How does it feel to be ‘inside and outside at the same time’? Reflections on the complexities and ambiguities of a practitioner action research project in east London.

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Reference: 0239

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Abstract

Background to the topic

This paper seeks to explore the complexities and ambiguities in running action research from inside the institution where one also is a practitioner. It tells the story of a piece of action research from the viewpoint of a ‘naïve’, first-time practitioner-researcher and in doing so, it explores the tensions and opportunities involved in being both inside and outside (Humphrey, 2007) at the same time. The project in question was conducted between 2005 – 2007 in a multi-cultural urban college in east London. This paper opens up a space within which the story of the project can be told. The action research took the form of peer-mentoring and peer-coaching. The wider story of the enquiry is how we adopted our roles and how these roles framed what we did.

Analytical and/or theoretical frame

Much is spoken of the “…learning process of getting to grips with the actual practice of action research.” (Reason and Bradbury, 2007: 339). We started further back from this: What is research and what is theorizing and how do you ‘do them’? The feel of the project – our research ennui - was something the research team needed to spend time reflecting upon in order to understand the framing within which the research activity took place (Grant, 2007).

Humphrey (2007) talks of the confusion arising from the ‘multiple positions’ established within practitioner action research. Grant (2007) writes that action research often does not feel ‘fully formed’. The ambiguities the role of practitioner-researcher created were, over time, seen by the team as the very substance of the project itself. It was messy and contradictory. The landscape of the research was unsettling. In our model, our action research was both ‘doing’ and ‘knowing’: It was transformative with elements of meta-learning for those who participated, researcher and practitioner alike.

Research questions and/or focus of enquiry

The focus of the enquiry was to confront conservativism in classroom teaching i.e. to encourage the need for experimentation and risk taking. A research team of practitioner-researchers was established, and I took the lead role managing the work. We saw it as a form of mutual support, little realising the journey we were about to embark upon. The project was ‘created’ from the ground-up, meeting the brief of encouraging cross-faculty, transferable support of colleagues’ practice. It was the philosophy of the transferable nature of ‘good teaching’ that made the project daunting. This also made it contrary to current trends within FE.
teaching for the centrality of subject specialisms and specialist subject pedagogy. The research was a deliberate attempt to encourage dialogue about the core activity of our learning community – classroom practice.

The overwhelming experience of the project while we were undertaking the work itself was of confusion and ambiguity – of being unsettled. As teachers used to the rather more rigid structures and formalities of a timetabled regime, the idea of case working was vague and open. On reflection, it was this ambiguity and fluidity to the research that gave it character and shape. It was something that changed the daily routines of those taking part. It is this experience – the adoption of this insider/outsider role (Humphrey, 2007)- this paper seeks to articulate.

**Research methods and/or mapping of literature**

Data capture took the form of participants’ own reflective accounts. For Leitch and Day (2000) the main focus or priority for all professional reflection should be to engender change at an ‘emancipatory level’; to develop a critical practice that places authority back into the hands of those doing the reflection. Equally, James (2007) suggests that reflective practice is always a ‘joint activity’, and yet, Lavie-Ajayi et al. (2007) illustrate how difficult action research can be when located within an organisation that works essentially in a hierarchical fashion. This enquiry was separate from, and in parallel to, formal quality mechanisms for appraisal and lesson observation. It offered a confidential, voluntary and democratic opportunity for staff to set their own agendas and receive support in the type of practice they wished to experiment with. My own experience was of being located within the college with all the assumptions and common sense (mis)understandings that institutional cultural emersion brings with it. And yet there was initially a huge difference between my own role as a practitioner and those I supported. Their classrooms and subject matters were at least at first, foreign territory.

**Research findings and/or contribution to knowledge**

Although being seen to ‘provide what works’ for the colleagues taking part, the pressure and practical reality to offer solutions and innovative strategies was at odds with the complex realities of most classroom practice (Radford, 2007). Since classrooms might be best understood as highly complex, multi-variant sites of social interaction, the very notion of providing simple solutions within such an open system is contentious. Participants though, overwhelmingly documented both the value in having new ideas and the value of having someone else to talk to. This paper will allow a voice for these participants to shine through. It draws upon reflective data to give voice to the participants’ professional collaborations and the researchers’ own meta-learning born out of the ambiguity of the insider/outsider role.


References:

Conference paper

Introduction and context

This Conference Paper details an action research project conducted in a large sixth form college in the east London area. The local community served by the college itself, is made up of the second largest Bangladeshi and second largest black-African populations in England and Wales and overall has the highest proportion of non-white ethnic groups in the country. The borough in question has high levels of unemployment and also of overcrowding. Recently both the immediate local area, and east London in general, have undergone massive and ongoing regeneration due to the successful Olympics bid for London in 2012. Within this context, the college is highly successful, taking young people with marginal levels of previous educational qualifications and obtaining high examination results and high progression onto Higher Education.

The action research project took the form of peer-mentoring and peer-coaching. A research team of practitioner-researchers was established, of which I was the team leader. The 5 staff involved in the project were deliberately from very different academic backgrounds and disciplines and were seen to each offer the project something different in terms of their expertise, teaching experience and favoured methodologies.
Authoring and voice

To locate my own voice and position within this practitioner-research, I was at the time both the manager/coordinator of the research team as well as adopting the researcher role myself. Unlike my fellow team members, I occupied a triple role within this work: manager, classroom practitioner and practitioner-researcher. Throughout this paper I will refer to common experiences and reflections of the whole research team, myself included, as ‘we’, reserving my own individual voice for those reflections and evaluations made at a greater distance and with some detached hindsight through my privileged coordinator role.

Project philosophy

At its start, we did not conceive of the project as ‘research’ – ‘action’ or otherwise. We saw it as a form of mutual support, little realising the journey we were about to embark upon. We created the project from the ground-up, meeting the brief of encouraging cross-faculty, transferable support for the improvement of colleagues’ practice.

It was the philosophy of the transferable nature of ‘good teaching’ that made the project daunting, exciting and different. It was a deliberate attempt to encourage dialogue and reflection about the core activity of our learning community – classroom practice. It was deliberately separate from, and in parallel to, formal quality mechanisms for appraisal and lesson observation. It offered a confidential, voluntary and democratic opportunity for staff to set their own reflective agendas and receive support in the type of practice they wished to experiment with. The aim of the project was to confront conservatism in classroom teaching: to encourage the need for experimentation and risk taking.

“The project has certainly caused me to introduce more variety into my teaching and having someone with whom to discuss my efforts and encourage me to keep trying when things don’t work out so well has been invaluable…The students have responded well so far to most of the new strategies, which is a further encouragement to build on successes but also to continue experimenting.” (Participant)

Much is spoken elsewhere of the “…learning process of getting to grips with the actual practice of action research.” (Reason and Bradbury, 2007: 339). We started from a point even further back from this: What is research and what is theorizing and how do you ‘do them’? We quickly discovered that by running what we had previously described as a ‘project’ - seeking to transform and innovate practice while constantly reflecting and evaluating on the processes involved - we were doing this ‘thing called action research’ without even realising it.
Once we, as a research team, re-conceptualised the nature of the work as ‘research’ it set a very different tone for future activity. We started to take seriously the notion of data capture and collection whereas before this, we adopted a very pragmatic approach; ‘getting on’ with ‘doing the work’ rather than reflecting upon it. The power of reflection and the professional dialogues it created for both the research team and the participants elevated participation to another level.

**Ambiguity and complexity**

The focus of the work was simple enough: the research team would work alongside volunteers to look at aspects of their practice they would like support with. The work would be both ‘in-class’ observing experimenting and team teaching and modelling, and ‘out-of-class’, planning, reflecting and evaluating.

My overwhelming experience of the project while we were undertaking the work itself was of confusion and ambiguity – of being unsettled. As a teacher used to the rather more rigid structures and formalities of a timetabled regime, the idea of case working, of project working, was vague and open. This was also an unsettling experience for the other members of the research group. On reflection, it was this very ambiguity and fluidity to the research that gave it character and shape. It was the case with our action research, that only by acting it out did we give it pattern, structure and meaning. It was the ‘doing’ of the work of peer-support that made it an ongoing construction. It was something that changed the daily routines of those taking part.

To draw a parallel, in her own research of trade unions, Humphrey (2007) talks of the confusion arising from the ‘multiple positions’ established by what she calls the ‘insider-outsider continuum’ and the effects of being, as she puts it, on the ‘hyphen’ between being an insider and an outsider. This ambiguous location of research was both confusing and ultimately liberating. I came to realise that this very ambiguity situated the work in an interesting space somewhere between practitioner and researcher. The action research did not simply create dialogue between the two – it was the dialogue.

Humphrey finds the reality of being on the ‘hyphen’ a contradictory location:

“In retrospect it is clear that insider- hood did not furnish me with the proper survival kit to sustain me on this turbulent journey: my self-concept as an insider actor….meant that I was treating myself as an insider ethnographer and assumed that I would be creating a map or ‘graph’ of the life of my own people or ‘ethnos’ without disturbing the grassroots realities, relationships and world-views which sustained us. This complacency was repeatedly ruptured by the insider-outsider hyphen and my recognition and responses to this hyphen came to be crucial to the development of my reflexivity as a researcher.” (2007: 13)
My own experience – as an internal researcher – was of being fundamentally part of the college with all the assumptions and common sense (mis)understandings that institutional cultural emersion brings with it. And yet, at the same time, there was initially a huge difference between my own role as a practitioner and those I supported. Their classrooms and subject matters were at least at first, foreign territory.

In addition, an important observation is that although being seen to ‘provide what works’ for the colleagues taking part, the pressure and practical reality to offer concentrate testable solutions and innovative strategies was at odds with the complex realities of most classroom practice (Radford, 2007). Since classrooms might be best understood as highly complex, multi-variant sites of social interaction, the very notion of providing simple solutions within such an open system is contentious. Participants though, overwhelmingly documented both the value in having new ideas and the value of having someone else to talk to.

“Making initial contact with the teachers that I was assigned to support was a little daunting because I felt that there was a danger that they would misunderstand what we were expected to do. I knew that it was imperative to build a working relationship built on trust. Most of the initial meetings went well however there were a couple of teachers who seemed to be concerned that the project would be a form of monitoring akin to inspection. I learnt that when dealing with co-professionals it is important to address their concerns (sometimes even before they arise), to be willing to be flexible within the brief (within given parameters) and to recognise that it may be necessary to be patient by dealing with issues over a period of time.” (Researcher reflection)

“I have found the project a really useful way of sharing and brainstorming ideas for the content and direction of lessons. As a part time member of staff I find that my time for discussion of teaching methods with colleagues is extremely limited if not non-existent; since I am the only teacher of my subject I do not get a chance to share classes and ideas with others.” (Participant)

Lavie-Ajayi et al. (2007) illustrate how difficult action research can be when located within an organisation that works essentially in a hierarchical fashion. In their example of research within a voluntary organisation, they note that the collaborative relationship so vital for successful action research is often in contradiction to the power relations found within organisations. From the start we attempted to meet each volunteer and to negotiate their particular focus for the collaborative work.

“At first this [meeting the participants] was a daunting situation – one that raised many questions and that made the very start of the term both exciting and less structured than previous years: how can I help others best? What will it be like to work alongside new colleagues? How transferable might the
recommendations and ideas I have be? Will the support I provide be useful, seen as valuable and will it be welcomed?” (Researcher reflection)

We wrote a contract, explaining the philosophy behind the project and what the participants could expect from us in terms of support, trust and confidentiality. 51 participants were involved in the first year and 45 in the second. Each participant was allocated a research team ‘coach’ and regular meetings were set-up. The research team came to recognise that participants ‘fully immersed’ into the practice started to blur the boundaries between themselves and the researcher offering the support. Mutual planning, team teaching and reflective sessions enabled both colleagues to work together. An unintended outcome was the important message this gave to the students of the college: to see staff reflecting, experimenting, working together and problem solving created an extremely positive atmosphere in many classes.

“As the project has progressed, I have experienced a shift in the dialogue that I am having with the participants of the project; increasingly they are developing new ideas and strategies for themselves and running them by me. This is really exciting and I have decided to try some of these out myself. It will be interesting to compare the success of these new strategies with the participant teachers. Participating in this project has led to increased focus and reflection about my own teaching. I have been inspired to try many new ideas that I knew about, but hadn’t actually put into action.” (Researcher reflection)

“Regarding my observations, I needed to take the middle ground between being too involved and being invisible. I played an active role in the lesson when invited to do so by the class teacher and I found that this helped to give me a good idea of the teacher’s situation…The observations reinforced the importance of developing a rapport with the students to reduce misunderstandings, avoiding confrontations and ensuring that the lesson remains productive.” (Researcher reflection)

“At the start of the Project we tried to interview and meet with all participants as quickly as possible – to develop a relationship and to build rapport. It seems that this initial, early meeting was as welcome from the participants’ viewpoint as it was valuable from mine. It was good to establish a working relationship quickly, productively and to be able to reassure colleagues about the more sensitive and confidential aspects of the support on offer. More than this, quite simply it was interesting. We do not spend enough time as professionals talking about teaching – about what we think about learning, what we see as the challenges, what we are trying to achieve in our own classrooms. It was also nice to have the opportunity to share, reflect and bounce ideas off others, in the same way as my role was to act as a point of reflection for them.” (Researcher reflection)
The need for reflection and for reflexivity was essential for the project’s eventual success – and certainly essential for the moral support of colleagues brave enough to undertake something new and something risky. Following James (2007), we also found that:

“Reflection at the technical level can help to improve efficiency and effectiveness in terms of practical skill. At the practical level, the purpose is to improve practice in relation to the immediate context – how we currently do things. Reflective practice at this level may enhance the capacity to exercise practical and moral judgements, to identify relevant problems and through the process to develop the capacity to self-evaluate” (2007: 34)

For Leitch and Day (2000) the main focus or priority for all professional reflection should be to engender change at an ‘emancipatory level’; to develop a critical practice that places authority back into the hands of those doing the reflection. James (2007) goes further, and suggests that reflective practice is always a ‘joint activity’ – a point often unexplored within existing literature.

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“Reflective practice is thus always a joint activity to some extent. It is linked to and influenced by the reflective working of others and is influenced by a whole set of informal and formal reflective interactions.” (James, 2007: 34)

Where the support of the project worked its best – and some participants had a ‘lighter touch’ than others – was with those colleagues who recognized for themselves the value of dialogue to support action and change.

“The fact is other practitioners have a key role in an individual’s reflective practice. In a variety of formal and informal roles, such as leaders, managers, mentors and coaches, others can influence an individual’s reflection. The everyday professional interactions with fellow colleagues can facilitate mutual reflection or co-reflection. Professional dialogue of this kind can enhance creativity because it can bring together different perspectives. Teachers’ experience of the practice of others is also likely to shape their reflections. “(James, 2007: 34)

The biggest challenge we faced was once we recognized the ‘research nature’ of our project, how then to document the work and to capture its data? I became conscious early on that the confidentiality of the project was its own worse enemy: we should be celebrating experimentation and risk-taking, not hiding it away. It took time for participants to feel supported enough to make open what they were doing. Capturing the data of the project was seen, mistakenly and ill-conceived at the start, as of secondary importance to the increased hours of ‘doing the work’. To capture the data we asked participant to make periodic reflections which over time built up into a detailed document giving voice to the nature of the work we had engaged
with. The confidentially so important at the very start to gain trust started to get in the way of moving the research forward – we found ourselves stifled by the private, hidden and behind-closed-doors nature of the individual support and needed to find a mechanism through which to make public a celebration of the risk-taking and experimentation participants had undertaken. Over time we encouraged colleagues to make reflections of their involvement in the research, making these available in booklet-form and on-line to the whole college community as a series of ‘voices’ through which the narrative of the project spoke. We eventually organised two ‘teaching and learning fairs’ where we asked participants to run market-stalls displaying ideas they had experimented with and materials fresh from their collaboration with the project. These were a massive success and publicly celebrated and valued those who took part. Staff remarked that they had an atmosphere and feel unlike any other staff training event most of the college had ever attended.

Within the practitioner-researcher role, I was conscious of the need to support colleagues to ultimately become independent of my own support. This point is echoed by Barazangi (2006) who suggests that the goal of action research is to avoid becoming an ‘authoritarian expert’ and instead increase capacity and effectiveness through ownership. Following Lewin (1947), the team urged participants to reflect upon both the forces prompting and resisting change and the tensions between the two. We also used this tool as a means to write our own logs and diary entries as a team, sharing comments regularly. It was also equally important that as a team of practitioner-researchers and certainly as a group new to the role, we set up a private and mutual space within which we could support each other.

**Subversion and change**

There was something deliberately playful, ironic and subversive about the remit of the project. The ambiguities the role of practitioner-researcher created were, over time, seen by the team as the very substance of the project itself. It was messy, contradictory and at all times fun! And yet, the landscape of the research was unsettling. The research was ongoing and so at no point did it feel fully formed. Our engagement with it as a research team was only productive once we realised the complexity of the work, roles and relationships we had taken on.

“It became evident to me that full transparency of the process was not always apparent in published accounts of research. It was not until I was able to more fully comprehend the value of reflection that I began to appreciate the contributions each detour in my research journey made, both to the research and my own development. I was learning through ‘being’ and ‘doing’.” (Grant, 2007: 268)

In this account of research from Grant, there is reflected a very similar feeling to the research ennui myself and others in the team experienced. We were even more ‘outside’ to the normal pattern of the culture of the institution than ever before – we had given up considerable hours of teaching (something we were all
relatively ‘good at’) – and had swapped structure and certainty for something far more ethereal: data gathering, negotiation of one’s own role and endless ‘talk’. As both Grant and Humphrey note, it was the recognition of the messy, insubstantial reality of the research process that was a genuine turning point in our own personal reflections of and relationships to the project and to each other.

“My contention is that an acknowledgement of the insider-outsider hyphen is indispensable to researcher reflexivity when operating in complex territories. On the one hand, the act of embarking upon action research itself propels the researcher into a new role as insider-outsider, which harbours the potential for confusion and contradiction. On the other hand, a research site is likely to shelter several groupings with conflicting identities and interests under its umbrella, and an insider researcher will have particular loyalties and antipathies like all the other players which renders insider- hood problematic for all.” (Humphrey, 2007: 22-23)

A naïve pragmatism?

As Elliott (1991) notes: “Teachers often feel threatened by ‘theory’” (1991: 45). The role of theoretical underpinnings was another and continued source of contradiction and ambiguity. On the one hand the research team did try and become increasingly theoretically informed as the project progressed – moving from a ‘what works and how can we see it’ position to asking ‘why does this work and how can we re-create it?’. Our participants by and large were less interested in theoretical ideas and more interested in something that ‘worked’, ignoring the relationship between the two. We allowed ourselves, on occasion, to be led down this route because it was often easier. The team were certainly actively engaged in a process of theorizing ‘as action happened’ and yet many participants were seeking a ‘catch-all’ solution. There was largely a ‘naïve pragmatism’ about the workmanship/craft approach to successful teaching. Some members of the wider community were suspicious of the cross-discipline claims of the project whereas others were suspicious of ‘talk for the sake of it’ without concrete ‘solutions’ being provided. I felt on a number of occasions that by tone setting and agenda setting – from the very aims of the project upwards – we were put into the position of needing to come up with an ‘expert solution’, and that somehow this is what some participants wanted from us. It was hard to resist further enforcing expert hierarchies of knowledge while creating the landscape of the project, but through mutual reflection we worked as a team to constantly re-evaluate our understandings of what we were doing, seeking for ourselves the very support we were offering others.

Conclusions

How might we judge the success of our action research? Elliott (2007), when looking at ‘experimental teaching’, offers the following criteria as a potential measurement of quality:
“It is a deliberative and self-reflexive process in which the teacher calls into question both her teaching strategies (means) and the aims (ends) to which they are directed, and then modifies each by reflecting on the other.” (Elliott, 2007: 237)

I feel it is the case that we increased both the quality and quantity of peer reflective dialogue and allowed a space within which experimentation in teaching could be both valued and safely conducted. In listening once more to the voice of the participants, we see an appreciation from many of the unusualness and freshness of the project in terms of their own routines and working lives.

“It was a positive experience; I liked the mixture of informality and support. It was not like a formal observation as the atmosphere was a non-threatening one and it was easier to take ideas on board. The presence of the advanced teaching practitioner helped improve the students’ motivation.” (Participant)

“Having meetings has helped me to share my thoughts on strategies and have constructive feedback with an experienced teacher. I have been given a lot of help in finding suitable strategies and have had resources given to me which I then adapted to my subject area. The project has not only given me knowledge on teaching, but has helped me to share and resolve issues in the working environment.” (Participant)

We ‘talked about teaching’; we shared, and in doing so hopefully left a legacy that prized dialogue, peer working and transferable skills as a basis for our colleagues to better know each other and better know themselves.

References

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*This paper was added to the Education-line collection on 15 September 2009*