

The Knowledge Building School: From the Outside In, From the Inside Out.

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ABSTRACT

This paper will discuss and contrast the challenges faced by facilitators of practitioner research depending upon their location. While boundaries may be more flexible and permeable than often imagined, it is the case that the persons supporting and encouraging activist professionals in schools, can and should play a different role, depending upon their terms of engagement. The argument will be grounded in two case studies. In one instance the facilitator of research is Researcher in Residence¹, acting as an external consultant over a number of years; in the second instance the facilitator is a Director of Learning, who is using forms of practitioner research as the basis for professional development and school improvement. It is argued, that in both sites the schools are aspiring to become knowledge building organisations, where professional knowledge is constructed, critiqued and employed for school improvement.

Introduction:

Fences, walls, borders, enclaves and enclosures - whether the territory is national or local, domestic or professional, human beings seem constantly to be engaged in demarcation, dispute and defence. *This is my space, my province - do not trespass!* To work across boundaries is to work across cultures, to risk transgressions, to chance being misunderstood and disoriented. At the same time, to be in a foreign land is to see and experience things anew.

Too often, in practices associated with education, border crossings are hazardous and difficult. Academic researchers are seen as inhabiting rarefied and remote institutions while those in schools live in a "real world", bedeviled by practical and often intractable problems.

Kemmis (2000) speaks of connecting the *lifeworlds of educational research*. Academic researchers and practitioner researchers operate in different realms with different mores and rewards. Nonetheless, the problems and processes on one side are interconnected with problems and processes on the other. Real dialogue

¹ Researcher in Residence is a phrase used to connote a role analogous to a "writer in residence" or "artist in residence". However, it is a positioning which is distinctive from being a resident in the fullest sense of the term, in that the researcher maintains her affiliation with her university and broader educational research and professional development consultancy.

between the two, acting as professionals with expert knowledge, not merely as experts in their fields, can contribute to a more inclusive critique of educational practices. Such interaction can also lead on to informed, well judged actions.

In this paper we argue that location does matter. It influences and affects practical research and the ways in which we engage with it. However, just as multiculturalism enriches a society, so too can educational inquiry benefit from the multiple perspectives of different facilitators of practitioner research. One of us speaks as the traveller, the visitor, the guest in the school environment; the other discusses from the position of the resident, the incumbent.

Nonetheless the common ground is significant. Both of us are facilitators of practitioner research (Groundwater-Smith, 1998) and have shared beliefs about what this means. Kemmis & Wilkinson (1998) write of participatory action research, or what we refer to as facilitated practitioner research, as having six characteristics: social; participatory; collaborative; emancipatory; critical and recursive. In recognising the inherently social nature of the work Kemmis and Wilkinson draw attention to the relationship which exists between the individual and the social - the individual is inscribed in the social, inhabits and is habituated by the social (Bourdieu in Robbins, 1991). Neither operates apart from the other.

We together recognise that too often, practitioner inquiry is seen to be individualistic, even private. Anderson & Heer (1999) have suggested that:

The insider status of the researcher, the centrality of the action, the requirements of spiralling self reflection on actions, and the intimate dialectical relationship of research to practice, all make practitioner research alien (and often suspect). p. 12

The work with which we are both engaged is dialogic in nature. Its premise is that the identification of the problem to be addressed; the collection and interpretation of evidence and the design of action must occur in a context which allows a diversity of views to emerge and an authentic debate to occur. Here we draw upon the arguments of Guba and Lincoln (1994) who have evolved a constructivist version of inquiry in the provision of social services such as education. They argue that “realities” are mentally constructed, socially and experientially based, local and specific in nature. At the same time they acknowledge that elements are shared among individuals and even across groups, but often in tacit and unproblematised forms. Constructions are not more or less ‘true’, in any absolute sense, but are more or less informed. These constructions provide evidence that there is a complicated set of linkages between the inquirer and the object of the inquiry and that in order to evolve a shared, or consensual construction, an ongoing dialogue must be maintained.

As well, we are both deeply committed to the inquiry being actionable. While the curiosity value of research can be engaging, practitioner research is essentially concerned with developing professional knowledge which will lead to improvements in practice. Such knowledge can be seen as provisional rather than fixed, in that it is always open to correction and amendment as the evidence is accumulated.

We are interested in schools becoming knowledge building organisations, where that knowledge acts as evidence to secure the betterment of the school. Because of its very nature, its complexity and its diversity, schooling is always improvable. There are anxious, marginalised and alienated students to be reached; students experiencing severe literacy and numeracy difficulties to be taught; talented and capable children to be extended; toxic environments to be changed.; curricula to be overhauled; overburdened teachers to be relieved; leaders to be revived; parents to be informed.

We see the practitioner research in which we have an interest to be a part of the culture of the school. It is not the one-off project, but is deeply embedded in each participants' consciousness. A criticism of action research undertaken within the context of a project is that the time frames lead to a 'speeded-up' game of inquiry and action (Heatley & Stronach, 2000, p. 415). In each of our cases we wish to see a long-term, school-wide commitment to practitioner inquiry leading to action.

Before returning, in greater detail to our argument regarding the consequences of the facilitators' location and terms of engagement it is important to look more closely at the contexts of our work and the ways in which it is currently being played out.

Developing Knowledge Building Schools

In presenting these two cases we are aware of, and sensitive to, the issue of privilege. Both schools are in the independent sector which means that not only are they relatively well funded, but also that they are less trammelled by regulation and government fiat. However, this does not mean that such schools are necessarily innovative or adventurous. Developing a knowledge building culture takes some courage on the part of the leadership. The culture, even veneer of politeness (Hargreaves, 1995) can be seriously interrupted. For trust to be exercised there must always be an element of risk, otherwise a trusting relationship is not necessary. It is possible to open a veritable Pandora's Box as teachers, parents and students become engaged in the inquiries. In each case a critical factor has been the commitment of the leadership of the school, both through the Principal and the executive, to practitioner inquiry and action.

Case 1 - Inner Western Independent Girls School:

Several papers and publications have already outlined the work of Inner Western Independent Girls School (IWIGS)¹ (Groundwater-Smith & Hunter, 2000; Groundwater-Smith, 2000). The school was described thus:

(Inner West Independent Girls School) is a large denominational comprehensive girls' school (K-12) situated in metropolitan Sydney. It has

¹ In these publications the school was referred to as Independent Girls School (IGS); the geographic location is now added in order to distinguish between the two schools.

been established in its current site for over one hundred years. It is well respected in the Sydney community for its progressive orientation, particularly with regard to technology innovation. During 1997- 1998 the school took part in the *Innovation and Best Practice Project*. In response to a public advertisement it undertook to evaluate aspects of its technology innovation and provide a report which would later be available for analysis and synthesis by the overall project.

During the conduct of its evaluation the school engaged the assistance of myself as an academic associate who would advise on: research methods; design; and implementation strategies. The association was seen by the school's Principal and the Director of Teaching and Learning to have sufficient merit to establish a longer term affiliation in the agreed form of a Researcher in Residence whose initial term in office was to be three years. Clearly, then, the appointment was designed to embed school based inquiry into the norms and values of the school and the professional development of its teachers.

The school based research, led by the Researcher in Residence was to be advised by a committee comprising: the school Principal, the Chaplain (who had a particular responsibility to oversee ethics considerations), two Parents (one from the junior school and one from the senior school); six Students (all of whom should be members of the SRC and should write expressions of interest to join the committee) ; the Director of Teaching and Learning, the Director of Studies and the Researcher in Residence herself. It is important to note that this structural support was designed after many discussions regarding the range and purpose of the practitioner research with which the school would engage.

During the past two years a number of projects have been undertaken, including ongoing professional development to support teachers as school based researchers.

During 1999 the school conducted an educational impact study to investigate student learning and how it might be best assessed and reported. As result of this study practitioner research has burgeoned 2000 - 2001. Commissions of Enquiry have been established, student voice has been enhanced and research has been seen as a vital tool in formative evaluation of fragile innovations in music education and middle schooling.

Thus it may be seen that the school has now been involved in ongoing and developmental inquiry since 1997. In this its fifth year of engagement in practitioner research several projects are underway. Two of these are reported below:

What Makes a Good School:

Small focus groups were conducted with students from Kindergarten to Year 5. Prior to the focus groups, thirty two Year 10 students were trained as group facilitators. They were provided with hand-outs which set out the processes of conducting focus groups and a question map. These were

discussed and a 'fishbowl' trial was undertaken by the Researcher in Residence and the Director of Teaching and Learning (DoTL), who from time to time interrupted the discussion to draw attention to specific methods, such as encouraging a student to elaborate or clarify an answer, or ensuring full participation by all students. Those who had taken part in the trial then led their own groups. During the de-brief student queries and concerns were addressed.

Following the conduct of the Focus groups the Year 10 students discussed the results and prepared brief reports. These recorded observations and the debriefing discussion provided the basis for the larger report which followed.

The questions which were addressed were:

- What makes a school a good school?
- What helps you to learn?
- What do your teachers do to help you to learn?
- What do you do to help your own learning?
- How does homework help you to learn?
- What does your family do to help you to learn?
- How do you know when you have learned something well?
- How do your teachers know when you have learned something well?
- How does your family know when you have learned something well?
- What makes you happy at school?
- What makes you unhappy at school?
- Draw a picture of your best day at school ever. (Ask each student to tell you about their picture).

At a later point, Junior School teachers met and discussed the findings and proposed future directions and actions. The report was also presented to parents.

Learning to Lead in Year 8:

- Learning through Leadership
- Learning about Leadership
- Learning Leadership

Purpose:

To develop generative student leadership that will enhance the IWIGS Middle School as a community of learners who feel safe, valued and respected.

Process:

The study is of a nested nature. Through investigation with students, their teachers and their parents we have identified the qualities of a good student leader in the context of the Yrs. 6 - 8 Middle School. Its first phase required students to identify with, and discuss one of six student profiles, and indicate their beliefs regarding the needs of different students for leadership development. Implicit in the process has been the notion that all students have within themselves the capacity to lead. The results of the first phase have then been fed into

focus groups in which the whole cohort participated. From these two phases a web based discussion has been commenced. The culmination of the investigation was a student/teacher/parent forum. We are now developing and implementing, with student advice, a training program for leadership and engaging in a formative evaluation of the program.

From the above it may be inferred that the Researcher in Residence occupies a position that is both inside the school and outside it as well. This is the fifth year of her association with the school and like any frequent visitor she is relatively well known. However, she is not physically located in the school, she does not have an office or any executive powers. She is university based, but in an honorary position. This means that she has relative autonomy in both the school and university setting, an issue which we shall return to later in this paper.

Case 2 - North Western Independent Girls School:

North Western Independent Girls School (NWIGS) is a Catholic comprehensive school with an enrolment of approximately 850 students 7-12. Founded in 1897, the school has long been recognized for its staunch commitment to the education of women. In recent years, part of this provision has taken the form of a commitment to utilizing technology in the classroom, and NWIGS is now one of the highest access technology schools in NSW, with a student:computer ratio of 1:2.4.

Towards the end of 1999, an appointment was made to the position of Director of Learning at the school, a position which was occupied by the second author of this paper. One significant aspect of this role is the facilitation of professional development for teaching staff, and one of the significant ways in which this has taken place over the past year has been through the introduction of practitioner inquiry in the context of the knowledge building school. Indeed, it was on the basis of making a case for teacher professional learning founded on systematic inquiry that the appointment of Director of Learning was made. With the support of the Principal and School Council, approximately one third of the teaching staff is now engaged in practitioner research initiatives.

In 2000, the school won a small grant through the Association of Independent Schools to run a practitioner research project relating to the implementation of the New Higher School Certificate. The Science Faculty was chosen to house the project, and the results were seen to be so positive in terms of both staff learning and enhancing student learning outcomes that other faculties have expressed interest in establishing similar initiatives. A group of seven teachers became engaged in developing Independent Professional Learning Portfolios in conjunction with the University of Sydney. While each of these is an individual enterprise, and the focus areas are diverse, the group is working collaboratively in their investigations of teaching and learning in the school (Mockler 2000, 2001). Also in 2000, the school's Gifted and Talented committee conducted a research project aimed at ascertaining how the needs of the school's gifted and talented students could be better met. The results of this study have informed changes to curriculum and pedagogy in 2001.

A number of projects are currently underway, two of which are reported below:

Good Learning Projects:

Several faculties are engaging in projects aimed at investigating the notion of “good learning” as it applies to students in their subject area. Teachers have worked collaboratively to gain skills in conducting practitioner research and applying those skills to the project. Students have been trained in conducting focus group interviews and interviewed their peers on a range of issues as they relate to good learning, the data collected in focus group interviews then used to form the basis of a questionnaire distributed to a stratified sample of students across all year groups.

The culmination of the Good Learning Project is the development of a corporate learning portfolio for each faculty, similar to an individual professional learning portfolio and comprising the following elements:

- Faculty History (*In living memory, how has our faculty grown and changed? What has been learned and how?*)
- Philosophies and Beliefs (*What are the values and beliefs held about: knowledge of our discipline; pedagogical practices; assessment practices; our interaction with each other?*)
- Focus Area (Questions to be collaboratively developed by each faculty)
- Goals and Needs (*What are our goals for the future as a faculty? What do we need in order to achieve our goals?*)

It is envisaged at this stage that faculty portfolios will be updated by each faculty on a cyclic basis.

Quality Teaching Project:

With the assistance of federal government QTP funding, a selection of teachers who have each been given a 0.2 FTE allowance to develop online resources will work to develop, implement and evaluate online generic independent learning resources based on an integration of Bloom’s (1956) taxonomy of educational objectives, Mackenzie’s (2000) questioning toolkit and information literacy skills.

The school’s Head of Information Services and Director of Information Technology have worked together to develop a framework for the generation of online student tasks which do not require any level of web-publishing skills on the part of teachers. Teachers on the research team have developed, published and implemented tasks for use by their own students and students of their colleagues, and feedback has been gathered in a range of ways from students, teachers and parents on the effectiveness of the tasks in enhancing students’ information literacy skills, habits of work and subject-related content knowledge.

The Director of Learning occupies a position which is very much inside the school, although in her role as research facilitator and critical friend to others managing and doing practitioner research, she is often required to maintain an outside perspective.

In this, the second year of her association with the school, this outside perspective is still well within her grasp, although it might be expected that it will become more elusive as time goes by. We shall return to this issue later in this discussion.

Facilitators' Location in the Research Territory:

It is clear from the cases which we have discussed above that we are both located in the territory of actionable participant research. What varies, is how we occupy or traverse that territory. Neither of us sees herself as the research "tourist". Just as the tripper makes short and superficial forays into foreign territory collecting artefacts which bear little resemblance to the culture, so the research tourist embarks on sightseeing expeditions, gathering memorabilia with little reference to "the indigenous people".

As the first case demonstrates, one of us does, however, see herself as a traveller, who actively engages with the domain, but nonetheless is not a resident. She could more properly be seen as involved in what Adler and Adler (1998) construct as an active membership role (p.85). She is accepted as a visiting member of the community, able to spend time with its participants, but aware of a home base in another place. She is not marginalized and is able to join in events and ceremonies from which the tourist might be excluded. All the same, she is not required to engage in those occasions and has the freedom to make choices. As a traveller her credentials must meet certain requirements; she can be deported if her behaviour is inappropriate or seen to be to the detriment of the territory.

The other of us, acting as the Director of Learning, is a resident, with all the attendant roles and responsibilities that go with the territory. She too faces her challenges. At present, she sees herself as a resident occupying the status of an "incomer". Some neighbourhood disputes are still incomprehensible to her – while she lives within the culture, she has not yet become so acculturated that she does not see the "dead dogs on the doorstep": those things that to a newcomer are unexpected or unpleasant but which become taken for granted and either unnoticed, unremarked upon or stepped over by long term residents. She is still operating on her resident visa – permanent resident status has not yet been granted to her.

This extended metaphor has been inserted in order to render the notion of insiderness and outsiderness more problematic than has often been suggested. The terms of engagement for the research tourist, the traveller and the resident necessarily vary. In the first instance, the enterprise may be supported by short term resources and funding. In the second, a longer and more sustained program is necessary, while in the third, the position is embedded and underwritten by the enterprise itself.

Conclusion

It is clear from our discussion that location has ramifications for how actionable practitioner research can be facilitated. Nonetheless, for the endeavour to be fully participatory, within the knowledge building school, the engagement of the citizenry is essential. In our view, the citizenry includes all members of the school community: teachers, students, support staff and parents. we would share Thesen and Kuzell's (1999) concerns that the following checkpoints are observed:

- Who gets invited? Are all those affected, particularly at the bottom of the hierarchies, included? (
- How are the power issues addressed and handled?
- Who formulates and refines the research question?
- Who has real influence on the processes?
- Who can allocate the resources when conflicts of interest arise between different stakeholders in a project?
- Who has the power to formulate and transfer the account of the process and the outcomes of the project? (p.288)

Like all checkpoints, these are more and less realizable in the complex micropolitical environment of schools. They are also influenced by the subtleties associated with the positioning of the research facilitator. The research traveller can come and go from that environment, whereas the resident researcher must continuously engage with the lived life of the school with its attendant concerns and anxieties. For example, in relation to the line management of the school in case study 2, when independent professional learning portfolios were being introduced it was conceivable that staff would have some anxiety regarding the perceived supervisory role of the Director of Learning (Mockler 2001).

Neither of us would suggest that developing knowledge building schools is easy or unproblematic, but the journey is worth having. The risks are there and the relationships must, in the end, be trusting but not foolhardy. Knowledge building schools are here to stay and will more and more challenge the orthodoxies of old and undefended practices within protected territories. Given the importance of border protection as a key concept in the recent federal election in Australia, this paper takes a more inclusive and optimistic stance. We believe that working across boundaries is indeed to experience things anew.

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