# Educational Research as an Authentic Learning Situation

Perspectives of a Student Co-Researcher
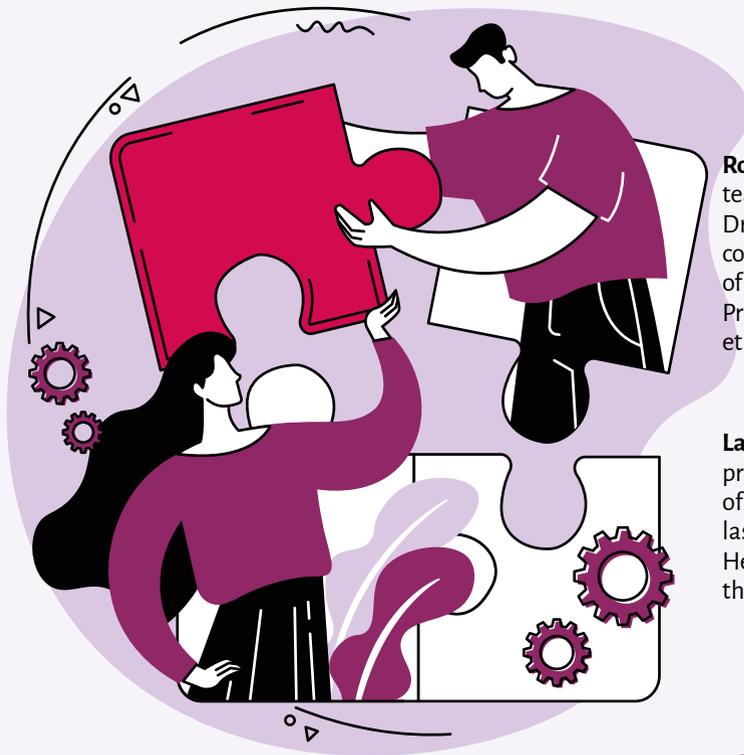
Roxane Doré is a researcher, French literature teacher and pedagogical counsellor at Cégep de Drummondville. She is currently conducting a collaborative action research project on the teaching of French literature at the college level[1] funded by the Programme d'aide à la recherche sur l'enseignement et l'apprentissage (PAREA).

Laurence Roy is a research assistant in the PAREA project in which Roxane collaborates. At the time of the conversation, Laurence was finishing her last session at Cégep de Drummondville in the Health Sciences profile. She is now studying in the Pharmacy program at Université Laval.

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[1] With the collaboration of Catherine Bélec, researcher, French literature teacher and coordinator of the LabSEL at Cégep Gérald-Godin.

The PAREA program regularly supports college initiatives in the implementation of research related to pedagogy. In recent years, the program has added an obligation to its requirements: any researcher presenting a project must commit to including a student on their research team. While this obligation is theoretically very interesting, it nevertheless implies a certain pragmatic reflection for the research team: how to choose this student resource? What tasks should be entrusted to them? How should they be supervised? What ethical dimensions should be considered? Moreover, the inclusion of a student also leads to a reflection on the posture of the research team toward this person: will they interact with the student based on the principle of equality? Do they want to train this person in research, or give them basic tasks that will make them an "administrative" resource? Behind this question lies another, more fundamental question: what can a student really gain from the experience of participating in an educational research project? This article presents, through a retrospective dialogue, the research team members' experience of including a student in the current PAREA project, as well as the perspective of the student who took part.

Roxane Doré – First, let me provide some background to situate our readership. In May 2021, Catherine Bélec and I were awarded a PAREA grant to conduct a collaborative research study in 2021-2022. The project aims to have its participants experiment with a new didactic approach to literature in order to validate its desirability, feasibility and viability. The project takes the form of qualitative action research and involves extensive data collection, including professional narratives and journal entries. Among the methods of analysis chosen is the technique of thematic analysis. Broadly speaking, we wish to assess whether the proposed didactic approach is perceived by teachers as having value for their students' learning, but also to evaluate whether it is possible to integrate this approach into the participants' practices. The research therefore places great importance on their experiences and perceptions—they are primarily our collaborators, rather than subjects.

Laurence Roy – Incidentally, when I read the proposal you submitted for the grant, I had never heard of collaborative research. So, I did a little research and I realized that it's when researchers work directly with practitioners, like in this case with teachers. I thought it was a really good idea to do this type of research, especially in education, because the practitioners are the ones who are in the classrooms with the students. It seems to me that they are in the best position to identify problems and issues, and to see what works well and what doesn't.

RD – What did you think of this type of text—the grant proposal—as a college student? Did you find it dry?

LR – There are some rather technical parts, but it's interesting to see that the document describes what is planned for each of the stages of the project, how they are going to work, and what the goals are. By reading the grant proposal, I learned more about how collaborative research works, but also about research in general. I didn't expect that a grant application document would require so much work. You have to know what other research you can draw on and what data collection methods you can use, and then you have to do a lot of writing. It's quite a bit of work that goes into it, and all that, without knowing whether it's going to be funded or not.

RD – You remind me that, already at the stage of writing the grant proposal you are talking about, we had to think about the selection of our student resource, the tasks we could assign to them and how to recruit them. We first approached the Social Science and Science program committees, but it was a guidance counsellor who suggested we contact you, based on your excellent academic record, but especially your interest in literature.

LR – Yes, what interested me in the first place was the issue raised by the research project. Personally, I love literature and reading, so I find literature courses interesting. I also find it important to read classics for our general culture. I had noticed, even in high school, that literature tends to play second fiddle in literature classes. We always read to do something else afterwards, like writing a text. Reading a work never seems to be the end goal, but rather a means to another end. The benefits of literature are kind of pushed aside. So, when you explained to me the problem underpinning the project, I understood what it was about.

RD – I remember you mentioning your interest in reading and general culture when we first met. In itself, it was very interesting to see that we had that in common. However, what was most important to us in bringing you on board was that you would be able to help us with the qualitative data processing we had to do—there was a lot of it—and help enrich the triangulation of the data with your particular profile as a student researcher (SR). In exchange, if I may say so, we wanted to provide you with a new experience, a kind of introduction to research that could genuinely provide you with an authentic learning opportunity.

LR – Research was indeed a new experience for me because before this project, I had not done any research as such and especially not on this scale.

RD – Didn't you do any in your program?

LR – No, not really. In Science, the closest we come to research is when we write scientific papers after following a protocol and doing documentary research. For example, in a biology class, we went out and took soil samples and analyzed the different species of trees in the forest, and then we produced a paper based on our observations.

RD – That's interesting! Why do you consider that it wasn't really research?

LR – Mainly because the teacher had provided us with a detailed protocol, which meant that we didn't have to do any preparation beforehand. And it wasn't a very large project. The data collection only took a few hours, and the analysis of the data was done fairly quickly with the documentation provided by the teacher. In your case, it was really something else, since the result of the work that is done does not come right away. You complete a lot of tasks before you see the outcomes.

RD – Yes, and in addition, I imagine that in Science, the research you do is perhaps less qualitative, more empirical?

LR – True. The research we do in Science usually consists in laboratory experiments. It's a very empirical approach because our results are based directly on the experimentation we've done and on our observations. Then we can check whether our results support the theory.

RD – I'm curious to know what you found different about our research on teaching literature at the college level in terms of the skills required or developed compared to what you had been able to develop in your program of study.

LR – The main difference, I would say, is that the human side of it is more developed than in the laboratory experiments in my program. In Science, we work in teams of two or three on the experiments, but what is really essential for the success of the experiments is the equipment. Whereas in this research project, we still work in teams, but the people involved are essential. We get to know these people through the texts they submit to us and through the meetings. Thus, the human side is more solicited since we analyze and combine the experience of several individuals in order to find a way to help and respond to the needs of the majority of them.

RD – Before you joined our research team, had you ever heard of educational research?

LR – No. I had never really heard of it, but since school is such a big part of a person's life, it makes sense to me that there would be research in this area. I was most familiar with research in the sciences, such as research to improve the quality of life by developing new drugs or treatments. In fact, I think research is always about making something better. I think that's the purpose of educational research too.

RD – I think you have an interesting view of research. Even if, in certain fields, research is aimed at creating new knowledge rather than improving quality of life, it is nevertheless part of a logic of improvement.

LR – That's another aspect of the research project I find motivating—the thought that the new pedagogical approach being proposed might help students be more interested in their literature course and in reading literary works. It would be interesting if there were literature classes that were more focused on the benefits that reading can bring. There are so many discoveries that readers can make about themselves, others and the world by reading a literary work. I think that should be emphasized more in literature classes.

RD – Did you have other motivations when you chose to get involved in the project?

LR – I definitely wanted to try something new. I wanted to discover other ways of working. Moreover, since I'm going to study pharmacy, it's possible that I'll work as a research assistant. I thought this experience could be useful in that context.

RD – That motivation was actually one of our goals. I would also add that it was very important to us that you had a say in the tasks you wanted to carry out and that you had the same opportunity as we did to organize your working hours autonomously. That's why we offered you flexible and adaptable deadlines—so you could manage the time spent on the project[1] and your studies as well as possible.

LR – Yes, I liked this way of working, allowing me to progress at my own pace. When I was approached to participate in this research, I was concerned that it would be too time-consuming, but since the deadlines were flexible, that was not the case. I was able to choose the times that were most convenient for me to work on the project. If I knew I was going to have a busier week in terms of my studies, I could work a little less on the project and then work on it more the following week. I liked this freedom to organize my schedule.

Source : Visual Generation/iStock

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[1] The interested reader can consult Table 1 (at the end of the article), which presents a summary of the objectives and means of the research team with regard to the participation of the student co-researcher.

RD – I think the most difficult part for us was determining what tasks were feasible for you. There were several contextual factors that came into play: the length of the research project, the nature of the interactions between the researchers and the participants, the type of data collection and the timing of the data collection, processing and analysis. It seemed to us that tasks related to the data collected were the most relevant option. We didn't want to give you only administrative tasks, such as transcribing verbatim, but at the same time we had to make sure that the tasks you were given were not too complex.

LR – Thankfully, because this was really new to me. At first, when you assigned me to code the professional narratives, collected at the beginning of the session, and then the journal entries collected monthly throughout the year, I was surprised because I expected to get direct responses to direct questions, for example: "What do you think about this or that?" It was definitely an unexpected type of response! Since the professional narratives were free texts, they were all different.

RD – To ensure that your task would be feasible, we proceeded with preliminary global analyses of the professional narratives in order to identify general trends and provide you with a grid of codes already established and categorized according to the dimensions relevant to our research objectives. This preliminary work made it possible to provide you with an observation framework that reduced the complexity of the exercise. Thanks to the annotation method that we proposed to you and validation meetings, we were able to work efficiently and rigorously. It was interesting to discuss the coding system and the suggestions for categories that you could establish when those provided did not correspond to the reality of the professional narratives.

LR – From the basic directions you gave me, I learned that it is possible to create a list of codes to categorize information. I wouldn't have thought right away about creating codes, but I did see how these groupings help to have a clearer overview. It's more concise. Still, there is some thought involved in how many codes or categories to have. This can have an impact on the analysis that will be done at the end of the day, since it changes what will be included in the final analysis table.

RD – Indeed, there are many planning, thinking and decision-making steps that can influence the results,

especially in the type of analysis we do, which involves good reading skills and some interpretation.

LR – Yes. I realized that the keywords I wrote down at the beginning were words from the text, but that over time, I began to write down keywords that went more into the meaning of what was written. It's still tricky because you have to try to understand the whole message without it being stated explicitly. It's a bit like in everyday life: a person won't necessarily say "I feel anxious," but you can understand it by paying attention to the context. In this sense, thematic analysis has allowed me to discover a new way of understanding texts and a new way of understanding people.

RD – You are quite right that there is something "tricky" about interpreting what someone wants to say. I would add that it may even be "risky" if we don't take the necessary steps to frame this interpretation with reading grids, a coding system and validation or rereading activities by third parties. In short, it is the sum of all these precautions that ensures the fidelity of the data and, eventually, the conclusions.

LR – I also realized that the choice of data collection tools and the instructions that are given to the participants have a very important impact on what is collected. For example, professional narratives and journals are both free-form texts, but the data I look for in the journal entries is completely different than in the professional narratives. Professional narratives are more personal, more intimate, whereas journal entries are really focused on the experiments that were done in the classroom. It takes a lot of thought when designing these tools, and it's not always easy. A simple choice of words, like the one we had to make when we built the scales for the self-administered questionnaire, takes a lot of time.

RD – You mention the data analysis phase. While undertaking this step, we see that there's still validation and reclassification to be done, right? (Laughs)

LR – (Laughs) Indeed... The analysis of the data is a rather complex step, and perhaps a little more difficult than I expected. I thought that everything was going to be in a table and that we would only have to look at the percentages to come to conclusions, but I saw that there is still a lot of work to be done to classify certain keywords and to see how

to choose the elements to be considered or rejected. Even if everything is well placed in a table, it's something that takes time, but it's interesting to do because it allows you to come to conclusions. A simple keyword can say a lot…

RD – Again, it is through a combination of validation processes within the research team and new data collection, such as the self-administered questionnaire and the final group interview, that we are able to be faithful to what they wanted to express before drawing final conclusions. It seems to me that all of this points to the expectation for rigour on the part of those who conduct research, but also to the requirement for critical thinking on the part of those who read it, doesn't it?

LR – Exactly. Research studies with similar objectives can be conducted in different ways. At the end of the day, the researchers decide on the objectives and instrumentation, and analyze the data. They can make choices that will drive the results. It is therefore necessary to look at what led to the result and consider whether the same result would be achieved by doing the research differently, for example.

RD – Can you name anything else you have learned in the context of this research?

LR – Because research is a long-term project and you gave me flexibility with the due dates, I would say I learned to plan my work and set goals to avoid procrastinating. I also became aware of the whole ethical dimension… I had already done assignments on the use of animals for research purposes, and I knew that there could always be some ethical issues in research. Here, I saw that participants had to sign a form. When you're involved in research with human participants, privacy is a very important issue. I have noticed this since the very beginning of the research project, because with the different texts written by the teachers, I learn a lot about each of them and their experiences as teachers, but their privacy is respected since I don't know their name or the name of the CEGEP where they work. I must say that before this research project, I had never really thought about the ethical issues that could be raised in education.

RD – It's true that, in the context of the tasks you were given, respect for privacy was the most important ethical dimension, but I would like to point out to you that in the consent form, we also ensure respect for free and informed consent and the balance of benefits and harms, for example.

You mentioned your surprise at the types of data collection tools that were proposed, such as the professional narratives, in which practitioners, instead of answering direct questions, are asked to tell anecdotes or share their thoughts. How did you feel about this first data collection tool you were exposed to?

LR – The participants' professional narratives are free texts, quite long and all different. It's interesting because this kind of text allowed them to develop their thinking and perhaps realize something that even they didn't know before writing down their experience. For example, maybe a teacher might not have perceived a problem with students, but by writing a fragment of their professional narrative, they were able to realize that student interest in literature classes was problematic for them. In short, I think that professional narratives are a great way to collect data about literature and teaching literature. I think it's also more interesting for teachers to write a text describing three anecdotes than just answering questions.

RD – In fact, sometimes qualitative data collection tools have several objectives while being careful not to direct the responses from the outset. For example, with the professional narratives, we obviously wanted the participants to talk objectively about the challenges they faced as college-level French literature teachers, but we also wanted to discern their values and even the extent to which their professional well-being was affected by the challenges they faced. Here we get into the personal, the emotional—which has a big impact, especially in the transfer of practices. Did it surprise you, when you looked at our coding grid, to see that we were interested in professional well-being?

LR – I didn't imagine that it was going to be something that we'd look at in the professional narratives. I thought we were going to look at more technical details about literature. That said, it's similar in the professional fields that I'm moving into; it's important to not just treat the physical health of the patient, but the whole person. In any case, I think we need to care about the well-being of people, and it's all the better if we can do that while improving education.

RD – At the beginning of the conversation, you said that you enjoyed reading and literature classes. Has your view of these classes changed as a result of the project?

LR – Yes, I was surprised to see that several teachers pointed out challenges related to students and specifically their interest in literature courses. As someone who loves literature, I had never thought that student interest could be such a big challenge for teachers. I had never perceived the difficulty of making the subject interesting to the student body. Having direct access to the teachers' point of view allowed me to understand how interesting it can be to look at a problem or situation from another person's
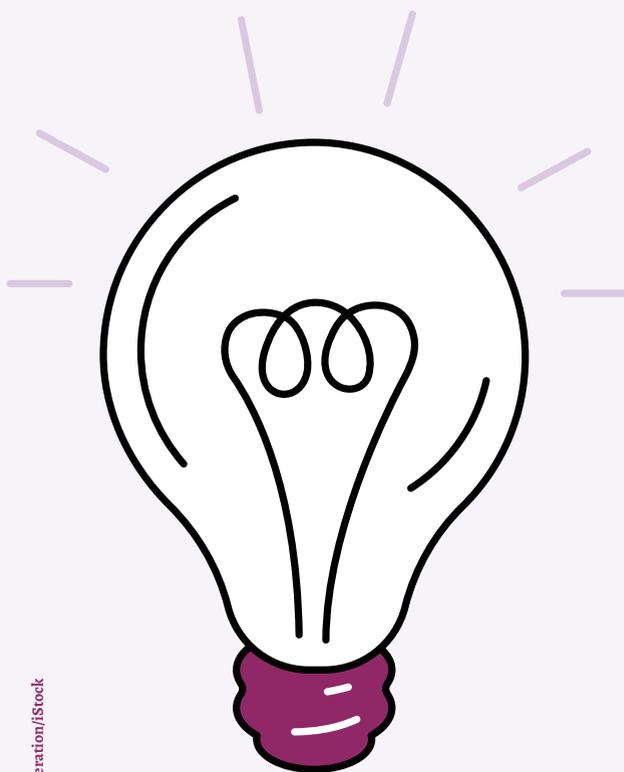
point of view because the issues that person faces may be completely different from our own. I had never realized that to this extent. My view of literature has also changed. As I said before, I already saw some benefits of literature, but when we brought to light the roles of literature mentioned by the participants, I saw that they were higher in number and importance than I thought. I think that goes back to why the project is important: because literature can do so much for so many people.

RD – For the remainder of the research study, what types of tasks would you like to invest your contracted hours in?

LR – I will finish processing the journal entries, but I would also like to finish analyzing the professional narratives with you and try my hand at writing tasks to help you with the final report.

RD – Sure. When you will have done all that, I think you'll have a good overview of the different aspects of educational research—and I'll feel that I've fulfilled my mandate. Finally, we'll just have to hope that you can come with us to at least one conference.

LR – Of course! It would be a great experience! And speaking of rewarding experiences, I would like to conclude by saying that I have learned a lot and continue to learn a lot as I complete the different tasks of the research project. Being a co-researcher has allowed me to learn more about research, literature, teaching, teamwork, and different work methods, but also about myself. I am glad to be a part of this project and I look forward to discovering what our findings will be and what solutions we can come up with to bring literature more to the forefront in college-level literature courses.

RD – Is it too indiscreet to ask you what you learned about yourself?

LR – No, not at all! I feel like I learned many things about myself during the project. Mainly, I realized that I prefer to work with a schedule because it is more motivating for me. I noticed that if I didn't give myself a goal to achieve regarding the tasks to be done, I spent less time on the project. Whereas if I gave myself a date to complete a task, I was able to get all the work done before that date. This is the method that works best for me.

Conclusion

In all honesty, the requirement of PAREA to include a student was initially a bit destabilizing. However, it turned out that Laurence's contribution to our study was an asset to the research team. Furthermore, in light of what she said in the interview, the teacher in me can only be happy to see that her participation in the project was a genuinely enriching opportunity for her. I will conclude by pointing out that, at the end of the interview, Laurence noted that the questions provided in preparation were in themselves an opportunity to consolidate her learning:

"The questions you provided to me to prepare for the interview were all about things I had vaguely noticed, or reminded me of things I had thought about along the way...but doing some deeper thinking to prepare for the interview really allowed me to see it all more clearly and ponder aspects I had thought about less."

Thus, Catherine Bélec and I have observed that researchers who take on a student resource have everything to gain by taking the time to debrief and reflect with the student. This reflective overview allowed Laurence to consolidate her learning. As for us, it allowed us to give meaning to this mentoring experience and to look forward to the next occasion when we will work in collaboration with a student. ▬

Table 1

Summary of the research team's objectives and resources with regard to the participation of the student co-researcher (SR)

	Objectives of the research team	Means used
1	Benefit from the SR's contribution to data processing (130 hours of work paid for by PAREA)	SR: Invest time in coding, compiling, validating and analyzing data
2	Offer an introduction to different dimensions of educational research	SR: Read consent form and grant proposal, conduct thematic analysis of data in various forms, create a collection tool, write, etc.
3	Benefit from a richer triangulation of sources through the inclusion of the student perspective	Team: Solicit input from the SR on pedagogical objects put forward in the approach
4	Promote work-study balance through autonomous time management	Team: Propose flexible deadlines that can be adjusted according to school obligations (priorities)
5	Promote the self-determination of certain tasks	Team: Offer choices based on interest or curiosity

Roxane Doré teaches French literature and acts as a pedagogical counsellor for the valorization of the French language and the development of literacy skills at Cégep de Drummondville. In collaboration with Catherine Bélec, teacher and researcher at Cégep Gérald-Godin, she has conducted research to develop a prototype approach to teaching literature at the college level and is currently conducting a collaborative action research project funded by PAREA to validate the desirability, feasibility and viability of this approach.

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Laurence Roy was completing her final session at Cégep de Drummondville in the Health Sciences profile of the Science program at the time of writing this article. She was also a co-researcher in a PAREA-funded collaborative research project on the teaching of French literature in college. She is currently pursuing her studies in the Pharmacy program at Université Laval.

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