systems-focused) approach to researching the lived experiences of real people, Ushioda's article explores the role of intuition in the contextualised decision-making of practitioner researchers. Her article highlights a number of potential benefits and challenges of relying on intuition to engage with ethical complexities as practitioners relate with students in the course of their dual roles as teacher and researcher. Importantly, Ushioda comes to the conclusion that both intuitive and reflexive forms of thinking underpin sound ethical practice and decision-making during the course of practitioner inquiry.

MOVING FORWARD

When we were considering proposing a Special Issue of this journal, our initial idea was to focus on practitioner inquiries into the psychology of language learning and teaching. At some point as the two of us were adding to the proposal over a number of days, dealing with everything else naturally going on in our (working) lives, Richard Pinner appended a focus on intuition. With apologies to RP, Richard S was somewhat skeptical to say the least – to him, it seemed like trying to bite off just a little too much of a rather overwhelmingly complex pie.

Richard S' concerns slightly abated when we concurrently approached one of our (eventual) authors with the idea. She not only expressed an interest in contributing, but remarked expressly that the focus on intuition would make this a fascinating SI. Certainly, our own experience of editing this collection aligns with such a stance (and RS is now fully on-board!). The process of working on our own articles not only gave us insights into what an intriguing and empirically-ripe area this is, but increased our awareness of the permeation of intuition throughout our practice. We have additionally received many gratifying emails from our contributors noting just how stimulating it was for them to consider the concept of intuition in more depth. This enthusiasm is reflected in their articles, which provide a sense of the diverse approaches via which we could build a more nuanced appreciation of intuition in our field. We hope that the collection might spark your own interest in this thought-provoking (with apologies for the pun) dimension of our human experience and practice.

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