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ABSTRACT

The implementation of an educational reform and the subsequent reconfiguration of curricula in a competency format prompted research into the learning experiences of students within a newly reconfigured competency-based curriculum. The curriculum was the technical and further education (TAFE) New South Wales (NSW) Tertiary Preparation Certificate III, first implemented in 1983 as a transition course to further education for adults. Adoption of the particular research perspective for the practitioner researcher in this case was dependent on factors that included nature and purpose of the research; experiences of the researcher within their practice; practitioner's conceptualization of being in the world; and pragmatic considerations, such as time and access. Consideration of these factors led the practitioner researcher to adopt an eclectic Symbolic Interactionist theoretical framework along with its methodology of participant observation. A model of practitioner research was proposed as a way of conceptualizing the conflicting yet complementary roles of teacher and researcher. Key characteristics of the three roles of teacher, course coordinator, and researcher were established, and a graphic representation was developed of these characteristics and the types of interaction and skills involved in each. (Contains 31 references.) (YLB)

Student experiences of generic competency learning: a case of practitioner research

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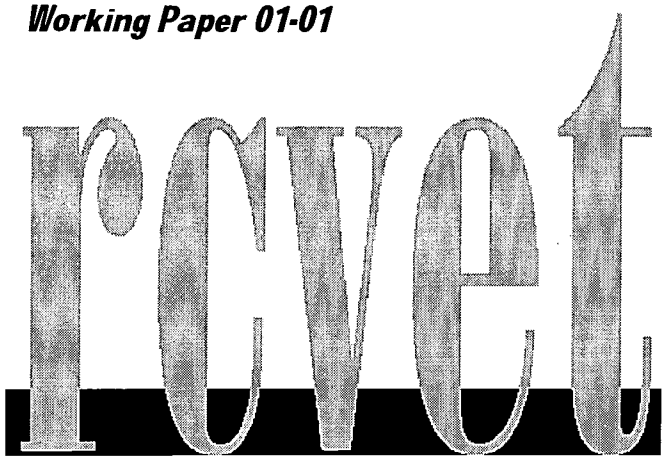

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Student experiences of generic competency learning: a case of practitioner research

Lesley Scanlon

ABSTRACT

This paper explores the research experiences of a teacher researcher within a TAFE NSW curriculum. It discusses the reasons for the adoption of a practitioner research position and the theoretical framework of the research. The paper also presents a model of practitioner research as a way of conceptualising the conflicting yet complementary roles of teacher and researcher. The model is presented for discussion as a work in progress.

RESEARCH BACKGROUND

The research on which this paper is based took place in an environment of curriculum change. The particular curriculum change, part of wider economic and education reforms since the mid-1980s, was the reconfiguration of an existing knowledge-based curriculum into a competency-based format. The widespread implementation of competency-based education has given rise to robust debate amongst academic commentators. This debate has centred on a number of key issues: the nature and purpose of education (Hager 1990; Marginson 1993), the link between economic prosperity and education (Magnusson 1990; Stevenson 1993; Williams 1994), the appropriateness of the competency approach as an educational model; and the nature of competence (Hager 1994,1995,1996,1999; Ashworth and Saxton 1990; Norris 1991; Gonczi & Tennant 1995). Here I want simply to note, rather than discuss, the widespread debate engendered by the implementation of competence-based education. The implementation of this educational reform and the subsequent reconfiguration of curricula in a competency format prompted this research into the learning experiences of students within a newly reconfigured competency-based curriculum.

The curriculum is the TAFE NSW Tertiary Preparation Certificate III, which was first implemented in 1983 as a transition course to further education for adults. The course aimed to develop in students the skills and knowledge necessary for post-secondary education, to improve their confidence and self-esteem and to develop a positive attitude to life-long learning. The curriculum aimed to do these things through knowledge-based subjects in which there was progressive assessment and final year examinations.

To gain reaccreditation in 1995, this curriculum, because of the education reforms referred to above, was reconfigured in a competency-based format and underpinned by the Mayer Key Competencies. In the new Course Manual (1995, p.13) the course was described as both a competency based general and a vocational education course which aimed to develop key and related competencies within the context of subject content areas. Major changes to teaching and learning resulted from specific changes to the curriculum. These

changes included: subjects previously of twelve months duration became six month modules; some traditional subjects disappeared or were replaced by interdisciplinary modules; many modules seemed almost knowledge-free with the disappearance of core and elective knowledge; learning was described through module purpose statements, learning outcomes and assessment criteria; and examinations largely disappeared and were replaced or supplemented by the verification of student assessments by a verification panel composed of module teachers from across NSW.

As a result of these imposed changes many teachers and students experienced what Esland (1971, p. 97) calls 'the vertigo of a paradigm break-up', the disintegration of a taken-for-granted world. The new curriculum emphasised the role of the teacher as a facilitator of learning rather than as a subject expert and the role of the student as an active participant in the learning process rather than as a passive receiver of knowledge. It is the learning experiences of students within this new curriculum that is the focus for my research. My challenge as a teacher and a researcher within this curriculum was to identify and adopt a theoretical and methodological perspective that would enable me to directly access these learning experiences.

THEORETICAL AND METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK

In general, the adoption of a particular research perspective for a practitioner researcher is, I suggest, dependent on a number of factors which include: the nature and purpose of the research; the experiences of the researcher within their practice; the practitioner's conceptualisation of being in the world; and pragmatic considerations, such as, time and access. It was a consideration of these factors that led me to adopt an eclectic Symbolic Interactionist theoretical framework along with its methodology of participant-observation. This theoretical framework grounded in the work of Herbert Mead (1934/1972), Alfred Schutz (1970,1972; Schutz & Luckmann 1973), and Herbert Blumer (1969) focuses on the interactive and interpretive nature of human experience. This particular theoretical framework was adopted for the following reasons:

- the conceptual framework of Symbolic Interactionism, with its emphasis on interaction and interpretation, corresponds with my empirical observations and pedagogical experiences as to what constitutes successful teaching and learning

- the rich tradition of verstehen sociology, which influenced the development of Symbolic Interactionism, provides a way of understanding human experience from the perspective of those involved

- the methodology of participant-observation, implicit in Symbolic Interactionism, emphasises intimate familiarity as a salient feature of research and hence the subjective nature of research.

Practitioner research is a version of participant-observation favored by Symbolic Interactionism. It is the kind of research that was undertaken in the early twentieth century at the University of Chicago as a research perspective that aimed to see things through the eyes of the research participants and thus it privileged subjective accounts of experience. Interactionist research as a consequence of the systematisation of a methodological

approach by Herbert Blumer (1969) focused on the interpretive, interactive essence of lived experience through the researcher getting to know people well enough to understand how they experience their worlds. If a researcher claims to capture how particular groups of people think, feel, and do things together, then the responsible thing to do is to 'go have a careful look' (Schwalbe 1993, p. 347). My first experience of having a 'careful look' was a pilot study in which I interviewed students from colleges other than my own. This study highlighted for me that as an outside researcher I would never have direct access to the students' learning experiences and hence, never gain any real understanding of the complex interactive and interpretive processes involved in these experiences. Such an understanding requires the establishment of intimate familiarity that comes from sharing student learning experiences through day-to-day contact. Intimate familiarity cannot result from interview schedules and observations in other peoples' classrooms.

The adoption of the role of teacher-researcher within one's own practice, according to one commentator, is a relatively new research concept.

> 'Its definition, at best, is problematic, and there are many who think it should be discounted before it ever gets started - that teachers are too involved, too close to their students, or that they cannot see the bigger picture well enough to connect their students' learning to that of other students in different settings.' (Pine 1992, p. 657)

It is this involvement and closeness noted by Pine that I suggest affords the teacher the best opportunity to gain the intimate familiarity required to investigate learning experiences. Pine however, suggests that resistance to teacher research from those who see educational research as best conducted by disinterested outsiders, can be overcome by the adoption of a theoretical position by the teacher researcher.

Other commentators regard the unique position of the teacher researcher as an advantage, for example, Griffiths (1985) argues that the teacher's intimate knowledge of the contextual features and events of the research site can only enhance the research process. This knowledge enables the teacher to understand the subtle links between situations and events and to better understand the implications of following particular avenues of inquiry. It is this intimate knowledge, Pine (1992) suggests, that helps the teacher researcher see and analyse events that an outsider would be unlikely to see. This intimate knowledge is what Eisner (1991, p. 68) calls *connoisseurship* and is the means by which the researcher comes to know the complexities, the nuances, and subtleties of aspects of the world in which they have a special interest.

The intimate familiarity of teacher research requires the researcher to adopt a position on issues of objectivity and subjectivity. Adopting the role of a teacher researcher within an Interactionist tradition requires the researcher to eschew what others have variously called 'the fallacy of objectivism' (Denzin 1989) and the 'fool's gold' of objectivity (Rubin 1981). It means that the researcher must not only accept but embrace the subjectivity of this research framework. It is this subjectivity, I argue, which produces accounts of lived experience that are 'more true' (Swantz 1996) than anything gained from objective methods. This is because the researcher takes seriously the views of those researched and shares their real life situations.

THE PARTICIPATION OF OTHERS

In my research, the intimate familiarity I established through day-to-day contact with the students was enhanced by their perception of my role in their learning experiences. For the students, I was principally a teacher and a course co-ordinator, that is, an educational expert. But I was also something else with which they could closely identify, I was a student. My student status was confirmed when I explained that one of the goals of my research was to gain a PhD. Thus, I was never a teacher-researcher to the students but a teacher-student. This perception of my role by students, I believe, allowed me to share more intimately in their learning experiences and they to share in mine.

A key issue for all practitioner-researchers is the willingness of others to collaborate in their endeavor. What motivates others to share in the research experience? In my own research I identified five major reasons given by students for participating. Firstly, as a teacher I had, over time, been judged as trustworthy and been accepted as one of the 'good guys' who could be trusted not 'to do the dirty' with what I might find out (Deans in Woods 1996, p. 66). This trustworthiness I believe sprang form the strong humanistic and interactionist elements in my pedagogical practice. As Prus (1996, p. 194) comments '... people very much appreciate contact with someone who is genuinely interested in learning about, as opposed to trying to impress, them.' Secondly, many students were aware of the new curriculum structure and said that they wanted a voice, wanted to be heard because they felt nobody listened to students. Thirdly, some students expressed curiosity about the research process, what I wanted to know and how I would ask them questions. Fourthly, as a teacher and coordinator I had already established a strong reciprocal relationship with students and participating in my research was, for many of them, a way of assisting me in my studies just as I assisted them. Fifthly, many students who took part in the research used at least part of the interview situation for counseling. The interviews provided a means for students to raise issues that might otherwise have remained dormant.

A MODEL OF PRACTITIONER RESEARCH

As an Interactionist researcher I situated my research within the college and curriculum in which I taught. This however, is not the only possible research approach for an Interactionist researcher and others have made different choices. For example, while conducting Interactionist research as a practitioner researcher Payne (1990, p. 89) chose to conduct his research within his teaching field though not within his teaching college. His decision was based on what he saw as the potential for role conflict between being a practitioner and a researcher and the implications his research might have on the performance review and evaluation of other teachers. Lacey (in Hammersley 1993), on the other hand, ignored colleagues who advised him that he was too close to schools to do Interactionist research. Rejecting the notion of objectivity Lacey took on the role of a fully participating teacher researcher in the early stages of his research in order to build up what he called a 'fund of goodwill'. However, in the latter stages of his research he adopted the role of total observer. Throughout my research I adopted the role of a fully particpating teacher researcher.

My engagement in practitioner research has led me to critically reflect on my position within the research site as I constantly reviewed my different roles. My roles as teacher and

course coordinator were closely related. As a teacher I was involved in student learning within specific curriculum areas while as a course coordinator I was concerned with learning across the curriculum. My role as researcher involved adopting a bird's eye view of curriculum learning from a specific theoretical perspective. During my research questions arose concerning these roles and the relationship between the roles. What were the distinguishing features of these roles? Where did one role end and another begin? As a practitioner could I be a real researcher? As a researcher could I be a real practitioner? I found that the key to answering these questions was firstly, to establish the key characteristics of each of these roles and secondly, to graphically represent these roles and the relationship between them. The key characteristics of my roles as well as the types of interaction and skills involved in each appear below in figure 1.

	Teacher	Coordinator	Researcher
Pedagogy:			
Theory	tacit theories, anecdotal evidence	tacit theories, anecdotal evidence	theoretical framework, systematised collection of evidence, public theories
Practice	professional expertise, classroom teaching and learning, assessement, emotion management, listening, questioning,gaining trust	curriculum teaching and learning, course assessment, tutorial support, emotion management, listening, questioning, gaining trust	data collection and analysis, public reporting, reflexive practice, data management, emotion management, listening, questioning, gaining trust
Administration	student attendance, assessment, enrolment, student references	enrolment, RPL, assessment, attendance, promotion, college and inter college meetings, course evaluations, student references, module completions	ethics committee, interim research reports, data management
Pastoral Care	counselling	counselling	counselling
Types of Interaction	lectures, seminars, workshps, library, classroom, conversations, interviews, intimate familiarity, long term	lectures, seminars, workshps, library, classroom, conversations, interviews, intimate familiarity, long term	classrooms, interviews, conversations, intimate familiarity, long term

Figure 1: Teacher-researcher Roles

Conceptually, the role of teacher and coordinator can be seen as occupying different communities of practice to that of the researcher. The teacher coordinator operates within a community of practice centred on curriculum and classroom based pedagogical, administrative and pastoral care activities. Moreover, interaction with students is similarly focused, both formally and informally, on the curriculum and classroom and these interactions employ similar skills. However, the role of the researcher, whilst occupying the same research site as the other roles inhabits a distinctive community of practice centred on the conventions of the wider educational research community. This community is principally concerned with the systematic analysis of broad educational issues.

However, that being said there are many similarities between the roles and the role of researcher may not be as distinct as at first appears. Researching within one's own practice, I suggest, draws the roles of researcher and the roles of the practitioner closer together through an evolving dialectical relationship illustrated in Figure 2.

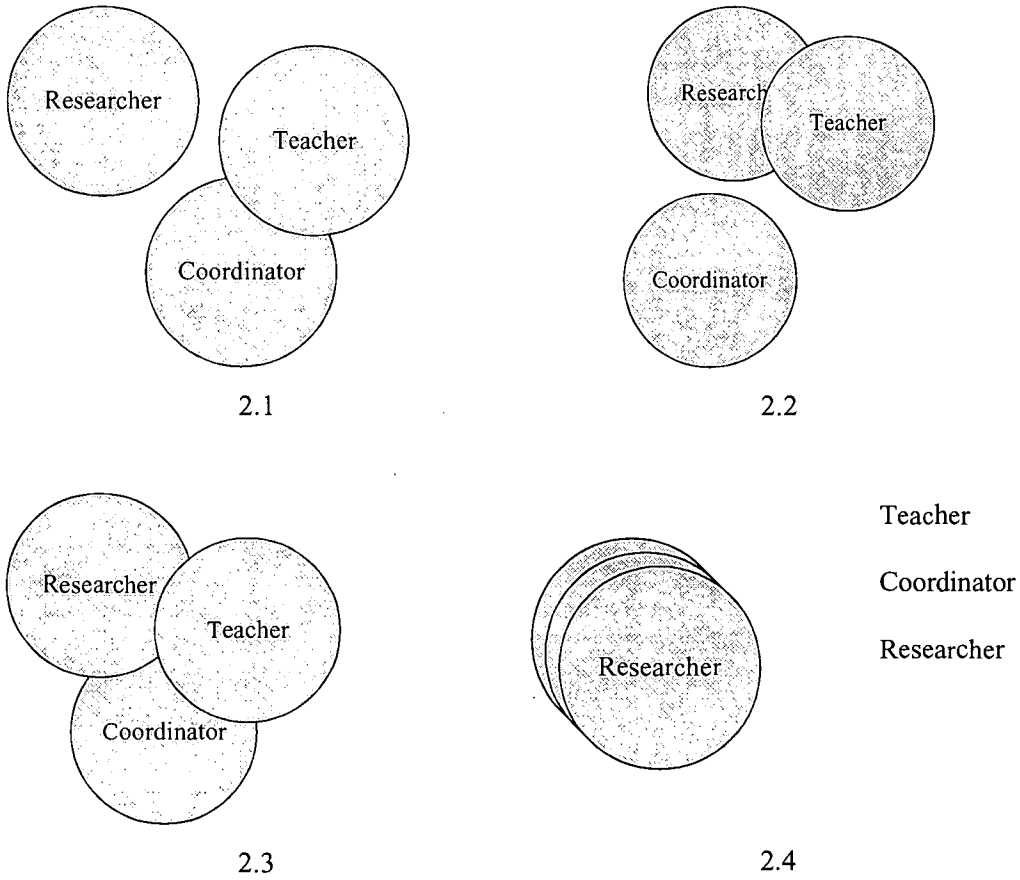

Figure 2: The Changing Relationship between Roles within Research Situation.

I suggest that if the theoretical and methodological frameworks adopted by the researcher are congruent with the researcher's practitioner perspective, then the interaction between these roles, during the course of practice and of the research, draws the roles closer together. By saying this I am not suggesting that Figure 2 represents a lineal development by which the roles incrementally become one, though of course they may do so. Rather, I suggest that the relationship between the roles constantly changes throughout the research process. The roles may, as a result of the individual practitioner or specific research situations become more or less aligned depending on the degree of congruence between the roles. In the case of my own research I believe that my roles became more aligned at various points throughout the research process and that by the end of my research my roles were best represented by 2.4. In the model I am suggesting it should be noted that the boundaries between the roles are conceptualised as permeable rather than fixed and so as one role changes it may result in changes within the other roles. Moreover, the boundaries between the roles and the research practitioner context are also permeable and each effects

the other in a constantly changing relationship. Thus, the model represents practitioner research as evolving and constantly changing, as the roles interact with each other and with the research situation.

There are initial similarities between the roles, as already mentioned, but there are also differences and as these differences are resolved through the interaction of roles throughout the research process then the roles may take on even more shared characteristics. I suggest that some of the major differences between the roles of researcher and practitioner and the ways in which they move closer together are as follows:

- teaching is traditionally a private business conducted in the privacy of the classroom often with little opportunity for teachers to share professional knowledge. Research on the other hand is a more public business as research is shared amongst the research community.

- it is suggested that teachers' knowledge is tacit, private, anecdotal, unsystematised knowledge and as such is not subject to critical examination and thus practice remains unproblematised. The knowledge that arises from research is however, '... systematic inquiry made public. It is made public for criticism and utilization within a particular tradition' (Stenhouse in Carr & Kemmis 1994 p. 188). The anecdotal is bound to particular contexts but when theorised has more general applicability. Thus research leads to a problematisation of practice.

- It is this problematisation of practice through research that leads to the development of reflexive practice.

CONCLUSION

It has been suggested that the practitioner is in a unique position within their own practice to adopt the role of researcher. The practitioner possesses *connoisseurship*, the intimate knowledge of practice not accessible to the outside researcher. It is this intimate knowledge which enables the practitioner to adopt a subjective research position and thus intimately share the experiences of the research participants. It has also been suggested that the adoption of the position of practitioner researcher is a way of resolving the differences between the two positions. Thus the intimate knowledge of the practitioner informs the role of the researcher while the theoretical and problematising functions of the researcher inform and thus expand the role of the practitioner.

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