

Subjects and objects in higher degrees: the view from within

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This paper will give two voices from within a Masters thesis; the researcher, and “the researched”. In this case, both speakers are participants within The Ithaka Project : the different purposes emerge from their different work settings. So what issues arise from this kind of participant-observer dichotomy? In what ways do the conversations which form the data for the thesis feed into the growth of the project? Does the consciousness of being “ researched” affect the ways in which such discussion can be conducted?

Introduction

The broad purpose of the research is to see what can be learnt about the notion of intellectual character through the experience of a group of teachers involved in The Ithaka Project. The study is in progress and this paper looks at just some aspects of it as outlined above, using the experience and voices of the researcher and the main teacher participant. Reflection on the experience of research-in-action provides insights into both the nature of the research and the learning partnerships. To help make these insights more meaningful it is first necessary to explain the full context of the study and its place within The Ithaka Project.

The voice of the researcher

The research project

The aim of this study is to explore the development of the understanding of selected teachers and students about the notion of intellectual character (Ritchhart 2001). Ritchhart, a member of the Project Zero Team at the Harvard Graduate School of Education, defines the concept of intellectual character as an “overarching term describing a set of dispositions - such as curiosity, scepticism or open-mindedness – that not only shape but also motivate intellectual behaviour” (2001:143). Perkins explains dispositions as “a tendency toward a particular pattern of intellectual behaviour” (2003:1). Furthermore, research carried out by the Project Zero Team has proposed three components necessary for dispositional behaviour: ability, sensitivity and inclination. The participants in the study discussed in this paper are all involved with The Ithaka Project, which investigates how thinking dispositions are manifested in the contexts of primary and secondary classrooms and how components of these dispositions are seen within ordinary school practice, in order to deepen understanding of teaching and learning.

The study addresses two key questions and three sub-questions.

1. What do teachers at different stages of experience understand about the notion of intellectual character?

· How can the stories of teachers’ current classroom experiences help us understand intellectual character?

- What factors shape teacher thinking about intellectual character?
- How might ways of thinking about intellectual character influence teacher behaviour?

2. What might teacher and student behaviours in different classrooms tell us about particular thinking dispositions?

Significance of the study

This study is significant because thinking-orientated curriculum has been identified as one of the three key areas of reform by the Victorian Department of Education and Training in its Middle of Years of Schooling Initiatives (McKnight 2000). Thinking is identified as a key domain to be addressed by all Government schools in the Victorian Essential Learning Standards (Victorian Department of Education and Training 2004). There are similar initiatives in other Australian States. Possible outcomes of this study are the potential to provide important insights into both the nature of thinking dispositions (Ritchhart 2001), and how these insights might support productive learning and higher-order thinking skills in classroom contexts. Moreover, the study has the potential to provide insights into aspects of student and teacher intellectual behaviour and curriculum development, thus informing the development of thinking orientated curricula.

At the broadest level, this research is qualitative. Qualitative methodology is a form of interpretive inquiry where meaning is explored and constructed by the participants and the researcher. Qualitative researchers are interested in exploring meaning; meaning made by the participants and the pathways they take to develop that meaning. While it is acknowledged that the researcher does not do this in a neutral way, procedures were put in place to keep the participant at the centre of the research. For example, interview questions were designed to explore experiences from the participant's perspectives through the use of questions such as, "How might you (the participant) interpret that experience?"

The setting

Research into learning and teaching experiences take their meaning from the contexts in which they occur, in this case the multiple contexts operating in the school and classroom settings (Cohen, Manion & Morrison 2000). The study was undertaken in two large, Prep to Year 12, metropolitan, independent schools. Both schools were original supporters of The Ithaka Project.

Teacher participants

The teachers who participated in this study were at different career stages and represented a broad range of experience across primary and secondary classes and teaching disciplines. They were invited to join the study because they represented a breadth of experience and because of their particular involvement in The Ithaka Project.

Student participants

There were two classes of student participants from the boys' campuses of one school; a voluntary Year 7/8 lunch time Philosophy class, and a Year 9/10 Philosophy elective. Both were taught by one of the teacher participants. The students were

generally very able and interested in thinking and learning but they were not necessarily highly articulate.

Case study – a study of a particular case in its time and place

A case study is, “an intrinsic, holistic description and analysis of a single instance, phenomena, or social unit” (Merriam 1998: 21). The exploration of intellectual character in selected classrooms, particular situations in particular contexts, was identified as worthy of sustained investigation and determined the selection of case study as the research strategy.

Case study and participant’s voice

Case study privileges the voices of the participants in the research. In this case it also enables the participants to deepen their understanding of their work within that particular context (Mendaglio 2003:164). Detailed documentation of participants’ stories includes some of the routine experiences of teachers and students, consequences of their actions, their formal and informal dialogue, their thinking and reflections.

Data collection

Techniques includes classroom observations of philosophy lessons in a selected secondary classroom and of a voluntary philosophy lunchtime discussion group, two semi-structured interviews with primary and secondary teachers, one semi-structured interviews with a small groups of selected students from each of the classes observed and written documentation of the development of The Ithaka Project.

It is acknowledged that the observer’s presence influences the nature of the data. Merriam (1998), referring to the work of Glaser and Strauss, claims that there is always some “researcher effect” as the researcher is a human instrument integral to the situation. Merriam describes the role of the investigator, “as the primary instrument of data collection and analysis assumes an inductive stance and strives to derive meaning from the data” (Merriam,1998 :17).

Trustworthiness of the study

According to Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, (2000), trustworthiness replaces the more conventional components of reliability and validity. They claim trustworthiness of qualitative, naturalistic, ethnographic research can be assessed by the application of criteria as set out below and addressed in this study.

Prolonged engagement: The study took place over a full school year. This enabled the researcher to collect data over a sustained period of time and guard against misinformation, distortion, and identify inconsistencies and constructions. It also enabled the researcher to establish relationships so that the influence of her presence was reduced.

Persistent observation: The researcher negotiated with teacher participants to ensure that interviews were conducted at the beginning and towards the end of their Ithaka Project tasks. The time varied from participant to participant. Observations were increased to four for each group of students, and discussions with the teacher of the observed classes were held over a sustained period of three school terms. Persistent observation also enabled the researcher to identify and clarify varying explanations of events.

Triangulation: Data was collected from a variety of sources using different data collections methods so emergent themes and “multiple realities” (Stake, 2000: 48) could be identified and verified.

Peer debriefing: Formal and informal peer debriefings were held with the university supervisor and the leader of The Ithaka Project. Their questions and comments helped in framing and reframing the research questions, identifying the influence the researcher’s values played in the inquiry process, and clarifying the emergent themes and findings identified in the data.

Negative case analysis: This study was exploring the theory of intellectual character as set out by Ritchhart(2001). While it did not aim to negate or substantiate the theory, the researcher will examine the data for examples within the data which may have contradicted the theory.

Member checking: Teacher participants were provided with transcripts of their interviews and encouraged to correct any factual errors and add clarifications and additional comments.

While issues of validity and reliability are addressed through applying criteria for **trustworthiness**, the issue of researcher bias and replication was also considered.

Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, (2000:119), suggest this can be addressed by repeating

- the status position of the researcher
- the choice of informant/respondents
- The social situations and conditions
- The analytic constructs and premises that are used; and
- The methods of data collection and analysis.

Qualitative research does not strive for uniformity. Different researchers studying the same setting may have different findings, nevertheless both sets of finding might be reliable. (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2000).

Limitations

All studies have limitations due to the parameters set up so as to make the study manageable.

- All aspects of the theory of intellectual character and the thinking dispositions as proposed by Ritchhart (2001), were not dealt with equally and therefore the study builds on that theory in a limited way.
- This study dealt with a selected number of teachers who, while representative of a broad range of experience, were small in number.
- Although the teachers were from both a boys’ and a girls’ school, the student participants were boys only.
- Both schools in the study were Independent schools in medium to high socio-economic areas.
- There was no cross-site analysis.
- The student participants were generally very able and did not represent a full range of general ability but for the purposes of this study a broad range of ability was not necessary.

The study does not claim to be representative of gender or general ability. Nor does it claim that its findings can be generalized to the whole population.

Other challenges for the researcher

As well as being a researcher I undertook roles within the Ithaka Project. My interaction with Ithaka participants outside the confines of the study includes membership of The Project Review Group and the reading group, attendance at some

planning sessions, other Ithaka meetings and professional gatherings with teachers in The Ithaka Project who were not part of the study. The challenge is to identify what is data for the research and what is other information and how this other information impacts on my understanding of intellectual character. As well, I need to acknowledge that I may be privy to information which belongs to others, which they may wish to use for their own research. The ownership of information presents a constant ethical and organisational challenge in this case. I dealt with it mainly by checking with my supervisors and the leader of The Ithaka Project, especially when moving in and out of my various roles. The challenges presented by my diverse roles enables me to gain a complex and rich understanding of the nature of The Ithaka Project and intellectual character to the benefit my study. I have been able to share my growing knowledge and experience with teachers involved in the Project to what I hope has been our mutual benefit. In other words I have been part of a professional learning team.

Constructing knowledge in school based research partnership

The voice of the teacher

“ All knowledge has an unavoidable personal spin, all knowledge is tentative and constructed, all knowledge is a living process modified by each user” Eisner p.x in forward to Beattie (1995).

Identifying common experiences which underpin the partnership

The story continues through the voice of the main participant.

The researcher and the main teacher participant have similar teaching backgrounds, similar educational philosophies, interests and objectives. Each had become interested in gifted education, had significant teacher-mentors and developed similar understandings of the teaching and learning process both within and beyond the secondary setting. Each shares the conception of the teaching/ learning process as a dialogue between different understandings of and approaches to conceptions of the world around us. Each shares an appreciation of the role of detailed subject knowledge and expertise, a passion for wanting to know for no reason other than the desire to find out. Each knows the wonder of observing that passion reignited in students' minds: the 'fire behind the eyes'. Each knows that wonder for teaching staff as well as students. Each knows the role of professional learning teams. Ithaka is such a team. Unlike many professional development activities, Ithaka provides the framework for ongoing, long-term engagement with other professionals in the context of recent theory and our own day to day practice.

The nature of the relationship within this research project

The focus of this qualitative research project is on exploration of meaning – not on quantitative assessment and judgement and the nature of the research drives the relationship. The nature and purpose of the research has been restated and clarified at regular intervals so that the purpose of the research has constantly been kept in focus.

Collegial respect is critical to the success of any established learning team. Such respect is won through engagement, like any jousting on the lists. Unlike jousting, there must be a degree of professional, philosophical agreement at the core of the engagement. A robust discussion may only proceed on the basis that the participants share a common framework from which to demur or agree. On occasion, such a framework is absent: there is no participation because the protagonists are not even “on the same page”. Consequently, an essential ingredient for success is mutual

understanding of beliefs and values that underpin the research. For example, we shared an understanding of intelligence and productive intellectual functioning. It was important to explore these understandings early in the process. The clarification of what each of us understood by central concepts meant that discussion could proceed without constant recalcification and potential confusion. Agreement is not important but engagement with mutually understood concepts and assumptions is critical.

The researcher and the participant needed to be comfortable with their different areas of expertise. The researcher is not the expert coming to have expectations confirmed. Ongoing discussion enabled us to revisit the understanding that we were reflecting on why things are the way they are rather than how they are. We needed to be comfortable with ambiguity and lack of precision; that we were seeking better understanding for all participants.

Importance of time

We try to find time to talk soon after the observations of classes -but time alone is often not sufficient. Such talk has to be focussed on why things are the way they are. Some examples of what we talk about include;

- To what extent could we say that one section of class discussion demonstrated students trying to critically analyse something?
- What was the role of the peer group in the “that part of the thinking?”
- What might this snapshot suggest about X’s disposition to search for understanding and tell us about the role of affective factors on the development of dispositions.
- Identifying and clarifying use of specific language. This was of particular importance in this project.
- The role of competing priorities in school life and changing perceptions and changing demands.

Discussion of such matters helped us understand that the research is influenced by many things.

Expectations, hopes and realities

The voice of the researcher

We all bring our expectations, hopes and concerns to a research project. I wanted to work with people who knew more than I did, people who would provide lots of depth, challenge me and provide lots of ideas for me to explore. This particular project was not about seeing if something was working, but about building knowledge together. I wanted a story from James that would be a source of greater understanding and a means of securing more accurate and complex comprehension of the way things are (Beattie 1995).

The voice of the teacher

I entered the research with few expectations other than that this would provide focus for detailed discussions of the thinking dispositions visible within the classroom. It is frequently difficult to discern thinking behaviours within the maelstrom that is a regular teaching period. Attention is often distracted and perceptions of behaviour may be skewed by personal perception. The degree of engagement with the researcher led to close discussion of moments within particular classes that illuminated our understanding of thinking dispositions and their antecedents. This expectation was more than met.

The voice of the researcher

What might be good for the researcher can be high risk for the teacher. The researcher gets to collect data, to sit in on interesting classes, to see what most other people are not privileged to see, that is the privilege of observing another's professional practice. As the researcher I was imposing on much of the teacher's professional life.

- Watching his practice
- Observing his classes
- Seeing his role in the school

I observed his relationship with the students. As I focussed on their thinking during fleeting and intimate interactions, I was aware that, more often than not, it was a response to his management and to the relationships he had built over time. Maybe, as a researcher participant, this is the most precise, but intrusive thing we do. We observe the personal relationships, the intimate connecting of ideas, the operation of trust between student and teacher, not knowing or understanding the experiences which have established that trust. How does this impinge on the nature of what we observe when, "We need an intellectually safe place for coherent thought to develop" (Plyani, 1958 in Clandinin, D. J. & Connelly, (2000).

The voice of the teacher

Aspects of teaching practice came into focus through apposite questioning and discussion. The processes by which students were encouraged to develop thinking dispositions became a little clearer. How the various dispositions appear in classroom behaviour was debated at length which sharpened my perception.

ISSUES AND QUESTIONS FOR FUTURE PROJECTS AND RESEARCH

PARTICIPANTS

THESE ISSUES ARE OF PARTICULAR INTEREST GIVEN THE MOVE TO SCHOOL BASED RESEARCH PROJECTS.

- Responsibilities which go with the privilege of observing the learning process in someone's classroom where individuals expose their human strengths and frailties
- The challenge of keeping focus on what you are looking for and not getting caught up in the content but looking at the learning.
- The suspension of judgement about teacher and students. Researchers are not there to judge but to find what focussed observations can tell us about productive thinking dispositions as they operate in this particular classroom.
- Classrooms are often a very familiar situation, so researchers must be aware of possible dominance of personal experiences, expectations and pre-judgements. These need to be acknowledged.
- Acknowledgement that while this form of research provides much deep understanding by drawing on the richness of individual personal insights, it is nevertheless, merely a series of snapshots of a very complex process of learning.
- There are issues to do with personal, professional and collegial boundaries that might be classified as matters of intellectual property but often have a very human face and may require careful, diligent awareness and management.
- There is the challenge of building on what we have learnt here and from other similar projects to help develop further research which might not be quite so messy. How can we refine the research process?

Conclusion

There is much to be learnt from exploration of the experiences of researchers and participants while the research is still in progress. Careful management of relationships, regular clarification of the goals, language and interpretation of experiences and attention to ethical issues will build help a successful partnership of researcher and participants. In this way, qualitative research projects such as this should be a positive learning experience for all concerned and provide the profession with important insights and issues concerned with learning and teaching.

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