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Interdisciplinary Research Methods: Considering the Potential of Community-based Participatory Research in Translation

Abstract

Different disciplines have different research traditions, including the use of discipline-specific research methods. However, adopting methods from other disciplines can provide fresh perspectives and lead to new insights. Community-based participatory research (CBPR) originated in the population and public health field, but it has potential to be applied in a broader range of disciplines. This article explains the fundamental characteristics of CBPR, explores some misconceptions associated with this method, and describes some potential barriers to its application. Finally, using the example of a machine translation literacy project, the article walks readers through this example of how CBPR was applied to a translation-related research project and evaluates the success of this method for the project.

Keywords

action research, community, interdisciplinarity, machine translation literacy, participatory research

1. Introduction

The overarching theme of the Third Conference on Interdisciplinarity in Translation and Interpretation is “Telescope or Periscope: An interdisciplinary look into the future”. In keeping with that theme, this paper will explore

interdisciplinarity from the perspective of research methods and consider whether integrating methods from other disciplines can enrich research in translation studies. More specifically, we first reflect on why it is important for translation researchers to consider methods from other disciplines, before introducing an approach known as community-based participatory research (CBPR), which is most commonly associated with population or public health research (e.g. Winterbauer et al. 2016; Kwon et al. 2018). We explore the potential advantages of adopting CBPR, as well as possible barriers to the uptake of this approach. Finally, we examine how this method could be applied to translation-related research using an example of a project on machine translation literacy that adopted a CBPR approach; however, because this is a methods paper, not a results paper, the focus is on describing and evaluating the potential of this method for translation research, rather than on presenting the findings of a specific research project.

2. Borrowing methods from other disciplines

According to Nyden (2003), although university faculty members typically consider themselves to be among the more open-minded and progressive members of our society, they are – perhaps somewhat ironically – also staunch defenders of academic traditions, such as how research is done and how research outcomes are used. In Nyden’s (2003) opinion, a combination of traditionalism and turf protection can generate resistance to research methods coming from elsewhere. However, as pointed out by Woolf (2017), given the complexity of the social, economic, political, environmental and technological challenges that are facing the world, our society needs researchers to get on board with the idea – and the practice – of interdisciplinary research. According to Woolf, in the past couple of decades,

interdisciplinary research [...] has gone from “nice to have” to “need to have”. [...] Why, exactly? Because it exposes specialists in one area to other perspectives and ways of thinking, challenging received truths and spurring creativity and innovation. (n.p.)

Moreover, Woolf (2017) goes on to emphasize that interdisciplinarity is not just something to be applied across the hard sciences, but something that must extend to the social sciences as well.

Over the past quarter century, a number of translation studies scholars have advocated for the adoption of a more interdisciplinary approach (e.g. Snell-Hornby et al. 1994; Gentzler 2003, 2014; Lambert 2012; Gambier and van Doorslaer 2016). According to Gentzler, the move towards interdisciplinarity has proved to be a positive one: “By borrowing ideas and concepts from other disciplines, translation studies scholars were able to gain great insight into additional translational phenomena, and the field experienced another boom” (2014: 18). However, in some ways, this level of interdisciplinarity witnessed in the 1990s and early 2000s did not go far enough as it primarily borrowed from other fields in the humanities and social sciences, such as philosophy, psychology, anthropology, feminism and postcolonial studies (Gentzler 2003). Meanwhile, as illustrated more recently in Gambier and van Doorslaer (2016), there is scope for translation researchers to learn from a wider array of fields, including business, technology and the sciences.

For instance, in the field of population and public health, an approach known as community-based participatory research (CBPR) has been widely applied by researchers and practitioners to address health disparities and community empowerment for health promotion. Yahya et al. undertook a systematic review of the CBPR literature in order to synthesize and evaluate it, and after studying this literature, they concluded that “interventions that included community involvement have the potential to make important differences to levels of activities and should be promoted” (2012: 387). By introducing translation researchers to a method that has proven to be successful in health research but that is not yet well known in translation studies, we hope to inspire some of the creativity and innovation that Woolf (2017) refers to above, and to encourage research that will make a difference in communities where translation is needed and used.

3. Community-based participatory research

It is generally acknowledged that so-called *action research* originated in the 1940s with work done by psychologist Kurt Lewin to engage minority groups “as a means to overcome forces of exploitation and colonization” (MacKinnon 2018: 4). Numerous researchers, including Israel et al. (1998), Holkup et al. (2004), Jull et al. (2017) and MacKinnon (2018), have observed

that the terminology used to describe various types of action research is diverse and overlapping and can be confusing:

Names for this methodology include terms such as *action research*, *participatory research*, *participatory action research*, *community-based research*, *action science*, *action inquiry*, and *cooperative enquiry*. Some authors use the terms action research and participatory action research synonymously. Others distinguish between them, placing the two terms on opposite ends of a continuum, with action research representing utilitarian, problem-solving approaches on one end and participatory action research representing emancipatory or transformative action on the other end of the continuum. Others assert that action research represents a broad umbrella under which participatory research may be subsumed. (Holkup et al. 2004: 163)

While it is difficult to produce an agreed-upon typology of types of action research, we can observe that all of them are action-oriented and all recognize the importance of involving members of the study population in the research process. Within the health field, it has become quite common to engage marginalized communities, and the term community-based participatory research (CBPR) is most often used there.

At its core, CBPR is a collaborative approach that seeks to address a locally relevant issue. This approach intentionally engages researchers and community members in all aspects of the research process, including decision-making, capacity building, knowledge generation and dissemination of findings. Israel et al. (1998: 178-180) outline the core principles of CBPR, which is a research method that

- Recognizes the community as a unit of identity;
- Builds on strengths and resources within the community;
- Facilitates a collaborative, equitable partnership in all phases of the research;
- Fosters co-learning and capacity building among all partners;
- Balances knowledge and action for the mutual benefit of all partners;
- Addresses locally relevant problems;
- Occurs in a cyclical and iterative process that includes ongoing evaluation of successes and obstacles;
- Disseminates findings and knowledge gained to all partners;
- Involves a long- term process and commitment to sustainability.

Meanwhile, Riffen et al. (2016: 219) point to a number of advantages to be gained from adopting a CBPR approach, including:

- Ensuring that the research topic reflects a genuine issue identified by the community;
- Improving the quality, validity and sensitivity of the research by drawing on community wisdom;
- Promoting trust between communities and researchers;
- Facilitating the transformation of research findings into policy and practice; and
- Enhancing the uptake of the research findings by community members.

Of course, while implementing CBPR offers numerous benefits, the choice of methodology for any research project should be made with a full understanding of what this method entails and an evaluation of its appropriateness for the project at hand.

4. Misconceptions and concerns about CBPR and barriers to its uptake

MacKinnon (2018: 6) laments that a superficial understanding of CBPR is relatively common, and she emphasizes that CBPR entails much more than simply undertaking research in a community. She recounts several incidents of university researchers asking community-based organizations for a letter of support, claiming that their projects are grounded in community-based research, even though the organizations themselves have had no awareness of or input into the projects. Similarly, Fitzpatrick shares an example where a community member recounts: “It was a feeling of being under the microscope. You felt stigmatized, even though they [researchers] might have had the best intentions” (2013: 14).

Mackinnon goes on to emphasize that instead of a researcher asking “How do I find a community organization that would like to work with me on my research?” (2018: 6), the best CBPR projects tend to unfold in the opposite direction, with the community approaching a researcher with whom it has established a relationship of trust. The researcher then works with the community to move its ideas forward in a way that is meaningful to this community. Fitzpatrick concurs and emphasizes that “the bonds of trust are critical” (2013: 14).

In addition, MacKinnon (2018: 6-7) warns that CBPR should not become opportunistic, and she cites three issues that could potentially lead

to such a circumstance. Firstly, she notes that in an age of corporatization, basic research seems to be losing ground in favour of research that addresses market needs. As a result, the trend toward collaborations between universities and communities has emerged partly out of necessity as funding agencies prioritize research that involves partnerships with groups outside academia. What's more, the increased interest in CBPR is also partly owing to the mounting pressure on universities to show that they are more than just ivory towers with no links to the real world. Finally, MacKinnon points to prior precedents where outside experts have done research *on* communities rather than collaborating *with* them and recognizing their expertise – a situation that has led to community concerns and which should be avoided.

With regard to barriers that might hinder the adoption of CBPR methods, Nyden observes that universities “are typically the arbiters of who has the appropriate knowledge to define researchable issues and who is qualified to do research” (2003: 576). CBPR represents a challenge to those traditions, and Nyden urges researchers not to view CBPR as a replacement for traditional discipline-driven research but rather as a complement to it. There is no reason that the two cannot co-exist.

Meanwhile, MacKinnon (2018: 7) points out that the structures in place to finance research present a dilemma for both universities and community researchers who wish to pursue egalitarian approaches that value diverse forms of knowledge. Although funding bodies are increasingly encouraging community collaboration, the requirements and models of practice tend to remain largely hierarchical in design, placing a higher value on academic credentials than on community-based knowledge.

In addition, Nyden (2003) and Fitzpatrick (2013) both observe that the traditional system of academic rewards and incentives, which includes tenure and promotion, is not always a good fit for CBPR because community partnerships do not generally hold as much sway with tenure and promotion committees as do scholarly publications that appear in journals with high impact factors. Scholars interviewed for Fitzpatrick's (2013) article emphasize the need for a broader definition of *impact* given that a well-received academic publication may be forgotten a year later, whereas work that makes a real difference in a community could continue to have a ripple effect for several decades. Outputs produced as part of CBPR projects could include briefs written for government, resource kits, videos or other items that could be of immediate and practical use

to a community. Fitzpatrick (2013) observes that scholars have the power to advocate for a change in the way that these non-traditional outputs are viewed. For instance, he interviewed one scholar who stated that, when reviewing grant applications, she now assesses whether the principal investigators have plans for hiring and building capacity within the community by asking questions such as: “Are they planning community forums where they will disseminate the knowledge? Will they be writing a plain-language report that will be given back to the community? Will they publish in journals that are available online, so communities can have access?” (Fitzpatrick 2013: 14). If more researchers begin asking such questions as part of the peer-review process, then CBPR projects may start to be considered as equal to, if different from, those that adopt more traditional research methods.

5. Adopting a CBPR approach for research in translation: An example

The previous sections have indicated why it can be beneficial to consider methods from other disciplines and have explained what the CBPR approach entails. Now, as an example, let us turn our attention to a project that was carried out in the area of machine translation literacy and examine how CBPR was implemented as part of this research.

Academic libraries must be responsive to their communities’ needs. Communities are constantly evolving, so libraries must monitor changes and adapt their services accordingly. One way that university communities are changing is through internationalization. For instance, more universities are welcoming students from other countries (IIE 2019), and an increasing number of countries where English is not an official language are offering university courses taught through the medium of English (Wächter and Maiworm 2014). As a result, a growing number of non-Anglophone students need to conduct their studies in English, and they may require support to succeed in this endeavour.

In 2019, the library at Concordia University in Canada wanted to offer support to international students who were not Anglophones, but who needed to read and write in English as part of their program of study. The library

contacted a translation studies researcher for assistance designing and delivering a workshop on machine translation literacy (Bowker and Buitrago-Ciro 2019), which would allow the students to become more critical and informed users of machine translation during their studies.

In keeping with a CBPR approach, the project was initiated by the library, who had identified a genuine problem among their patrons and who needed support to help design an appropriate solution. However, the translation researcher was not considered to be the only or the best source of knowledge for addressing this need. In addition, two other groups at the University who were knowledgeable about and who worked directly with international students were invited to contribute also – the International Students Office and the Student Success Centre. Moreover, with support from the library, the translation researcher also hired graduate student research assistants to work on the project: One was an international student studying translation, and another was an international student studying library science. In this way, actual community members – international students – were directly involved in the project design and development.

At the invitation of the library, the translation researcher took the lead in preparing a first draft of the content for a machine translation literacy workshop, but the other groups responded with suggestions for modifications or improvements. One key suggestion that came from the Student Success Centre was to incorporate a section on academic integrity and machine translation into the workshop. This recommendation was based on observations that the Student Success Centre employees had made in previous years where they had assisted international students who were struggling to apply appropriate referencing and citation practices to work being produced in a multilingual context.

In addition to having two team members who were international students, another way that the community members were directly integrated into the project development was through a pre-test. Before launching the workshop with a large group of students, the team organized a pre-test where two international students experienced the workshop as it was originally designed. These two participants had different profiles:

- **Student 1:** female, undergraduate student, studying Business, from China and a native speaker of Mandarin;
- **Student 2:** male, graduate student, studying Engineering, from Bangladesh and a native speaker of Bangla.

These two students listened to the workshop presentation and were invited to give feedback on ways that the workshop could be improved before it was launched on a larger scale. Overall, the material was well received with both participants indicating that they had learned new and useful information. With regard to improvements, the students who participated in the pre-test made two main recommendations: 1) try to reduce the amount of specialized technical terminology used in favour of plain language wherever possible, and 2) highlight which of the freely available machine translations worked best for different language combinations.

Finally, an important element of CBPR is ensuring that the outputs of the project are not limited to academic publications. In this case, the team co-authored a publication that reported on the workshop experience to appear in a professional volume aimed at practicing librarians (Bowker et al. in press, 2021). By sharing their experience with a professional library audience, the research team hopes to inspire other university libraries to build on this model and offer machine translation literacy workshops at their own institutions. In addition, the research team also produced a guest post entitled “Tips to Work More Effectively with Machine Translation”, which appeared on the blog maintained by the Student Success Centre and was therefore accessible to all students (Bowker et al. 2019). By sharing some of the main elements of the machine translation literacy workshop in a public and easily accessible blog post, which is promoted to all students at the university, the researchers hope to make concrete tips available to students who may not have attended the workshop but who would nonetheless benefit from becoming more savvy users of machine translation.

Overall, the CBPR approach to research was a positive experience that strengthened the quality of the team’s work by ensuring that it responded directly to a genuine challenge that was identified in the community, and that the workshop content was appropriately tailored to the community’s needs. The end-of-workshop evaluations completed by the participants showed a high level of appreciation for the workshop, suggesting that it helped to make a real difference to the students. Moreover, in addition to the workshop itself, other results of the project were shared with audiences (i.e., librarians and international students) in forms that were accessible to them and which could be of immediate practical use (e.g. to design a similar workshop at another university library, or to get concrete tips for

using machine translation more effectively as an international student). Therefore, while CBPR might not necessarily be the best method to use for every translation research project, it seems to be worthy of inclusion in the translation researcher's toolbox for consideration alongside other traditional and in-discipline methods.

6. Conclusion

According to the systematic review carried out by Yahya et al., when CBPR is adopted for research in population or public health, "the findings show that collaboration among community partners, researchers, and organizations led to community-level action to improve the health and wellbeing and to minimize health disparities" (2012: 387). In other words, implementing an approach where community members are involved as partners in the research process generally has a positive effect in the health field. However, this method has not been widely adopted outside the health field to date, and so Nyden (2003: 581) emphasizes the importance of fostering faculty and student interest in CBPR in order to combat academic conservatism against non-traditional and non-discipline-based research approaches. Indeed, according to Nyden, because CBPR research supports interdisciplinarity, "community-based participatory research may be one tool that future-oriented university administrators can use to break down decades-old disciplinary turf boundaries and create an effective and responsive university" (2003: 578). We hope that by raising awareness about CBPR in the translation community, we can empower translation researchers to consider how this method that was initially developed and popularized in the health field could be usefully applied to future research in translation studies.

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