An intruder in my own world: Critical reflective methodology

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This paper maps my journey as a developing researcher in teacher education. Setting out to study student teachers’ professional development with particular attention on the role of reflection and active learning, I found myself an intruder in my own world, embarking on an intrepid journey which would challenge and change my understanding of both research methodology and my own practice. The research became personal professional development.

At the beginning of this journey my expectations of research methodology were of a linear approach - clean, predictable and sequential. However what was discovered was a dynamic, complex and apparently unpredictable reality. A search for authenticity required a methodology that would overcome the barriers my expectations of a linear framework presented.

A critical interpretive ‘interactional dynamic’ between experience, enquiry and examination led to an increased awareness of the powerful influences of past learning and beliefs, combining to make a study where the methodology modelled reflective practice and led to the researcher’s professional growth. The developing methodological framework allowed the building of integrity and authenticity because of a greater degree of alignment between subject and method which in turn allowed the symbiotic relationship between these two to emerge.

Embarking on the journey

This paper maps my journey as a developing researcher in teacher education. Setting out to study student teachers’ professional development with particular attention on the role of reflection and active learning, I found myself embarking on an intrepid journey which would challenge and change my understanding of both research methodology and practice. Some aspects of the research focus are included to provide context for the journey of professional development involved in this change.

A journey often begins with people, baggage and a plan. The research journey which is the focus for this paper also includes these fundamentals. Key people include student teachers within an initial teaching degree and a teacher educator with a vision for quality education for the nation’s children and a belief that this is dependent on quality teaching which is in turn dependent on quality teachers. And baggage? Well, we all have plenty of this. Teacher education literature indicates that students bring many beliefs, values and understandings about teaching to their initial preparation and that these beliefs are resistant to change (Calderhead & Shorrock, 1997; Fischler, 1999; Furlong, Barton, Miles, Whiting, & Whittty, 2000; Hattie, 1999; Kagan, 1992; Lortie, 1975; Mayer, 1999).

Throughout this journey it became clear that as a teacher educator I had more items in my baggage than I first realised – helpful as well as unhelpful. One valued item in my baggage was a commitment to the role of reflection as an integral part of initial teacher education, and indeed professional development, where the aim is to “effect those personal changes which will permit the integration into practice of self understanding, relevant theory, substantive knowledge and functional skills” (Fielding, 1966, quoted in Pyle & Seals, 1995, p.86), or as recorded elsewhere: “A process for improving practice by becoming professionally self aware through identifying assumptions in decisions and responses within the learning/teaching relationship, and judging those assumptions for their adequacy in the light of a developing and critiqued educational vision” (Norsworthy, 2002, p. 111).

A research project was embarked upon, and after several meanderings down side roads the following focus was determined. “How does pre-service work within an initial teacher
education programme contribute to the development of the reflective professional?” Two strong tendencies in student teachers had been observed. The first was the ‘give-the-teacher-educator-what-she-wants’ approach, and the second, ‘give-me-the-simple-recipe – Steps 1-2-3’. Even recognising student teachers’ preoccupation with the technical aspect of teaching, these two tendencies appeared to have pushed aside, hidden or marginalised the students’ desire to learn. One may posit that they are learning something but ‘its’ often not what we would like them to learn.

The research context is a curriculum course which focuses on aspects and related issues in the teaching of Science. The research plan was that through a pre-course questionnaire I would discover something about the students’ expectations of the course and then ‘track’ their processing of learning experiences within the course through a range of reflective experiences. A meta-reflection at the conclusion of the course would identify for me the students’ awareness of their growth and development. That was the plan. The research methodology was linear - clean, predictable and sequential, an “effort to increase human effectiveness through systematic data-based inquiry” (Patton, 1990, in Pitman & Maxwell, 1992, p. 735).

**Beware: Rocky road ahead**

Beginning expectations may have been of a linear approach - clean, predictable and sequential, but what was discovered was a dynamic, complex and apparently unpredictable reality. My plan did not take into account the effect of expectations for student engagement in active learning, nor of the challenge involved for some students in understanding the nature of the thinking involved in that learning.

For example, I believed that to understand an educational situation was to understand the participants’ ‘theories of action’ (Argyris & Schön, 1974) and the factors which sustain those theories. Therefore, to bring about educational change requires interaction with those theories of action to produce difference consequences, which may be described as leading to improved learning. But why, in my initial interactions did I think only of the student teachers’ theories of action? Why did I overlook and underestimate the degree to which I was a participant within an institutional framework which generated factors which sustained those very theories? And, why, given the clear message from the students’ pre-course questionnaires that a great course would be “fun, fun, fun, little reading and not much writing”, did I view as unproblematic my belief that to be an effective teacher of science one needed to be an active learner, an enquirer?

The rocky beginnings on this journey emphasised the students’ perception of an overarching metaphor for ‘teachers-as-tellers’, ‘dispensers of knowledge’, and their motivation for the journey seemed to focus on completion rather than ‘noticing’, observing and learning along the way (Mason, 2002). The belief that the professional responsibility of teachers is to utilise knowledge about teaching generated by those outside the classroom, is very strongly held by the student teachers. It appeared from the questionnaire data that what they wanted was entertainment and notes on the board to copy down. Within such a scenario, I was filled with conflicting emotions and thoughts. To my colleagues I described the student teachers’ responses as ‘resistance’. Apparently, these students did not want to learn. My deepest anxiety related to this was the fact that they were preparing to be teachers. How could teachers not want to learn and inquire? At several times throughout the course I entertained the idea of giving them what they wanted – notes on the board, recipes for experiments – I could do that. But could I? Such a choice would ask me to be untrue to myself and my
epistemological and pedagogical beliefs. My reason for being a teacher educator is inextricably linked to the notion of transformative education and to work toward any other end would be to turn my vocation into a job, a professional into a technician. “Being professional requires a personal commitment to the telos or purpose of the professional activity, and this involves moral or ethical purpose” (Norsworthy, 2003, p. 60). This is part of who I am, my ‘identity’ and the motivation and strength to be an educator flow from this – if I deny this, I lose the heart to teach (Palmer, 1998, p.16). The rocky path would yet become rockier. A few key and vocal students voiced concern to the Assistant Dean. Institutional Evaluation Sheets for the course and the year programme identified the students as not confident with teaching the subject. This is not what I expected the data to say. Such information challenged my own integrity and identity. Where was the objective research data now when I needed it the most? As Day (1999, p.222) records: “Teachers’ emotional commitments and connections to students, both positive and negative, energise and articulate everything they do. Teaching involves immense amounts of emotional labour… This kind of labour calls for a co-ordination of mind and feeling, and it sometimes draws on a source of self that we honour as deep and integral to our personality (Hochschild, p.7 cited in Hargreaves, 1997)”

My journal diary from this time records my turmoil as I struggled with the tensions between ‘justifying’ my course approach, but also desperately trying to find a way forward to increase the students’ level of confidence in their preparedness for teaching science. I dug deep into my commitment to the students and to my beliefs about the nature of teaching and learning.

By the end of Phase One, after processing this initial data there was no doubt – these students were definitely resistant to learning. I began to read the related literature. But all the while I sensed that there was more to this situation than I had captured. A search for authenticity required a methodology that would overcome the barriers my expectations of a linear framework presented. As I continued to read, write and teach in the area of reflection and The Reflective Practitioner, I knew I had to re-visit, or ‘reframe’, the experience (Schön, 1983). But this time I needed to challenge and examine the assumptions underpinning that experience, and particularly those which sustained the assumptions underpinning the enquiry process itself. Would I have the courage to continue and make choices in the light of appropriateness rather than being constrained by a particular paradigm? (LeCompte, Millroy, & Preissle, 1992, p. xiv).

Glimpses of Change

At the beginning of this research journey I identified qualitative methodology as the most appropriate paradigm expecting to focus on “a single thing with a single subject matter” (Patton, 1990, cited in Pitman & Maxwell, 1992, p. 734). Given that research has dual facets, the ideas that drive the work and the inquiry procedures used to pursue them (Wolcott, 1992), I had a cook’s approach: Given a method, I would implement it, ‘bake’ the research, and produce the ‘cake’: an outcome to enjoy. The assumption was that the ‘very stringency of the method guarantees good research results’ (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2000, p.2). In other words, I believed that method-driven research would produce the results. However I began to see that rather than a cook, I needed to be an explorer and see qualitative research, not as a model to be implemented, a recipe to be followed, but rather an enabling strategy to guide decision making on the journey. Such an approach enabled me as the researcher to be responsive to situations and events along the research journey. I began to see that my own inquiry was trapped within a technicist framework and, ironically, the elements of reflexivity (Shacklock & Smyth, 1998) were not present, or perhaps being silenced.
Alvesson and Sköldberg present ‘three powerful reasons for not regarding empirical material as the whole truth, or as a decisive path to knowledge’ (2000, p.134). Their reasons include the fact that any capture of data or insight is only a fragment, and may not capture the context within which that snippet occurs. Related to this is that such data may not identify the social conditions, ideologies and communicative processes which are operating in unexplored assumptions, and which mean that the results of interviews and questionnaires are ambiguous at least and may in fact be erroneous. The final reason given is that studies of what is deemed to presently exist fix our attention on the actual and draw it away from what can be.

As the second stage of the journey began several things had changed. The research question had changed from the “How?” question to a question which is directed to “What is happening?” By understanding what is happening, one is more able to effect change. Alvesson & Sköldberg, (2000, p. 132) indicate that the “how” question assumes somewhat naively and simply that the organisation exists first and foremost to fulfil the official goals, while in reality it is driven by external functions (employment, regulations) and interests of leaders and staff (harmony, job satisfaction, favourable conditions, living up to norms about ‘what it ought to look like’). A question which seeks to discover not just what is happening, but also what constraints both enable and support such practice in its occurrence, is more likely to uncover the ‘taken-for-grantedness”. Whereas the initial question focused more on the educational vision and goals, the second question focuses on exploring participants experience and understanding of what is, and its findings can be interpreted and critiqued with the intention of moving what is closer to the educational vision and goals, what might be. As Carr and Kemmis observe, “practices are changed by changing the ways in which they are understood” (1986, p, 91).

My perception of the data had changed, particularly of its representation and authority. How did I know the responses to the questions, the reflections and meta reflections were real? I knew the data was real in the sense that it existed, and was recorded in black and white. But now I was suspicious of the process. I could analyse what I had – but how authentic, and therefore truly helpful in understanding what was obviously a very complex situation would such information or interpretation be? One student who had written a very insightful meta reflection, just the sort of thing one might want to hear, had also, with reference to an essay, asked “Do we write what you want, and what you believe? And to the answer, “No, thank you, I already know what I believe, I want to know what you believe”, had commented, “But I always write what I think the lecturer wants to hear.”

Awareness of the complexity of the students’ world was viewed differently. While, student teachers’ over riding goal on this journey appeared to be “complete and pass”, previous work with student teachers had indicated that they were not necessarily aware that their practice and decisions were in fact choices. So could it be that these students were not being supported in challenging the predominant metaphor at work as they sought to ‘survive’ the tertiary world. The student teachers’ behaviour made sense to them, so what were the thinking processes, assumptions and situations which sustained them? I knew the well documented claim that an approach to research which claims to be critical and/or interpretive needs ‘to be rooted in the self understandings of educational practitioners’ (Carr & Kemmis, 1986, p, 129). But, instead of collecting these ‘self understandings’ I was beginning to see that the experience of research itself is a tool to develop these, rather than take them as a given. And this was true for the researcher as well as the student teacher.
My initial view of the research process assumed more than is possible – that one may ‘know’ and interpret the data with accuracy and authenticity. BUT interpretation-free, theory-neutral facts do not exist and settings within which research is based are themselves complex political, social and historical bodies. For example, re-examination of the data which had led to an interpretation of resistance, now led to a recognition of the power of educational messages in terms of what is important. I reluctantly faced the fact that while educational settings such as secondary and tertiary providers may envelope their messages within the rhetorical framework of lifelong learning, for students the reality does not appear to match the rhetoric. Our students come to tertiary with years of being rewarded for appropriate task or activity completion – and the tertiary institution in which they found themselves, continued to reward them for such behaviour. The very terminology at work is the terminology of ‘provision’, ‘delivery’ rather than ‘engagement’ and ‘discovery’. So why should I be surprised when a different expectation is provided WITHOUT recognition of the anxiety, the risk taking that such an expectation stirs up? The expectations which I had placed before the students required a new metaphoric framework – and this took time to understand. Students needed support in interpreting the signs.

So here I was on the journey. Instead of riding along enjoying the scenery, collecting insight about students’ professional growth and development, I was anxious, troubled and wondering about what the future twists and turns might herald. Questioning my own contribution to and complicity in the practices that contribute to the passive learning I so wish to avoid became a focus of self reflective critique. But this too was not a safe place, as acting on that recognition put me in an extremely vulnerable place institutionally – and in a way, I found myself in the vulnerable position shared by the student teachers. ‘being self-critical, raising questions about our own practice is what I think we have to do if we are not to accept blindly such models as the perfect solution in any class” (Brunner, 1994, p.208). In fact, perhaps even looking for such a possibility meant that defeat stared me in the face whenever I looked for such an outcome. A new light dawned. The intrusion into my own research beliefs indicated that my initial apparently unbiased approach definitely privileged the institutional framework, as well as the power within my position. Recognizing the multiplicity of realities – the journey continued.

It is a given that the two foci for qualitative analysis are description and interpretation. The description is not just of the practice being observed, but also of the beliefs and values shaping both participants’ behaviour and the institutional setting within which that practice occurs. Such description is not unproblematic.

So what might be the desired characteristics of a methodology which would recognise, be responsive to and valuing of, the real context of teacher education and the day to day experiences of the travelling companions? Such research methodology would present experience for enquiry and enable participants to venture into it as ‘a privileged outsider’ (Bakhtin, 1986). To be authentic in terms of the focus of the research it would celebrate the multiplicity of factors and perspectives without simplification and reductionism. Such an approach would focus on ‘seeing’ or ‘observing’ to understand rather than mere looking and would seek to be sensitive to what is subtle and significant. Thus key to the methodological design for a study which seeks ‘meaning making’ is to value reflection, not as a ‘straitjacket on the social world’ (Bryman, 2001) but as a ‘way of knowing’ (Kuzmic, 2002). This way forward requires the researcher to be open, and given the propensity to bias and privilege, submit that openness to critique so that even the assumptions which frame the processes of observation and interpretation are themselves engaged and subjected to critique.
Wolcott (1992, p.19) identifies and describes three categories of data gathering techniques: 
*experiencing, enquiring* and *examining*. By changing his categories from data gathering 
techniques to categories of knowing and processing, I found a sense of hope for what I 
trusted would lead to an increased level of authenticity. For Wolcott, *experiencing* referred to 
data collected through the senses, particularly through watching and listening. However in 
changing from a data collection tool to a focus of inquiry, *experience* becomes the initial 
starting point—the multifaceted student teacher’s or teacher educator’s daily work. The world 
of experience includes thoughts and feelings which arise out of: past experiences (with 
learning, the particular subject, the staff member), institutional expectations - spoken and 
unspoken, and relationships with peers and staff. For Wolcott, *enquiring* provided for the 
researcher a role more intrusive than that of a “mere observer” (1992, p.19). It reminded me 
of Bakhtin (1986) and his notion of the privileged outsider. *Enquiry* then became the process 
of placing that experience with its assumptions in the public arena and asking hard questions 
of that experience. Finally, for Wolcott (1992) the process of *examining* involved ‘making 
use of the materials others had prepared. In my model this process of examining encapsulates 
the change in methodology. *Examination* focused on identification, critical evaluation and 
investigation into both the assumptions underpinning, and, the process of enquiry itself. This 
examining may be likened to Smyth’s interrogative research. The kind of interrogation he 
has in mind is ‘of the contexts and dominant discourses that envelope the everyday lives and 
experiences of teachers, and that are held in place by hegemonic ideologies, paradigms and 
worldviews” (1999, p.76). The status quo by its very nature often eludes critique and 
examination. It is so comfortable, there – like the air we breathe, and yet its comfort and 
familiarity are themselves traps for the researcher, given “The status quo paradigm in 
education makes the rules and sets the standards by which all innovations- and the new 
paradigm they propose - are judged: this principle greatly inhibits paradigm shifts, which by 
definition establish new boundaries and rules” (Hull, 2003, p.216).

What has been critical in this journey is to recognise the need to engage the constraints within 
the status quo, “systematically articulating the subjective-meaning structures governing the 
ways in which typical individuals act in typical situations” (Carr & Kemmis, 1986, p.91). 
Focusing on what is going on, rather than what one hopes is going on, and bringing to the 
open the ways in which people within a situation make sense of what they are doing, may, 
when critiqued by the intentions and hopes within the educational vision which initially 
inspired the activity, influence practice by influencing the ways in which individual 
practitioners comprehend themselves and their situation. As outlined by Schwandt (2000, 
p.190), “social inquiry is a distinctive praxis, a kind of activity (like teaching) that in the 
doing transforms the very theory and aims that guide it”. In fact more than transforming the 
theory and aims it changes one’s view of self and the setting in which we live out our work 
(Renner, 2001).

In this journey, a critical reflective ‘interactional dynamic’ between *experience, enquiry* and 
*examination* appears to provide an increased awareness of the powerful influences of the 
status quo: past learning and beliefs, institutional expectations and practices. The 
methodology itself required reflective practice and opened possibilities for the researcher’s 
professional growth – in research, in teaching and in self understanding. The developing 
methodological framework is seen to hold potential for the building of integrity and 
authenticity because of a greater degree of alignment between subject and method, allowing 
the symbiotic relationship between these two to be seen.
Conclusion

When this journey began, maybe I had more in common with my perception of my students’ position, than I care to note; expecting some neat ‘truth’ to implement. Kennedy, writing about why educational research has had what is viewed by some as a minimal effect on practice, wrote: “To the extent that our work reflects more adequately the ambivalent and ambiguous character of education, it may become more persuasive and more relevant, and perhaps as it does, it may also become more conceptually accessible” (1997, p.10).

My initial approach and interpretation did not place the students either historically or institutionally in context, but rather perpetuated what Smyth refers to as “a value consensus that stability is the natural order of things and goals are shared and unproblematic” (1992, p.272). Rather than a linear process that seeks causal determination and prediction, critical reflective methodology requires a holistic process that seeks critical reflection about both the illumination and understanding of all phases – describing the experience, enquiring into that experience as well as of the examination of that enquiry and interpretation process itself. By doing so the researcher is provided with “a set of epistemological relationships” which in turn influence the purpose, process and product of research (Kuzmic, 2002, p.224).

For this researcher, the process of research provided a clarion call to seek a method which would enable and in fact require the tensions between the espoused theories and theories at work in student teachers’ approach to learning to be more fully problematized. A search for objectivity was replaced by the aim of authenticity. Instead of viewing the subjectivity of the researcher as problematic, it set about to understand both the researcher and the biases which shaped her interpretation. The inherent process of reflection meant “interpreting one’s own interpretation, looking at one’s own perspectives from other perspectives, and turning a self critical eye into one’s own authority as interpreter and author” (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2000, p. vii). Expectations for the initial research journey – linear, clean and simple have been replaced with a “modest, unassuming style of one struggling to piece together something reasonably coherent out of displays of initial disorder, doubt and difficulty” (Van Manen, 1988, p.75). The intrusion into my own research world and work continues to be a journey of self-discovery as well as of professional growth and development.

References

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