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CB 4 - 15, Level 4, Centenary Building

The politics of collaborative research: Doing ethnography with an industry partner

collaborate 1. to work with another or others on a joint project. 2. to cooperate as a traitor, esp. with an enemy occupying one's own territory. (Collins Concise Dictionary: Australian Edition 1995)

Introduction

It seems to be taken-for-granted that collaborative research is 'a good thing to do'. Indeed a great deal of the literature seems to extol the virtues of 'participation', 'collaboration' and 'partnerships' (Free, Burrow & Roley 1994; Grundy, 1995; Oakes, Hare & Sirotnik, 1986). After all, who could oppose such an enchanting and egalitarian notion as working with others in the pursuit of knowledge and human endeavour. Yet the dictionary definition above reveals another more sinister and unsettling notion of collaboration - one which calls into question the motives and integrity of those who cooperate with more treacherous elements in society. They execute these collaborators don't they!

Perhaps this rather disturbing slant on the act of collaboration should alert us to the possibility that in the stampede to secure funding for research purposes we may run the risk of forming partnerships with organisations whose interests may be quite inimical to those that we espouse. At the very least it should highlight the political nature of collaborative research and to the need for critical appraisal of the motives behind the push for professional research partnerships. Shacklock and Smyth (1998: 265 - 166) contend that, despite the proliferation of literature on the topic, there has been scant attention to the policy agenda driving calls for collaboration between university and industry. They go on to argue that beneath the egalitarian rhetoric a lot of collaborative research is promoted largely for largely utilitarian reasons that have their genesis in a discourse of globalisation (Taylor, Rizvi, Lingard & Henry, 1997) and the drive for international competitiveness. In the light of these conclusions they insist that there is an urgent need to ask such fundamental questions as; whose interests are being served by these partnerships, how is power being exercised, and what are the possible long-term consequences?

In this paper I wish to look at the politics of doing ethnographic research with an industry partner through the lens of the Teachers' Learning Project. John Smyth has already given an

overview of the scope and nature of project, and an account of the cultural politics of researching teacher learning from a socially critical perspective. I propose to build on these ideas by focussing more specifically on the methodological aspects of this research and to highlight some of the perplexing issues associated with working with an industry partner - for example:

- What are the particular interests of the partners?
- What forms of expertise do each of the partners bring to the collaborative research?
- How is parity defined?
- Who gets to hold the pen?
- Who gets to drive the research agenda?
- How is power distributed in the partnership?
- What principles guide the partnership?
- How are ethical issues resolved?

After a description of the research methodology I want to outline how the project attempted to grapple with some of these questions and, in particular, how the accounts were negotiated with industry partners.

At this point I think I should declare my hand and explain that my role in the project was that of a Research Officer employed by the Department of Education Training and Employment (DETE). Thus, although I was part of the ARC team working with university researchers, my specific links to the project came through the education industry partner, DETE.

The research methodology

In this necessarily brief description I want to focus on the selection of school sites, the research approach and data gathering methods.

Selecting the school sites - search for vibrancy

A major goal of the Teachers' Learning Project was to provide a description of teaching that could be used to analyse teachers' workplace learning. Because the goal of the project was to showcase teacher learning we were mainly interested in engaging with those schools

which exhibited considerably vibrancy in terms of teachers' learning and a school reform agenda. We were not after the stuck schools! Thus the choice of school sites for investigation became an important consideration. We were looking for schools in which there were tangible signs of:

- an emphasis on teacher-managed form of learning;
- a primary focus on learning and teaching;
- a commitment to addressing the needs of all students - ie socially-just curriculum; and,
- evidence of success or potential success in improving learning and teaching outcomes.

Extensive assaying of potential sites preceded the final selection process during which we visited a number of schools, conducted project seminars, reviewed the literature on schools involved in national and state education projects, and sought advice from DETE Project Officers, Superintendents, Principals and the Reference Group. Our final selection of eight sites included junior primary, primary and secondary schools in metropolitan and rural South Australia. They were: Hackham West Schools; Ingle Farm East School; The Pines School; the Senior Secondary School of Distance education in the Open Access College; Gepps Cross Girls High School; Seaford 6 - 12 School; Indulkana Anangu School; the Mid-North Secondary School Cooperative - a group of schools including Booleroo Centre, Jamestown, Gladstone and Peterborough, High Schools and Orroroo Area School.

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The research approach - 'partial immersion'

Our research approach at these schools involved qualitative ways of rendering teachers lives and works more accessible to others. We were interested in talking to teachers, principals, students and other members of the community about teaching and learning. We wanted to venture into the world of teachers to understand the meanings that activities have for those engaged in them (Page et al 1998). We wanted to observe the structures and culture which enhance teachers' learning and contribute to the growth of learning communities. In short we wanted to immerse ourselves (however briefly) in the life of schools. In actual practice this meant inhabiting eight school communities for periods of time ranging from two or three days in some instances to two years in other cases. Because of the partial nature of this immersion we should hesitate to describe this research as a fully fledged ethnographic study, but we did employ ethnographers methods of collecting data, namely semi-structured interviews, participant observation, document analysis and photographic records. Our approach involved what Glaser and Strauss (1968) refer to as 'grounded theory' where we were attempting to generate theory from the grounded experiences of the participants in the study rather testing pre-conceived beliefs and theories.

But we should make it clear that our research extended beyond the micro political level of schools to a study of the broader context in which teachers' work is carried out. Making sense of what was happening in schools and classrooms also required analysis of the economic, political and social influences impacting on schooling and public education.

Research Methodology

- individual and group interviews and conversations
- observation of learning forums, school activities and teaching practices
- field notes and journal
- photographs
- document analysis
- checking out with participants

Let me now spell out in some detail what this field work looked like.

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Research methods - a 'multi-layered approach'

One way of conceptualising the fieldwork involved in this project is to view it as a multi layered process in which we attempted to generate descriptions of teachers' learning from different layers within the school communities.

1. In the first place it involved preliminary meetings with the principals/deputies/ administrators (the school 'gate keepers') to establish the broad parameters for the research program and to address some of ethical guidelines and procedural matters. Not only did these discussions provide an orientation to the school and a leadership perspective on curriculum priorities and planning processes, they were also a conduit to the staff and the various forums which support teacher learning. During the research phase we continued to maintain ongoing dialogue with the school leadership - checking out our impressions, re-visiting ideas raised in earlier discussions and talking through concerns about the representation of the account.

2. Having negotiated access to the school community we then commenced a round of interviews with teachers and school coordinators. We referred to these semi-structured interviews as purposeful conversations because they were usually dialogic or interactive in character and allowed for a good deal of open-ended discussion about teaching practices

and curriculum issues. In the process of negotiating the topics for discussion, we usually faxed teachers a set of headings or focus questions to give some direction to the conversation. Because of limited time and resource constraints we had to make some pragmatic decisions about limiting the number of informants at each school. In the main interviews were carried out with individual teachers but occasionally we met with small teams or pairs of teachers. In a number of instances we pursued some of the ideas and issues raised in these discussions with a second round of interviews - a strategy which allowed us to explore new pathways and engage in theory building with participants.

Quite often interviews with a particular teacher were preceded by observations of the classroom practices. We found that this was very helpful in allowing us to observe connections between theory and practice and it gave us a chance to converse with students about their learning.

3. Our research also involved observations of curriculum meetings, training and development activities, learning teams, staff meetings and other professional development groups where teachers revealed themselves as learners within the school community. In some instances we moved beyond being observers to active participants in these gatherings - taking part in role playing activities and providing feed back to staff about the project.

4. At another layer the research involved tracking the teachers' learning to the point of contact with students in class meetings, lessons, school assemblies, festivals and other learning situations. We talked to students about their perceptions of how their teacher's learning was making a difference to their learning. We invited students to take us on a tour of the school and to talk about their impressions of schooling. Essentially these observations and recordings aimed to give a reading of the relationships between teacher learning and learning outcomes for students and to look at the ways in which pedagogical practices resonate with the life experiences of students. Ultimately we believed that at this level that some evaluation might be possible about the links between teacher development and the educational achievement of students.

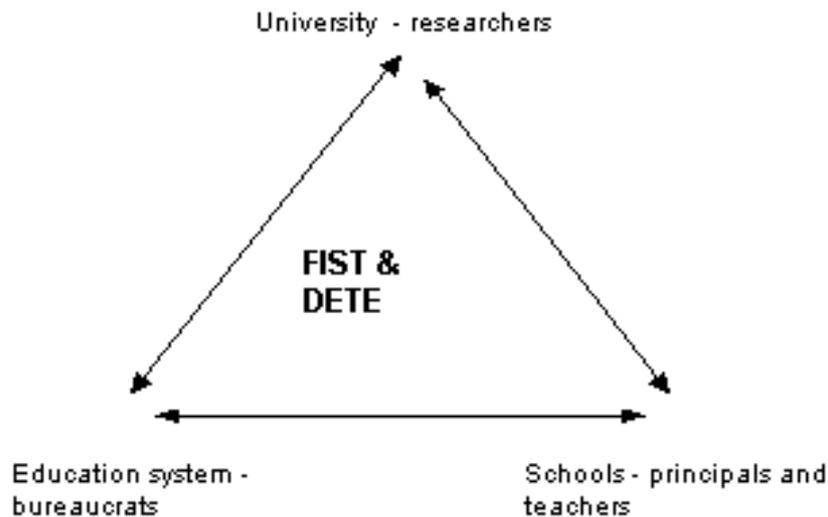
We collected and recorded our data in a variety of ways, including field notes, transcripts of audio taped interviews and photographic accounts of school events, facilities and learning activities. These records were supplemented with curriculum documents, policy statements, school newsletters and other written portrayals of school life.

This research methodology enabled us to collect a substantial amount of data from which to generate theories about teachers' learning and school reform. But what needs to be emphasised is that the collaborative nature of the research meant that the processes of developing the account had to be negotiate with the industry partners - DETE and FIST. In the next part of the paper I want to look at the politics of this negotiation and consider questions of interests, parity and reciprocity arising from the project.

The politics of partnerships - 'multiple perspectives'

Collaborative research invariably involves working with partners with differing perspectives and interests. In spite of some shared commitment or common purpose amongst the partners there may be friction, fractures and even irreconcilable differences between researchers, practitioners, school administrators over such issues as research roles, research processes and research outcomes (Campbell, 1988; Grundy 1995; Boostrom, Jacobson & Hansen 1993; Shacklock & Smyth, 1997a). Much for instance has been written about the tensions emanating from the cultural divide that supposedly separates teachers and university researchers - tensions which often jeopardise collaborative research possibilities. According to this view of a 'cultural divide' teacher researcher participants are generally more concerned about "action and experience" while university researchers are on about "analysis and knowledge" (Shacklock & Smyth, 1997b: 5). But as we were to encounter in the Teachers' Learning Project there are multiple perspectives even within an industry partner - points of difference which add layers of complexity to the research process.

The politics of collaboration: tensions within partnerships



Perhaps the sharpest of these divides was evident in the differing interests and headsets of teachers (practitioners) and education department administrators (bureaucrats) which might be represented in the extreme form as follows:

School teachers (practitioners) Department Administrators

- close to students - remote from classrooms
- work grounded in practice - work grounded in policy
- view school as locus of change - centrally mandated reform - local will and capacity - systemic change

Although DETE was the industry partner in this collaborative venture our work was primarily located in schools rather than the educational bureaucracy and the voices most commonly heard were teachers and other members of school communities. From time to time we became conscious of the tensions between schools and the education system especially; of the school-based resistance to mandated reforms such as the Basic Skills Tests and Performance Management policies; of a reluctance on the part of teachers to embrace aspects of the National Curriculum; of the intensification of teachers' work and concerns about funding cut-backs in public education.

At times it appeared that, although school personnel and department administrators shared a common conviction about the significance of teachers' learning in improving schooling for students, they often held oppositional positions about the ways to achieve this goal. For many education bureaucrats the solution lay in mandated reforms, a centralised curriculum, standardised testing regimes, accountability measures based on performance management and quality control programs. In contrast principals and teachers in vibrant schools tended to attach a lot of importance to democratic decision making practices, teacher-managed forms of professional learning and curriculum making in response to the local community. The notion of the devolved school became quite a powerful concept for framing these points of tension between the system and schools - a issue which Rob Hattam will raise in his presentation.

Representing the accounts to take on board the differing perspectives within industry partners is a political issue - an issue I now want to look at in some detail.

Negotiating the account

The construction of collaborative accounts necessarily requires the rupturing of the separation between teachers and researchers that often prevent teachers commenting on the action of researchers (Shacklock & Smyth, 1997b:16). Reporting ethnographic accounts to informants does not always occur in a very enlightening way in collaborative projects. A recent study of a school project in Southern California (Page et al 1998), reported in the Harvard Educational Review (Volume 68 Number 3, 1998), shows just how damaging this process can be. In this instance the university researchers took several years to represent their impressions to the schools involved in the study and promptly alienated many teachers with their disparaging descriptions of the school cultures. But we don't have to go all the way to the United States to see evidence of this damaging critique. Recently a South Australian school principal made it quite clear to a group of researchers that he did not appreciate his school being summarily categorised as "Average" following an evaluative survey.

Goodson and Manjan (1996) remind us that negotiating accounts with informants is not only an ethical and respectful practice but an acknowledgment that situated participants have authority and knowledge which is vital to the representation of the research. Negotiating the account with industry partners assumed particular significance in the Teachers' Learning project. Early in the project we had reached agreement with the department and schools that the identity of schools would be made public and questions of ethics and disclosure procedures were negotiated with school principals and participants. It was understood that the purpose of the research was to highlight those elements of the school culture which enhanced teachers' learning. So we were not going in to 'do a job on schools'. But by the same token we did not want to present an overly romantic account which underscored the problematic nature of school reform. Representing the account in a positive, yet critical, manner meant treading a fine line between these imperatives.

Because we were also working within the broader public education system the process of negotiation also involved sustained dialogue with DETE personnel in such areas as Curriculum, School Operations, Training and Development, Strategic Planning and Equity Standards.

I now want to briefly outline the structures and strategies that were established to facilitate this process of negotiation with the department and school groups.

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Reference Group

From the outset a project reference group consisting of representatives of the various branches of DETE, the AEU and principals associations provided a broader system perspective. Over the three years of the project it became a forum for checking out accounts

and workshopping theories generated from the research. One of the issues raised in this forum concerned the emphasis which our study placed on the local school as the site for educational reform. Some members argued that individual school case studies of this kind might undervalue the role of the public education system as a major player in school improvement.

Teachers' Field Group

We also met regularly with another group of educators - mostly school-based personnel (teachers and principals) - who provided advice about the content of the case studies, assisted in generating theory about teachers' learning and gave some directions for the development of resource materials. This group became a reality check for the project - a role which Mike Lawson will elaborate on in the next part of the presentation.

School-based personnel

We placed a lot of emphasis on developing and sustaining relationships with school-based personnel. As outlined in the description of the methodology we attempted to maintain an ongoing dialogue with teachers and principals at each site. Following a round of interviews and observations we generally analysed the data and revisited the school to check out our interpretations with informants. These conversations often formed the basis for new directions in field work; they helped to generate theory and allowed us to incorporate new perspectives in the study. Our endeavours to incorporate reflexivity in this way were based on Bakhtin's (1981) understanding that all discourse is inherently dialogic - or as expressed by Herr and Andersen (1997: 47):

[I]nformant's narratives are not mererly elicited, but rather created out of specific social contexts and interactions between interviewer and informant.

These strategies and forums helped to bring researchers and participants together in a way which is not always possible in more traditional research methodology. We believe that ethnographic studies of the kind in which we were engaged can moderate the difference between the culture of teachers and university researchers because the methods and reports are less technical than traditional studies, they are more focussed on the lived experiences of teachers, and tend to position teachers as 'experts' within their field. In our project the 'purposeful conversations' with participants provided an interactive setting in which teachers could be involved in the generation and testing of theories and ideas rather than simply as informants which typically occurs in research studies dominated by surveys and other quantitative methods.

We should also add that the four researchers in the project all had a background in teaching in the public education system (two in fact had recent experience in teaching in South Australian schools) so we entered the project with some knowledge and understanding of

the institutional practices and culture of school communities. On reflection this background enhanced our credibility in schools and allowed us to engage in conversations with teachers and students in which we could draw upon our own personal experiences.

"Did we get it right?"

Our methodology included a 'checking-out' phase where we met with participants to respond to our drafts of the case studies. "Have we got it right?" we would ask them. "Tell us where the gaps are". The strategies for working through this process varied from site to site. In some schools we had a 'reading' of the case study where teachers and researchers actually read aloud excerpts from the text. In another instance we met with a group of principals, teachers and parents to review the account. Quite often we received written feed back from principals and teachers.

What were the participant's reactions to these accounts?

1. In most instances participants stated that they were satisfied with the authenticity of the account and agreed that there was little need for revision or modification. It appeared that many of those involved in earlier discussions with the researchers had a fairly clear understanding of the content and there were few shocks to their sensibilities. Sustaining an ongoing dialogue with informants during the research phases seems to have been particularly beneficial to the research outcome.
2. Some participants proof read the accounts and corrected our spelling and grammatical errors. This was very helpful!
3. In some instances participants up-dated information about their school. Because we were writing up accounts some time after the completion of field work our data had become outdated. The terrain shifts rather quickly in some schools.
4. There were some criticisms which went to the core of how we had interpreted what was happening in schools. At a couple of sites principals argued that we had oversimplified the process of school reform. "It was much more difficult than it reads", they told us. "You need to talk more about the elements of resistance", they suggested. In another example teachers disagreed with our interpretation of student voice in their school and then went on to explain how we might begin to reconfigure this part of the account so that it resonated more closely with their reading.

We should add at this juncture that we did not necessarily accept at face value all of the criticisms posed by the participants and members of the reference groups. We didn't give up the power of the pen without good reason! Rather we engaged in a dialogue with informants in which we attempted to problematise the issues and establish ways of re-drafting ideas to take into account new perspectives and to clarify our interpretations.

Addressing issues of reciprocity - "what's in it for me?"

Finally, a few words about the benefits to informants engaged in this research. Criticisms concerning issues of reciprocity often arise in collaborative research projects (Grundy, 1995; Ulichny & Schoener 1996) - namely that:

- informants receive few rewards and are sometimes exploited
- there are doubtful benefits to schools
- feedback is often negative and damaging to schools.

We relied extensively on a group of volunteer teachers to act as informants in the project. Although informants were not personally recompensed for their time we were able to make a financial contribution to schools to release staff for interviews and planning purposes. Showing a concern for "people's existential experiences" (Goodman, 1995: 8) and the relational aspects of research in schools helped to create a dialogic space and climate of trust in the research project. Teachers who participated in the interviews and groups discussions often expressed their satisfaction at the opportunity to talk and reflect on their work and professional learning. In most instances they told us that this was a rare event in their working lives. For these teachers the question of reciprocity was satisfied by having a reflective surface for their own ideas and practices and the opportunity to contribute in a meaningful way to the development of the case study and broader goals of the project.

Principals and teachers in school communities derived benefits from this research in other ways as well. To cite two examples:

- Because the case studies highlighted 'good' practices the documents occasionally became an affirmation of the school's educational success - a public relations tool.
- In some instances school's saw the possibility of using the reports as a source of leverage in negotiating for systemic support for schooling and teachers' learning - a political weapon.

In the next part of the presentation Mike Lawson will take a closer look at the feed back from teachers and members of the field group to gauge what benefits they claim to have gained from their participation in the project.

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