

PILOT STUDY SCREENCAST TRANSCRIPT: PEPPER AND TRISCUIT GO TO SCHOOL!

Narrated by Dr. Bonnie Stelmach

[0:00-0:42] Title slide:

Hi! I'm Dr. Bonnie Stelmach, a rural educational researcher from the University of Alberta. In this 10 minute screencast I'd like to share information about a pilot study that was conducted to refine the current research study at New Humble Community School. Pepper and Triscuit are the two pygmy goats that have lived in the New Humble School barnyard since the inception of the school. You can see from the picture that they are friendly, and they are definitely entertaining, too! Delimiting the study to the animals ensured a manageable project – all pilot studies are small studies. Focusing on learning with animals was one of the foci suggested to the Board following the Growing Together dinner when we were first figuring out what the study should be in April 2022.

Slide 2:

[0:42-1:30] Point 1: To evaluate and refine the research design

Pilot studies add significant value to a research study. Not all researchers conduct pilot studies before the “real” study; however, in planning the research at New Humble Community School I was entering a new methodological landscape of engaging in community-based research. A pilot helps researchers evaluate and refine the research design, including methodology and data collection. My passion for learning about rural school innovation was unquestionable. But my signature on the research community at that point was on the topic of parents' roles in secondary schooling, so I was confident about and familiar with conducting interviews with high school students, parents, teachers, and community members – basically, adults! The chief data source for the research at New Humble was going to be K-6 students. This meant a new mindset and skills for working with and learning from young students.

[1:31-2:00] Point 2: To try out the data collection strategies and revise as necessary

From my point of view, the key reason for the pilot was to give me a chance to practice collecting data with young participants. In particular, I wanted to test my interview questions to see if they were age appropriate and if they would elicit responses that would give me appropriate data. My research assistant at the time was a 4th year education student, Mr. Jihoon Jang, who was hired thanks to a grant I received from the Winter 2023 Undergraduate Research Award from the Faculty of Education. I made up questions to start us off, and then Jihoon and I revised them after each interview.

[2:01-2:10] Point 3: To gain familiarity with the research context

Although I had been visiting New Humble for about a year to discuss research possibilities, a pilot affords the researcher more time at the site to become familiar with the context.

[2:10-2:34] *Point 4: To troubleshoot logistical and methodological issues*

Besides figuring out WHAT to ask, I had to figure out HOW to ask young students to ensure I got more than monosyllabic answers. After consulting available scholarship, I realized that the interview itself had to be more than sitting down at a table and talking – that would not likely sustain students’ interest for long! Having some practice allowed me to troubleshoot the questions and the interview process itself.

[2:35-2:47] *Point 5: To provide insights into the nature of the data and how it can be analyzed*

Although the sample was rather small for this pilot, having some data from a pilot also helps researchers get a sense of what the data will be like, and to begin to form conceptual ideas that will lead to eventual theorizing.

[2:48-3:16]

Point 6: To provide insights into the nature of the data and how it can be analyzed

The first step in any research study where human participants are involved is obtaining approval from the university ethics board. Interviewing young children involves more steps than interviewing adults, and because I was proposing to take pictures of students’ drawings, and use a GoPro for walking interviews with students, I knew that going through the ethics application process would help me to assess ethical and sensitivity issues. It was certainly a helpful experience that made the ethics application for the current study go very smoothly.

[3:17-4:01]

Point 7: To gain stakeholder confidence in the researcher’s ability to plan and successfully conduct a study

Finally, the teachers, staff, and Board knew that I was a qualitative researcher, but I admitted that elementary school contexts were new for me. Although we had spent a year discussing research directions, and I had visited the school many times, I felt it was still important for them to see me in action as a researcher. Gaining stakeholder confidence in my ability to plan and successfully execute the study was another reason for conducting a pilot. The New Humble community saw that I could obtain research grants as well - I had obtained 2 internal grants from the faculty. This, too, was important as I was anticipating an application to Alberta Education’s Research Partnerships Program. I felt we were ideally positioned to be successful in applying for that grant - and we were!

[4:02-4:33] Slide 3:

As I mentioned, the ethics approval was relatively smooth. The extra step when including young research participants is that student assent must be obtained in addition to parent consent. Privacy issues when using a GoPro for walking interviews or taking photos of students’ creations or drawings are also important. When walking interviews were conducted, I sent the video to the parents. I did the same with photos of their drawings or playdough creations. Parents were also invited to be present during the interview, and one parent chose to do so.

[4:34-5:53] Slide 4:

I will admit, that many of the interview strategies that were tried came to me serendipitously! For example, when I was shopping on Amazon for a birthday present for a 7 year-old, I came across “conversation cards” that families could use to have discussions with their children...that gave me the idea to turn the interview into a game. Jihoon typed up questions on cue cards. We duplicated cards so that we could have stacks of two, numbered 1-6 so that students could roll a die and then would have a “choice’ between two cards (they of course didn’t know that the questions on the cards were the same!). Some of the question cards gave students a chance to play a game, such as “What’s For Lunch?” in which we asked students what was in their lunch for the day, and they looked at pictures of animals or plants to identify any sources of their lunch. The interviews were not a test, but I wanted to discern how the agriculture lens impacted their ability to draw connections between food sources and what was in the school barnyard or garden.

The students really seemed to enjoy rolling the die, so this was helpful for ensuring engagement. We also liked the idea of having the interview be as experiential as possible to align with New Humble’s charter goals. Students also had options to draw their answers or create something out of playdough. These were ideas I had read about in the scholarship. I was surprised that not many students chose to draw, and even fewer chose to use the playdough.

[5:54-6:17] Slide 5:

We also practiced walking interviews with a couple of students, using the GoPro. We wanted to see if it would be more natural for students to be out and about, and able to show us things rather than only talk about them. Students were asked to take us to some place that they thought was most interesting when it comes to their school experiences - they all, perhaps unsurprisingly, chose to take us to the barnyard to see the animals.

[6:17-7:00] Slide 6:

I learned that walking interviews gave more opportunities for students to perhaps share their expertise, and for information to be offered that might not have been in a face-to-face interview. For example, when standing by the steer pen and asking about the students’ learning about caring for the steers, I had put my hand through the fence to pet one of the steers and the student cautioned me about where to place my hand to ensure that the animal didn’t move its head and accidentally wedge my arm and injure it. From this one little exchange I learned that the student had knowledge about animal behaviour that included safety, but also, this student was confident and caring enough to share this with an adult. It’s not that often that children are telling adults to be careful, is it?

[7:01-7:27] Slide 7:

The data collection included individual interviews with 8 K-6 students, 3 teachers, 1 parent, 1 focus group with teachers, and classroom observations.

What did we learn? We gained insights into how children perceive and experience the presence of animals in their learning environment, and how it contributes to developing essential life

skills. For example, in the classes and responses to the interview questions, students demonstrated the following:

[7:28-7:40] Point 1: Responsibility & work ethic

A strong sense of responsibility and a strong work ethic, a consequence of the daily chores, including chores within the school. Many students also talked about participating in chores at home, which was a bridge in their learning.

[7:41-7:50] Point 2: Conceptual specificity about animals

Students not only knew about agriculture, but they had conceptual specificity - they taught me things about animals that I didn't know, even though I grew up on a farm!

[7:50-8:08] Point 3: Connection to Food Sources

Students were definitely connected to their food sources. What was interesting about their understanding of where food comes from, is how open they were to a variety of food sources, including wild game. No students cringed at the idea of eating animals they see out in the wild, even if they hadn't eaten it before.

[8:09-8:20] Point 4: Commitment to sustainability

Sustainability was part of their repertoire - land stewardship was often articulated in terms of protecting trees to ensure fresh air, and refraining from littering.

[8:21-8:32] Point 5-6: Understanding of animal life cycle and Understanding of agricultural economics

Some students were well aware of the costs of raising an animal, which showed knowledge of agricultural economics. The school was engaged in selling eggs and vegetables, so they gained knowledge from those experiences.

[8:33-8:51] Point 7: Confidence and Social Skills

The interview process itself offered an excellent demonstration of students' confidence in having a conversation with an adult who is a stranger (this is risk-taking and social skills), their ability to follow instructions, and even their manners, such as when they thanked us for the interview and wished us a good day.

[8:52-9:00] Point 8: I learned how fun it is to interview young students! A key learning for us was how to be creative in our interviewing strategies!

[9:01-10:09] Slide 8:

Working with Jihoon was also incredibly insightful. Jihoon had moved from South Korea to Vancouver at the age of 14, and except for experiences during his first degree in Forestry, he had never been in rural Canada. In fact, Jihoon told me that when he landed in Vancouver at the age of 14 he thought he landed in rural Canada! Rural Alberta was new to Jihoon and so he saw things with fresher eyes than I! Jihoon said that it was an excellent opportunity to witness firsthand, the profound impact that learning environments can have on students. Jihoon is now

a Grade 5/6 teacher in Vancouver, and although he cannot have a barnyard, he has an aquarium in his classroom. Somewhat unrelated, but equally interesting to me, is that Jihoon has returned to Alberta during holidays more than once since completing his assistantship, and he has taken friends to the “So Good” coffeehouse in Calmar, the town close to New Humble School. Jihoon developed an appreciation for rural communities that would not have happened had he not participated in the pilot. This is all thanks to his experiences at New Humble Community School.

[10:10-10:27] Slide 9:

This pilot study was conducted between February and March, 2023. I would like to thank the Faculty of Education for funding this pilot, and Leah Peters, a current education undergraduate student who is now assisting with this project for creating this screencast so that we could share the research journey.

Total Time [10:27]