Practitioner-led enquiry as development of professional practice

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Abstract

The learning derived from acting as a Researcher in one’s own organisation provides possibilities for autonomy and empowerment. To study one’s own practice is part of the way new knowledge is generated and practitioner-researchers are able to bring about constant change that engenders new knowledge and understanding, new conceptualisations, innovation and ways of looking at things. These are matters that concern organisations or specific communities where work takes place as well as individuals who undertake practitioner-led enquiry. Practitioners undertaking enquiry into the practice of their organisation or professional area experience the process as a major source of their own learning whether it is traditionally thought of as academic domains of learning and/or professional domains of learning. Data is drawn from research with a group of 10 professional doctorate graduates and 6 Bachelors graduates. The work of Michel Foucault relating to power and knowledge is used to try and understand the complex relationships between adult learners who are also workers, the university, their organisations and the subjects of their research (their colleagues). The extent to which H.E. can address issues of complexity in organisations where there are a range of contexts and contribute to the learning of workers with experience and understanding of the nuances and micropolitics of their professional field is discussed in relation to new ways of conceptualising knowledge in changing knowledge-based economies.

Introduction

That the acts of enquiry followed by workers bring possibilities for autonomy and empowerment is the main topic of this paper. Workers acting as researchers into their own practice provide an important means by which professional people at work can develop themselves and their practice. There is a body of criticism concerning practitioner-led enquiry mainly concerning the validity and rigour of what is perceived as insider-led, and therefore subjectively biased approaches and articulations of the research (Murray and Lawrence 2000). This paper suggests that undertaking enquiry using research techniques is a logical next step to take for reflective practitioners and the most valuable outcome of practitioner-led enquiry might not be the research itself but the practitioner’s own self-development.

Current interest by national governments in higher education professional development encourages the development of capacity to understand and enhance one’s own practice. A more skilled and knowledgeable labour force is needed to supply workers in what is termed a knowledge economy. The emergence in higher education of new fields of professional studies has brought about more practice-based approaches to teaching and learning that include various forms of practitioner-led enquiry. The three-way learning
plan between university, work organization and learner is becoming a common form of agreement in higher education that draws academic and professional learning closer together. Practitioner-led enquiry is a common learning method that can combine professional and academic interests.

Practitioner-researchers (PRs) who are usually experienced workers are involved in research that uses their own colleagues as subjects and the topic of the research is likely to be something quite specific that aims to enhance current practice. PRs learn how to enquire using research techniques, they draw upon literature, artefacts from the wider body of knowledge outside of their context, their own experiential knowledge and their colleagues’ knowledge. The subjects of the research and the organization in which the research takes place are therefore likely to have a vested interest in the process and outcomes of the research.

The paper focuses on how two groups of learners at Doctorate and Bachelor’s level acted as PRs in their own organizations to fulfill the final component of their degrees. It is argued that the PRs can become empowered by taking the lead and becoming the authority on the topic under investigation. The possibilities for this happening can be mediated by the PRs current positionality within the organisation and the particular operating structures and culture of the organisation. Such investigations encourage PRs to discipline themselves and to enhance greater productivity at work. Through the processes of research, practitioners embrace a view of self in order to develop self knowledge and understanding thus gaining self confidence and knowledge of their own strengths and weaknesses. There are complex issues of power involved in these kinds of actions which have implications for social equity and this is discussed in relation to Foucault’s ideas about power and knowledge.

Practitioner-led enquiry is important for a number of reasons. There is a growing awareness of the role of personal or ‘soft’ skills and qualities which are of high-level professional importance such as problem solving and action oriented practical wisdom. The context offers the researcher practical experience, direct access to data, and an insider’s understanding of the minutia of the research topic and how it is situated. The findings of worker-researchers can often be operationalised by the researchers themselves leading to a resolution or enhancement of practice that is;

- satisfying and developmental for the research
- meets the requirements of higher education qualifications
- has appropriate outcomes for organisations and other stakeholders.

Enquiry is part of the way new knowledge is generated in practice. Work engenders constant change where new knowledge and understanding, new conceptualisations and ways of looking at things through practitioner-led enquiry can bring about innovation and the ability to affect change.

**Literature review**
There are several theoretical debates that address different aspects of this topic that will be drawn upon. There are debates concerning knowledge and of relevance here are texts that situate learners within a changing knowledge economy, for example, Ilon (2000), texts that consider closely how HEIs develop and use such knowledge, for example Scott et al (2004) and texts that conceptualise power and its productive role as in the work of Foucault, (1980, 1982, 1991).

In order to treat changes in the way education is meeting the needs of emerging knowledge-based economies problematically it is important to realise that they still perpetuate disadvantages that challenge the possibilities for equity in industrialised/capitalist economies.

The rationale for how resources are organised to create value and in, turn, how value is converted into power are changing radically. When the primary means by which the world creates value changes, nothing can be reliably interpreted through old paradigms. Predictably, therefore, we are largely unaware of, or in denial of this radical shift. This denial has been witnessed before during the shift from land-based to capital–based economies.... Educators can play a unique and central role in negotiating these power shifts.

Ilon (2000)

One way educators can engage with these changes is to articulate how knowledge is being understood. Scott et al (2004) present five alternative modes of knowledge of which one is the dispositional and transdisciplinary model which “is essentially concerned with the individual and their own practice” (p51) and resists “methodological imperialism” in that universities do not insist on particular academic approaches that are usually bound up with subject specific schools of thought. They argue that it is the way “universities understand and in the process construct relationships between academic and professional knowledge” (p 42) that is important. This kind of definition helps in the location of power dynamics and provides a basis upon which equity and access can be realigned and reaffirmed.

Michel Foucault’s concerns about power and knowledge have been cited in relation to his identification of subjugated knowledges (Foucault 1980) that have been used to explain how knowledge developed outside of higher education can be viewed as having less legitimacy than the more codified knowledge that is controlled by the Academy (Armsby et al 2006). There are also parallels that can be drawn concerning practitioner-led research with reference to the concept of power and its productive role proposed by Foucault (1982).

Foucault’s (1991) ideas about power relationships and how disciplinary techniques of power aim to generate complying citizens demonstrate: firstly how hierarchical objectives bring about strategies of surveillance; secondly how normalising judgements encourage us to act according to certain norms; and thirdly how examination acts to establish the truth about individuals. According to Foucault this is done through confession in which procedures dictate that the subject is compelled to produce a
discourse of truth (the c.v., the learning diary, the reflective autobiographical piece, the colleagues account of their practice for the practitioner-researcher’s enquiry). The confession takes place in power relationships (student to tutor, researched to researcher, and now also student to employer, colleague to student). Disciplinary techniques operate on the self by the self to establish truth about ourselves. Human beings thus turn themselves into subjects by becoming objects to themselves.

Debates about the learning process itself are of particular importance, for example learner-centredness and valuing of previous experience (Boud and Solomon 2001). Also the changing relationship between tutors and students requires pedagogical issues to be addressed (Boud and Costley 2006/7) and the learners’ situatedness outside the academic sphere (Lave and Wenger 1991).

There has been a fair amount written about practitioner-led enquiry but mostly from the perspective of educationalists. Educationalists own practice has been researched, for example teachers enquiring into classroom practices. These enquiries have been well documented using action research (McNiff and Whitehead 2005, Whitehead and McNiff 2006 ) as the main research approach. There is not much literature that discusses other approaches or other professional areas.

A wider implication of this study is the role of the university as knowledge producer (Barnett and Griffin 1997, Boud and Solomon 2001), reasserting it through reliance on critical thinking leading to critical action and critical self-reflection (Barnett 1997) and how the University is repositioning and restructuring to meet the needs of the age of “supercomplexity” (Barnett 2000).

Sources of data

Most of the primary data is drawn from worker-researchers on a professional doctorate programme who had completed their doctorate award. A grounded theory approach was adopted (Glaser & Strauss, 1967 and Strauss & Corbin, 1997). Ten graduates of the doctoral scheme were interviewed by an experienced researcher who was independent from the ten graduates. They articulated their ‘reflections on their personal learning histories’ covering their times before, during and after the programme. Analyses based on multi-level coding of data from open-ended interview transcripts, were used to allow tentative issues and agenda to emerge from the experience itself. Emerging issues were then checked for fit with the complete data gathered. The themes relevant to the emerging issues were identified for exposure to the wider field to encourage debate on their wider applicability.

All graduates of the programme (43 at this time) were invited to participate in the interview process. The cases were chosen on an opportunity basis of availability and willingness and ten came forward. The following titles indicate the work-based project they undertook for their doctorate degree:

-the development of a new professional service in the legal profession;

-distinctive and innovative educational curriculum in a new primary school;
-a new approach to the educational development of physiotherapists;
-the codification of professional practice in a major national organization;
-models of national audit in a major area of government policy;
-national policies for the education and assessment of pupils;
-rationalization of interment practice and policy in a major metropolitan area;
-development of a framework of recognition for professional practice in an emerging field;
-Establishing opportunities for practicing psychotherapists to gain doctorate status.
-developing and operating quality assurance procedures in a rapidly changing environment.

A smaller amount of data is also drawn from a cohort of teaching assistants who were studying for a Bachelors degree within the graduate teachers scheme to gain a teaching qualification. Interviews were given to six teaching assistants before, during and after their practitioner-led enquiry. The interviews were undertaken by the students’ academic tutor. This data, drawn from learners in the same university department as the doctoral candidates, is used as a means of contrast to the doctoral level candidates who held middle to senior management positions within the organisations in which they worked.

**Findings**

The results for all the PRs (following Doctorate and Bachelor degrees) could be represented as falling into two interwoven categories; one being that they gained a set of enhanced intellectual abilities and the other category revealing their enhanced personal capability. The high-level intellectual skills were mainly the generic abilities that constitute high level learning; of synthesis, better judgement of levels of achievement and 'seeing the broader picture'. From their position as PRs they learned considerably how to self-motivate, behave and think from a stance of confidence and authority.

Their enhanced intellectual and personal abilities and the renewed trajectory to continue to develop the self were probably the two most enduring findings in terms of significant and lasting impact that the practitioner-led research experience provided for professional learning. These facets suggest the huge impact that practitioner- research had on the researchers themselves which in turn led to an enhanced practice which as eight of the ten of the doctorate candidates and all the teaching assistants said was still unfolding and emergent.

An important benefit for the PRs was from their exercise of a sense of agency within critical environments and this is clearly derived from the supporting mechanisms in place and the structures and systems on which the Bachelors and Doctorate programmes function. The benefits from their learning come from greater self confidence, intellectual development and commitment to further development of the PRs themselves as well as significant 'new' professional impact on practice.
The specific findings for the doctoral candidates showed how they had been able to make a direct impact on their organisation or professional area. This came from work activity contained within their specific projects that made real impact on professional situations. The products that emerged from the PR’s projects varied widely: for example, a developed policy statement for a national organization, a book on good professional practice with researched contents, a staff development program for a public service organization and so on. They also varied widely in subject area, for example, sustainable development, healthcare, franchising, curriculum innovation, burial and cremation.

Direct engagement with the specific field is shown by the following: *I wasn’t interested in doing a piece of research with no practical application whatsoever which seemed to me what a lot of doctoral programmes were about.* Another said, *The benefits (for the field) actually far exceeded what I expected them to be.* And another said, *It was very much grounded in my day to day work anyway and did facilitate that reflective process.* One candidate was repeatedly asked for copies of his project - an innovation in his field - and commented that, as a consequence, he recently did a joint article with a well-known academic and practitioner in the field. He said *One of the impacts is that quite a lot of them [his community within his professional area] say to me “I regularly turn to it...”. Its on their reference shelf...they say to me that there has never been anything like it.* There have been some good reviews.

It’s not just the final project that has the impact. One Candidate who had written a book as the outcome of her final project said: *I kept on wanting to say to people “That wasn’t just it you know. It was a whole host of other stuff that isn’t in this book”*. 

Each professional area presents a unique context and in one particular profession the idea of revolutionary impact was seen as undesirable so the Candidate designed a research outcome that was constructed as what he described as evolutionary, commenting that *if you add up a lot of evolutionary developments the sum total can be revolutionary.* The project is comprised of *a collection of major reforms and developments which are very exciting and encouraging .......*

Each of the PR projects, on which the candidates were assessed, advanced the professional fields in which they were engaged. However, the research suggests that the impact of the program went beyond the above specific areas, and significantly enhanced personal attributes and skills in ways that made a further contribution to each candidate’s professional effectiveness as shown in the following three sections.

1. **PR’s enhanced credibility**
Candidates recorded a perceived greater status with clients and colleagues and recognition from professional groups for the doctorate level of their achievements and significantly increased self-confidence in themselves as individuals and as professionals. One stated, *It’s nice to know that you are, you’re considered the sort of expert, in this particular territory of the profession.*

Enhanced credibility could be seen for the candidates’ professional community as well as for them personally in some cases. One said of the professional community,
They also felt that the [professional community] deserved it and that it was probably going to enhance some sort of standing in terms of the various negotiations we continue to have in terms of finding our place in the world of academic courses.

People take more notice of you- Papers that had been written before getting the doctorate now have more impact when you have the ‘Dr’ attached to it; they prompt even more response.

One Candidate observed that we have an experience which younger people simply could not have and that’s where the action-reflection element……. people in their twenties simply could not do that, because you wouldn’t have reached the level of your professional life that would give you the contacts and the standing.

There was significant impact from the PR’s experience relating to the Candidates’ enhanced credibility (real or perceived) in the eyes of others in their field who engaged more readily with their work once they had achieved doctoral status. Here again we have noted that it is the change in the Candidates themselves that has provided the impact of the Doctorate.

Some of the impact, as one candidate stated, engenders….the confidence I feel in all sorts of areas …….because of the way its changed me it gives you that extra bit of metal in the new field.

Another stated that, There is absolutely no way that I would be doing what I am doing now unless I had done this project.

2. A developed capability
Enhanced personal capability was expressed mainly in terms of high-level intellectual skills, usually wrapped up in abilities of synthesis, better judgement of levels of achievement and 'seeing the broader picture'. They also became more self-motivated as learners.

Candidates acknowledged the difficulties and self-drive necessary to develop themselves to doctorate level, based on generic work-based criteria.

*I found that the reflectiveness was about me and you know that’s quite a hard thing for some people to do because they take comfort from that academic distance and that is not what it is about. You have to be really interested in yourwork as well.*

*I know I have worked at that level (doctorates) and have the ability to co-ordinate, to analyze material at that Level and reflect on it and affect the big picture in a whole world of concerns.*

Capabilities such as synthesizing, reflecting, focus on actual work, were seen as important impacts on self provided by the program.

*The ability to see connections between different pieces of work and draw lessons over and above that are greater than the sum of the parts.*

*The program enabled me to focus on the work I was actually doing.*

Candidates are working within complex and sensitive social and political environments
that often have constraints and tight schedules that require the use of a rare combination of skills, knowledge, personal qualities and concern for values. One commented that the program was about,

.. how to pull together the threads to make something new... and it's the thread that stayed with me...

This last comment in this section demonstrates how the Candidate realized that she had developed a new capability that enabled her to synthesize a whole range of contextual issues. The Candidates in the sample expressed their new found capabilities and attributed them to the autonomy they had on the programme to use a range of higher education approaches in the context of their actual work.

3. Continuing development

Impact on continuing development shows itself in the continuation of the Candidates’ doctorate projects as real-time ongoing activities at work, knock-on effects on colleagues and clients, renewed interest in further learning, and productive engagement in debates relevant to the professional wider field. One stated that

Doing advanced work in the second half of one’s professional life, that’s very good, because the idea of continually learning in an academically credited context is very good for people in their fifties.

Another said,

Once you finish the programme, it’s meant to be only the start of the next phase or the next series of projects.

Other comments were,

The program has finished but it’s not left me.
In every sphere of activity it’s been a real help.
Things continue to come out of the research project.

The real time real world doctoral projects often have a time limit in terms of their timeliness for impact and one Candidate noted that

since the project was done... things have really changed very, very dramatically.

The project work can bring about a transdisciplinary and professional approach to continuing professional development rather than a subject- oriented approach as one Candidate pointed out.

This is difficult to assess but I think if I look at responses to the papers (products of the program) I think the best ones, in a sense, the ones that have been very insightful, have been more from the non- [professional area] rather than the [professional area]

The following extract touched on all dimensions of the doctoral candidates’ development;

It matured greatly, my thinking and my approach and it has actually influenced my style of management at work. I give a great deal more thought and planning to what I’m doing and it’s widened my focus really. I take much more of a wider view now than I did before. It does actually seem to raise people’s expectations of you though and it hasn’t done me any harm. It clearly has (pause) it achieved what I wanted it to achieve and it did actually raise debate and awareness of the subject matter I’d studied and I think its one that’s going to keep popping up.

(Other) things are coming out of it. You see in my approach I decided that the way ..... XX of this size are managed needs far greater care and long term
planning than has been applied in the past. And that came out of my thinking for the doctoral program ... and ... I have realized, as a result of my work that this place needs the benefits of specialists in certain fields....

The teaching assistants came for their initial tutorials with a range of possible projects proposals to be undertaken as part of their practitioner-led project. They came with ideas such as how to contribute towards a whole school literacy scheme and to define the conditions necessary to develop an IT strategy. After further development work on the purpose and relevance of the projects to the PRs own professional development, all the PRs changed the focus of their projects. They had initially decided on a project that had been endorsed by the school but had all decided to enquire into topics that were more relevant to them in their individual practice and to matters that the PRs considered were more valuable to the children in the school rather than valuable to the management of the school.

The teaching assistants in contrast to the candidates on the doctoral programme had less autonomy from the beginning of their projects as to the topic of the project but felt empowered by being able to change to a topic that they had considered for themselves and decided was more valuable for them in their professional development and for the children they taught.

The doctoral project does demand that Candidates have a certain positionality before they are allowed on the program in terms of experience and status within their organizations or professional area i.e. they have to be in a position to be able to impact on change. The lower status of the Bachelors candidates means that only projects that are possible for the candidate to undertake with their work-roles are possible for PRs. This means that those not engaged in work activity would not be able to come on the programmes and those whose thinking may be at a certain level but whose work role may be at another level would only be able to engage in a practitioner-led project that could be facilitated by their work roles.

**Discussion**

Educators might consider the issues of power and autonomy for candidates of developing fields of study that include PRs such as work based learning. As Ilon (2000) has shown, a knowledge-based economy is not inherently more democratic or empowering than is a capital-based economy as both are driven by a profit motive that results in a growing level of consumption, differentiated wages and incorporation of relatively autonomous populations into a global system. The notion of equity itself has become technologised and repositioned to serve the agendas of neo-liberal states that perpetuate the primacy of the economic over the social (Butler 1999).

Practitioner-led enquiry could serve as part of a struggle around equity in higher education because it is concerned with non-traditional knowledge and it represents the move away from authoritarian industrial-friendly teaching and learning (rote learning, authoritarian teaching, individualised rather than group learning) to a more student-
centred and knowledge-friendly approach that involves critical thinking, bottom-up learning methods that place teacher in the role of learner and integration of diverse thinking. Group knowledge-building has become a major learning goal and diverse perspectives are acknowledged as potentially valuable beyond their immediate context. Further, the nature of co-operative knowledge-building requires a shared trust, honesty and mutual respect. This shared stake in alliances has fostered unequal and often ideologically opposed partnerships between HEIs, other stakeholder organisations and the learners themselves. The research shows the tremendous social power in this dynamic for the learners but also the vested interests of the other parties concerned.

The three-way partnership of worker, organisation and university has the possibilities for workers by equipping themselves with knowledge of how to enquire and thereby viewing the work situation through a new or alternative lens, allows the worker a more informed and respected profile within the organization and/or professional field. They are invested with the power of being a researcher, a truth seeker. In writing up their analysis for examination by the university and for presentation to their organisation, they make a public statement about their findings and their thoughts and become subject to their own ‘confessions’. With reference to the concept of power and its productive role proposed by Foucault (1991) it can be understood how practitioner-researchers in their production of new practical knowledge are engaged in power relations. Foucault states that “power and knowledge directly imply one another because we are subjected to the production of truth through power and we cannot exercise power except through the production of truth” (Foucault 1980).

The generic assessment criteria and flexible structure that supported candidates from a wide variety of professional fields undertaking their practitioner-led enquiry has similarities to Scott et al's (2004) dispositional mode of knowledge. Further exploration of how this view of knowledge constructs educational practice may enable a fuller understanding and support for PRs. A wider understanding of practitioner-led enquiry is needed for the development of professional practice. PRs can develop relevant knowledge for a situation within a wide and informed context and this has broad epistemological relevance. Studying ones own practice is part of the way new knowledge can be generated. Work engenders constant change where new knowledge and understanding, new conceptualisations and ways of looking at things bring about innovation and the ability to affect change. These are matters that concern organisations or specific communities where work takes place as well as individuals who undertake practitioner-led enquiry. Higher education needs to address issues of complexity in organisations where there are a range of contexts and contribute to the learning of PRs who have a wide knowledge, experience and understanding of the nuances and micropolitics of their professional fields.

Students need to know how to organise their knowledge and analysis to create conceptual frameworks to tackle complex problems. Building conceptual frameworks implies an open-ended structure where the agenda is only known one step ahead. The research intimates that open-ended approaches to curricula that support PRs can result in deep, high-value learning. Old paradigms are not convinced and often do not like risking a
move away from instructive curricula. The risk also involves the situatedness of the practitioner-researcher within capitalist discourses of paid work and how this can enhance the potential for the co-option of learning to improve productivity and profits and to reproduce inequities rather than engage in difficult but significant struggles for more equitable individual and collective futures (Butler, 1999 p132).

**Conclusion**

PRs are usually non-traditional work-based learners in HE have a resource that is of tremendous value; adverse, often unique perspective that they to bring to the academy if there can be an appropriate structure in place for them that meets their needs in an appropriate way. As educationalists there is a responsibility to offer a critical and informed structure and learning experience and this has always been the case but some of the ways of doing this and structures that obviate the need to challenge and assert have changed in focus over recent years. Learners at all higher education levels need a more comprehensive insight into their learning and understanding especially the links between the highly specific sites and contexts of learning and the wider community within which they exist. The learners themselves are now working in organisations with flatter structures and need to think for themselves and make informed decisions. Becoming enquirers into their own practice allows this kind of thinking and is potentially empowering for learners and assists them in becoming autonomous in their practice. They also have to consider their positionality and its effect upon others, how they use their new credentials, their collegiality and their values. The reflection upon self continues to be an important characteristic of practitioner enquiry. The possibilities for drawing upon bodies of knowledge that facilitate such reflection remains the domain (and the choice) of educationalists but now in partnerships with other stakeholders. Who these other stakeholders are and the kind of partnerships that are forged can also be a matter of choice.

HEIs and organisations outside of HEIs in which most people work are both huge structures that embody differing regimes of power within societies. PRs use discourses of power available from education to empower themselves in their work but in order to do so, they have to negotiate and observe a difficult and complex set of systems and consider their own values system and approaches to others.

**References**


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