Clients, colleagues or experts? Defining identities in an Action Research project

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Abstract

This article examines how discourses shaped and were shaped by participants' identities in a participatory action research (PAR) project in a tertiary education environment. The primary researcher and the director of the university's desktop publishing team explored the idea of working together to help the newly formed team to develop strategies and procedures for setting up their workplace profile and related activities. Through informal, 'getting to know you' sessions, researchers and team members discussed how the collaboration would proceed. Researchers introduced the idea of PAR and discussed with team members their questions and observations as to how it would work. One aspect of the knowledge generating aspect of the PAR process was for researchers to feed information

gained from confidential interviews, with both team members and academic and administrative university staff, into the joint problem-solving and action process. The proposal seemed agreeable to team members. However, during the course of attempting to develop the partnership, various discursive motifs emerged which militated against the possibility of team members and academic researchers functioning as a collaborative partnership. This article examines these motifs, arguing that while participants may 'agree' on ways of proceeding, there may be culturally entrenched ideas and behaviours that are much more difficult to negotiate and overcome in a PAR process.

Keywords: participatory action research, higher education, organisational change, identity

Action research (AR) is increasingly espoused as the means of generating sustainable organisational change (Coghlan, 2005). Ideally, all participants share an idea of goals to be reached, develop levels of trust for collaboration and are motivated to participate in the process, as its outcomes will be beneficial to their roles in the workplace. The classic model of action research involves a cyclical collaborative problem-solving process articulated by Stringer (1999) as look, plan, act, and reflect, then look, plan and so on until satisfactory solutions are achieved. Various hybrids of AR have been articulated (Marsick & Gephart, 2003), including the participatory action research (PAR) approach described by Kemmis and McTaggart (2005). PAR might be described as a post-positivist approach to organisational change which incorporates the development of personal awareness and reflexivity as important elements in an AR process. AR theorists have provided conceptual models to focus and organise the research process, but actually doing participatory action research can be quite fraught (Johnsen & Normann, 2004; Wray-Bliss, 2003).

Often, people resist change as a result of mostly unconscious motivations they have developed to deal with anxieties produced in their workplace (Bain, 1998). Workers develop

processes whereby they can 'contain' contradictions in the workplace and therefore not be aware of the differences between what they say and what they actually do (El-Sawad, Arnold, & Cohen, 2004). In these kinds of situations action research can facilitate attempts to 'unstick' both researchers and other project members from dysfunctional relational patterns (Kahn, 1993). Bain (1998) refers to individual and system resistances to change as 'maladaptive social defences' which militate against organisational learning more broadly. Where there are a number of institutions (such as in higher education) that share a similar primary task there are wider processes and structures constituting the 'system domain' that inhibit change. Part of the difficulty in modifying social defences lies in the shared 'system domain fabric' which comprises attributes shared across institutions such as roles, organisational structure, authority systems, policies and procedures, funding arrangements and so on (Bain, 1998, pp. 413–414). Power asymmetries between administrators and academics are encoded in these mechanisms and affect the ways a 'partnership' might proceed.

In the university where the research reported here took place, the faculty was comprised of a number of disciplinary divisions, all of whom employed their own desktop publishers (dtps) to produce teaching and marketing materials. The university decided to centralise these desktop delivery operations and combined all the individual dtps into one large room where they were to set up operations as a distinct work unit. A director was appointed from outside the university. The researchers belonged to one of the divisions in the same faculty, and were subject to the Faculty Dean as well as their Head of Division who was also the dtps team's Line Manager. In attempting to cultivate a participatory action research environment (henceforward, the project) we believed we could facilitate the newly instituted desktop publishing team's (henceforward, the team) process of developing their identity and procedures for working with other stakeholders in the institution.

Below we set out the conceptual rationale for this article showing how individual identities are intertwined with organisational processes. This is followed by a brief description of the project's initiation stages and a discussion about methodology. Next, we explain our use of discourse analysis to interpret interactions related to the project and provide evidence of how perceptions of two identities, *clients* and *experts*, were mobilised in ways that pre-empted the possibility of team members and researchers becoming *colleagues* in a joint problem-solving process.

Conceptual rationale

The need to respond to rapidly changing technological innovations has raised the notion that organisations need to initiate training programs to conceptualise their functions differently and train people to participate in action research (Liu, Denis, Kolodny, & Stymne, 1990). In fact, the features of a 'learning organisation' mirror the characteristics of teams engaging in a PAR process. The similarities are represented in four areas. First, both theories promote equal access to power and information so that participants have more opportunity to communicate freely and openly (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2005; Senge, 1992). Second, the processes for achieving the state of a learning organisation and the goals of action research are recursive, as people engage in cycles of action and reflection by giving feedback to one another about their experiences during the change process (Argyris & Schon, 1996; Kemmis & McTaggart, 2005). Third, PAR and learning organisations focus on developing a climate of trust and a learning culture (McNiff, Lomax, & Whitehead, 2003; Rylatt, 1994), which provides an environment suitable for people to reveal their true values and assumptions so that a deeper level of learning can take place. Finally, PAR and learning organisations engage all people involved, at all levels, in a shared vision; a vision of where they are, where they want to be and how to get there (Passfield, 2001; Waddock, 2002;). It follows that PAR is a

constructivist approach to institutional change that is not linear and not designed to produce the positivist outcome with a 'report' and 'recommendations' from an objective researcher who is outside of the change situation.

Participatory action research involves identifying collectively defined goals and setting in motion collaborative processes to achieve them. A functioning PAR team is a community of practice. According to Wenger (1998), communities of practice (CP) emerge when individuals identify mutually felt concerns and share a vision of goals to be achieved. Wenger's model is useful for our purposes because it focuses on practice, the communicative processes involved in developing and maintaining a CP (or in our case a PAR Project). Watkins (2000, p. 20) maintains that the ways we talk to one another is a 'basic form of action' or practice. From early on in the project researchers noted that language was used in a manner that structured team member–researcher relations in specific ways and these were reflected in broader university structures. We outline Wenger's framework as the backdrop for discussing how language worked against the development of a PAR community of practice.

A CP evidences three inter-related dimensions; *mutual engagement*, *joint enterprise* and *shared repertoires of meaning* (Wenger, 1998, p. 73). *Mutual engagement* refers to the fact that the membership defines the community and members are continually engaged in managing the tension between harmony and conflict that emerge in the course of reconciling diverse individual ideals and practices, as well as responding to changing organisational demands. As individuals do this work they negotiate and renegotiate ways of getting along with each other, part of which involves developing modes of mutual accountability. Wenger refers to the establishment of modes of accountability as the *joint enterprise*. Over time, agreements and processes become implicit in discourse; people know what the rules are, what

values are operating, whose word is to be respected, who possesses what skills and so on. Wenger calls this third feature, a *shared repertoire of meaning.* The shared repertoire of meaning is the history of outcomes of mutual engagement processes that inform the community's ongoing practices.

Communities of practice develop through two mutually constitutive action processes; identity formation and community building. It is the ongoing *practice* of communication that mediates between individual identities and collective identities (communities) and it is this practice that ensures coherence and continuance of the community (Wenger, 1998, p. 63). For individuals, a significant motivation for practice is to cultivate one's sense of belonging. Three communicative processes are involved in managing one's belonging to a CP; *engagement, imagination* and *alignment* (Wenger, 1998, p. 73). Individuals may predominantly involve themselves in an engaged way negotiating the internal functions of the community on a regular basis, some may provide imaginative scenarios for revitalising community practices and still others may be boundary riders, seeking to align aspects of the community of practice with ideals and practices of a broader culture or other CPs. Actions for the community, of necessity, reflect needs of the self. Belonging has a dualistic and uncertain nature, however, involving processes both of identification and negotiation (Wenger, 1998, p. 208). Because individuals at one and the same time may belong to a number of CPs, they are constantly faced with the need to negotiate their role and the meanings multi-membership raises. Their willingness to do this self-work will determine the extent to which they identify with the CP and contribute their energies to its sustenance.

Language affects the way change is co-constructed (Jabri, 2004). It mediates the key defining features of CPs — ongoing mutual engagement and the negotiation of both individual and collective identities. It follows that if individuals are unable or unwilling to

negotiate their identities when engaging in 'collaborative' processes, it is unlikely that a PAR team will develop and achieve its goals. In practice, the language they use in encounters with other members may take the form of 'contentious conversation' (Tilly, 1998). Tilly states that '(c)onversation is contentious to the extent that it embodies mutual and contradictory claims, claims that, if realized, would significantly alter the longer-term behavior of at least one participant' (*sic*). Such conversation activates visceral emotions, personal meanings and individual physical actions. It is contained by 'historically formed conventions, with regard to collectively constituted interests, and in response to stimuli from leaders and bystanders' (Tilly, 1998, p. 493). In other words, contentious conversation is a result of reified discursive practices historically laid down in power relations and top-down processes for getting things done; practices endemic in the higher education system domain.

Cunningham (1995) identifies six tensions that need to be addressed in developing a collaborative project: organisational versus action research activities relationship, changing people versus changing structures, power versus integration, information gathering versus facilitation, resolving technical problems versus social problems, and top-down versus bottom-up. An examination of these tensions reveals that one side of each tension represents traditional positivist forms of social research based on the natural science model where individuals are divided into the researcher/s and the *researched upon* or *for*. There are 'facts' to be found and 'findings' to report. The people who are 'researched' give time and effort, but seldom reap any benefits from the research (Smith, 1987). We suggest that 'contentious conversations' may reflect such understandings of research and they may be investigated to reveal underlying assumptions that affect the development of a collaborative project. Our aim in this article is to reveal cultural motifs operating within the institution that prevented what we envisaged would be a truly collaborative process from ever becoming a reality.

Initiating and conceptualising the Project.

The new Team Director invited Angela (the primary researcher) to address team members and discuss the idea of working together to help them develop their policies and procedures. Angela solicited Chris' (third author) interest, as he possessed expertise in human resource development. Both researchers joined the team at an informal morning tea in the team's workplace and described a participatory action research methodology that we felt would work.

Cautioned by Pettigrew's lessons (2003, p. 384), that trust and success in partnerships is not always achieved by thoroughgoing openness and transparency, we adopted a multi-method case study design. This involved six converging research methods: participatory action research; Job Diagnostic Survey; job diaries, confidential in-depth interviews; Technology Use Survey and observation of the team's workplace interactions. The combined use of qualitative and quantitative methods in organisational research serves to prevent errors and distortions that may arise from the researcher interpretation of qualitative data (Eisenhardt, 1989). This methodology enabled us to study both the internal workings of the team, as well as of the broader context; the related activities of schools and administrative work units with which the team worked. The material used in this article was drawn from this much wider project. Our argument here draws on material gained from interviews and participatory observations of team member's and researchers' actions and interactions.

The researchers approached key authority figures to seek their support. The Dean of the faculty was agreeable, but required that the researchers present a report on their progress at the faculty's monthly meetings of all the Divisional Heads. Our Head of Division, the team's Line Manager who was responsible for both the director's and the team's performance also gave her support, saying that she thought the process would be 'good for them'. We also

sought and received permission from the relevant authority for the team members to use up to 15 hours of their work time that year in activities associated with the project. Researchers acquired a small internal university grant ($1944) to initiate the project. After some months, Catherine (second author) joined the research team seeking a topic for her honours thesis. We asked and received team members' permission for her to work with them as well. Catherine's project involved interviewing team members to gather their thoughts and feelings about the PAR process to date, thus representing a separate reflective stage of action research that did not include the primary researchers.

Angela and Chris engaged in continual reflexive monitoring and evaluation of their interactions with the team and other members of the faculty. We met prior to and following encounters with people who impacted on the PAR process. Before meetings we worked out strategies for communicating and encouraging understanding of a joint enterprise. We debriefed after both formal commitments, such as a staff meeting or planning sessions, and informal encounters like attendance at the team's coffee mornings or chance meetings with individuals around the campus. Our reflexive conversations revealed that, even though we explained how we could collaborate with the team several times in many ways (apart from our initial coffee session with the team we did not use the official theoretical designation 'action research') and attempted to act accordingly, people's communications and questions seemed always to reflect the assumptions of traditional positivist research. Actions of authority figures also impinged on the process.

While attempting to stimulate mutual engagement, we explained to participants that information gained from interviews would be aggregated and presented to the team in ways that individuals could not be recognised. Our role as researchers would be to act as resource persons and facilitators with particular skills and knowledge that we could put at the team's

disposal. However, we were given no opportunity to engage in information sharing with the team or to reveal the points of view of other stakeholders as we interpreted them. It became apparent after about 8 months that there would be no action unless researchers initiated communications. In the next section, we examine actions and contentious conversations that occurred during the course of our attempts to develop a PAR process.

Interpreting Communicative Processes in the Project

A Foucauldian discourse analysis interrogates, not just language, but the texts of people's actions (Gubrium & Holstein, 2000, pp. 493–496); the texts of interview transcripts, of explanations and decision-making in social interactions, of conflicting expectations — for example, over the approach to the research. We explore the ways people, team members and researchers, constructed their interactions with each other and identify how these constructions were mirrored in broader structural actions and communications. The aim is to render visible the ways interactions, rather than representing 'mutual engagement' and 'identity re/negotiation' which would facilitate the development of a PAR process, in fact took the character of 'contentious conversations' which locked participants into already existing reified structures and stifled attempts to change.

Ethical clearances were obtained. Most team members, as well as samples of three or four people from each unit of the administrative and academic staff of all divisions in the faculty, were interviewed. All participants were asked similar questions, firstly about their job description and then about their history of involvement with the team. Interviewees were then invited to give experiential accounts; firstly of a problem-solving situation that went really well in their experiences of working with the team and secondly, of a situation that was particularly difficult.

One of the difficulties in conducting PAR is to keep in focus both the *action* part of the research as well as the researcher's own *theoretical* research question (McKay & Marshall, 2001). Angela was interested in examining how the university culture, particularly constructions of specific identities, affected the PAR process. She recorded detailed field notes. Insights from our debrief sessions were recorded as we spoke. Observations of researcher's interactions with the team members, the Dean and the team's Line Manager as well as broader processes that impinged on the process were conducted unobtrusively and recorded soon after the events took place. This process was facilitated by the fact that Chris and Catherine often were present on such occasions and could facilitate Angela's memory of events. Catherine added invaluable insights as she recorded the various reasons Team members felt the project was or was not creating effective change, and what they saw for the future of the project. Selected instances from these processes are used to illustrate this paper's argument about the construction of *clients* and *experts*.

Constructing clients and experts

The notions of client and expert are mutually constitutive. If one party is labelled as a 'client' it follows that the other must be positioned as the 'expert' or 'professional'. The term 'client' refers to 'a person using the services of any professional' (Brown, 1993). 'Experts are 'person[s] with the status of an authority (*in* a subject) by reason of special skills, training, or knowledge; a specialist' (Brown, 1993). Professionals acquire paid positions by virtue of their specialised training and therefore can be regarded as experts in their field who provide a service for a fee. If a relationship is characterised as client/expert where the communications are one way, rather than mutually constitutive, it follows that the parties are not and can not be *colleagues* who engage mutually in the process of problem-solving and working together.

There were many instances and levels in the faculty at which the idea of the client, and therefore the associated expert, was evoked often in contradictory and confusing ways.

At the beginning of the project, team members and researchers identified all the stakeholders with whom the team members needed to interact. The team completed teaching materials for *academics*, worked with administrative staff in negotiating and achieving deadlines, and needed to put in place procedures for delivering materials to the printery. However, one of the most outstanding features of all conversations and interviews was the team members' primary focus on *students* as their clients as illustrated by this comment from one interview ' . . . we're trying to make it look good basically so students regard the money they spend on their courses as well spent'. The large majority of academics and administrative staff interviewed reported what they perceived as barriers to communication that existed between themselves and the team. When researchers attempted to alert the team to academics' and administrative staff's perceptions, members rejected the suggestions — referring to academics' faults and their lack of expertise in technology. For example, this comment reflects a commonly held belief, 'most of them [academics] are not very computer literate and resistant to change'. Desktop publishing team members all asserted in interviews that they were experts in online or web technology, so one wonders why they felt academics also needed such expertise. It seemed that there was a misrecognition of the nature of their relationship with academics in the university.

This apparent misrecognition and difficulty of communication was reflected in the researchers' work with the team. Angela and Chris explained that it was not our aim to be experts, but to be resource people who could facilitate in ways they wished to use our skills. PAR was *not simply research on* or *for* people, but research as a means of producing knowledge that we could offer to facilitate problem-solving *with* them. However, the ways the

team members wished to use us stopped at gathering information *on them* and *for them* — for example, doing observations of their workplace. This was reflected in questions that were asked and constant reminders that we were not trusted. For example, we were asked often over the months 'when will the final paper be written up that sums up the study? And 'when will you report back to us?' There was a fear that 'findings could be manipulated' and we were queried about the ownership of ideas. We indicated that the production of papers could also be collaborative and made a firm commitment not to produce papers without the team's input and/or comment. These reactions reveal historical experiences formed of traditional, data gathering, exploitative types of research which denied people a say in the interpretations of their own reality. These issues were reflected in the broader university culture.

People from various sections of the university positioned researchers' as clients. For example, about one year into the project, management decided to conduct an 'external' review of the team. The team's Line Manager phoned Angela and asked if she would discuss the project 'outcomes' or 'findings' with this external consultant, because it 'would waste [the team's] time if the consultant went in there asking the same questions that the [team] has already answered for you'. This comment reveals a natural science understanding of research where one asks questions and receives answers, the typical positivist approach. We were more interested in interpreted realities seeking to gain people's own versions of the situation, rather than being confined to answering questions about a reality we had constructed for them. As mentioned earlier, researchers had obtained approval for 15 hours of the team's work time during that year to be spent on the project. Bound by our collaborative agreement with the team, Angela refused to speak to the consultant. At which the Line Manager said, (referring to the small internal research grant we'd received) 'we've paid you to do it'. Cooperative planning and knowledge generation for implementing a new team's procedures were clearly not seen as legitimate unless the research followed the traditional external objectivist form —

get a consultant to study the team's practices and implement their recommendations. This positioning of the researchers as consultants or experts also was revealed in the researchers' encounters with the Dean and the Divisional Heads.

When Angela and Chris approached the Dean to gain his support for the project, underlying attitudes were evident in his response to us. The Dean revealed a good acquaintance with the methods of the Tavistock Institute, which is known for its pioneering work in AR. However, his knowledge did not seem to translate into an understanding of our approach to PAR. The Dean indicated that he did not want to see the team members 'being treated like animals' and 'they had work to do'. The idea of the traditional natural scientific 'experiment' is invoked in this statement, and the paternalistic note reflects the Line Manager's imperative not to waste the team members' time. We believe this 'not wasting time' message was clearly conveyed to team members via the 'system domain fabric'. They did not avail themselves of the opportunity to use the 15 hours' work time set aside for the project. This is illustrated by the observations that we were frequently reminded of the time constraints under which the team worked (and therefore did not have time to put into the project, which was not a priority) and that most members scheduled their individual interviews with Angela in their lunch time. Only two members completed the job diaries, which all had indicated a keenness to do.

At Divisional Heads' monthly meetings researchers were asked about our 'findings to date' and 'if they [the team] were cooperating'. We anticipated this action and determined that our 'reports' would take the form of an account of how far we had progressed in carrying out the research. For example, we reported on how many interviews had been completed and that the job diaries had provided some invaluable information. A good part of our debriefing and problem-solving sessions, described earlier, involved devising ways of avoiding succumbing

to language actions, which we perceived positioned us as spies for the Line Manager or as tools of the faculty management.

The language actions illustrated above positioned researchers as experts and the team members as our clients — patterns redolent of traditional positivist research approaches. These actions, together with behaviours which did not include us in their planning processes and did not initiate communications with us, meant that the attempt at mutual engagement failed. Mutual engagement infers that the jobs of initiating, inviting and suggesting ideas are shared by all, not left for one party to visit upon the other. However, as researchers we also were bound by broader structures of the system domain; the need to show progress to justify the research grant, to provide a report for the ethics committee and not least of all, to make something of the professional time we put in. With great reluctance we took a step back and decided to return to traditional action research where we presented the team with 'findings' aggregated and presented as a work relations scenario.

Discussion and Implications

It takes little to 'read between the lines' and note that there were many other structural and personal issues in the system domain fabric that impinged on this PAR. Not the least of these were historically embedded social defences that had been developed to protect people against anxiety and threat in the workplace. Given the historical relations of power between administrators and academics, contentious conversations may have been one of the social defence mechanisms by which the team members survived in the university. It is quite possible that team members understood the principles behind PAR, in fact some members indicated as much in their interviews, but they may not have viewed it as a particularly 'useful' research strategy for advancing the team's interests and solving their immediate problems. The team's predominant focus at the time involved sorting out procedural problems

and coping with lack of funding. Researchers contemplating undertaking projects of a similar nature may wish to consider the stage of a team's development before deciding to engage in PAR. PAR by nature is a social process, and when teams are in the process of actually building their team, as well as focusing on their immediate procedural and monetary problems, they may be less likely to engage in practices that place high importance on time-consuming qualitative processes.

In another vein, the team's resistance to PAR could be interpreted as a wish to manipulate the research process to lobby for a desired outcome. This means that their expression of a preference for more so-called 'objective' positivist research strategies may not have been a rejection of PAR per se. It may have been a pragmatic approach to the collaboration in that, having been long-term employees of the university, they understood that other key parties for example, the Dean and the Line Manager, may not have been able to comprehend, appreciate or recognise the outcomes of post-positivist research. Unlike positivist research, post-positivist research practice is unlikely to produce 'tangible outcomes' in a linear fashion in the short term, that is, the expert report with concrete recommendations. Future researchers are encouraged to explore the historical and political contexts that may impinge on a PAR project including previous relationships between the parties involved. Generally, accounts of action research focus on the 'teams' or 'stakeholders' without adequate attention to the influence of individuals. Where a small team is involved, the preferences of individuals can affect the whole collaborative process. It would be worthwhile to seek participants' accounts of their experiences of other action research projects to assess prior attitudes and dispositions with respect to PAR.

We have attempted to illustrate how contentious conversations involved claims about clients and experts and the expectations of those roles. These ways of talking and the related

actions structured our relations with the team in a manner that made it virtually impossible to do other than traditional research. We recommend that researchers clearly define the meaning of 'mutual engagement' in the context of a PAR project and question the expectation of reciprocity for all participants. For example, while we anticipated researcher involvement in the team member/worker's planning process, is it reasonable to expect team member/worker involvement in research design and planning processes? Should PAR proceed without genuine reciprocity? There is a need for research on the strategies participants might use to facilitate mutual engagement, in particular, on ways of fostering reciprocity.

The team members were all enthusiastic and energetic people who possessed a great vision for the development of their team and a belief that they could achieve it. We believed that PAR could be a process with the team, even though the broader university structures are very authoritarian in nature. The idea was that if others saw a successful outcome they would be more willing to participate on a broader scale. However, we misread the original 'agreement' about the project and the historical processes, characters and relationships that impinged upon team members and their willingness to work with us collegially.

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