Research in Practice in Adult Literacy: What does a Longitudinal Model look like?

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Introduction

Research by practitioners within their own practice is a long established tradition in parts of UK adult literacy practice (e.g. the RAPAL network) and increasingly within teacher education programmes (Barton, 1999; Tracey, 2006). Most recently, programmes of Research in Practice (RIP) have been funded by the NRDC (Hamilton & Wilson, 2006; Hamilton, Davies & James, 2007; etc.), by the LSC (West Midlands, Herrington, 2006) and by specific universities (McLachlan, Glasgow, 2006). Similarly, colleagues overseas - in Canada, Australia and the USA - have also sustained extensive Research in Practice programmes. All of this work — undertaken by individuals and by collaborative groupings —has revealed major gains at individual, community, institutional and field levels.

Though these gains are clear, there remain important obstacles to RIP being taken seriously by professional researchers and practitioners. More work, for example, is still required in relation to:

1. Making more explicit the place of such a research stance in relation to other research traditions - the overlaps, the distinctive advantages etc.
2. Unravelling the epistemological implications - the valuation and status of new knowledge generated in this way
3. Articulating the significance of such work for professional roles over time, in this field.
4. Removing the barriers preventing practitioners and literacy learners from developing confidence in their role as knowledge makers, and affirming the case for the reconceptualisation of the adult literacy educator role to include a research in practice dimension

Work is already underway on some of these. For example, Horsman and Woodrow's (2006) recent clarification of the essential components of RIP as a research approach; Kendall and Herrington's (2007) exploration of RIP and professional formation; and the seminar, *Practitioner Research - can it support professional development?* at Lancaster University Literacy Research Centre (April 28th, 2008)

In this paper I attempt to contribute to the discussion by arguing for the value of a longitudinal approach to RIP- *for the day-to-day building of research within practice, in varying contexts, throughout an educator's professional life.* I shall argue that in addition to the known gains from specific pieces of RIP, a long-term stance produces an enhanced impact on research confidence — in terms of methodology and interpretive depth — and on professional development. I draw briefly upon evidence from my own history as a practitioner researcher, to provide an example of such a model and though this is designed primarily as an invitation to practitioners to devise their own, it also contributes something towards each of the above issues.

Rationale for engaging with Research and/in Practice

The main reason for my engagement with research was the stream of questions and gaps emerging in everyday practice. My work as a literacy educator started with a question. Why were two of the second year plumbing students who I was teaching in a UK Midlands further education college in the mid-1970s unable to read? Successive years of working in the field produced more and more questions. Searching for answers became essential to my practice.

Research about and within my practice can thus be seen as a process of constructing a 'living' *theory of practice* (Whitehead, 1989). This involved learning from the students directly and also drawing into this process the insights from professional researchers who had exposed the confining and destructive effects of some theories and concepts of literacy (e.g. Freire, 1979; Graff, 1979; Street, 1984; Arnove & Graff, 1987; Gee, 1988; Barton, 1994; Fairclough, 1995; Barton & Hamilton, 2000; etc.).Narrowly-based theories and policies which continued to damage literacy students were problematised. The curriculum was not after all just about learning letters, sounds and words, but about whose language, whose literacy, in which situation, for whose benefit, at whose expense — all essential building blocks for reframing students' experience of literacy failure.

Further, I wanted to do *research in practice* in a way which recognised the significance of learners' research questions and their potential as researchers and co-researchers and so became interested in building democratic processes within research. The RAPAL and RIPAL networks thus provided a professional 'home'.

To some extent my particular career journey can be seen as a response to the ill-defined nature of professionalism in these fields over three decades. At the time of writing this is still a problematic issue and hence this invitation.

A Longitudinal Approach*

This developing approach has drawn heavily on the traditions established within Adult Literacy practice and within Action Research. It has included the following ten characteristics:

1. Motivationally complex but responsive to policy and practice

Many practitioners can see no obvious reason for an involvement in research. Close analysis of my own motivation revealed a mix of multiple *push and pull* factors. Some were self determining , for example, to resolve my own 'niggles' and my own uncertainties about dyslexia and to seek a clearer, more authentic narrative for practice than was available **;** to articulate the sophistication of certain Learning Support roles**;** and to ensure that literacy and dyslexic learners' voices were heard, both for representation and revelation Sometimes the pressure of others was the motivation: for example, responding to learners pushing for answers and to funders' desire to investigate. Students got involved in research to find out more about their own difficulties — both to relieve their own discomfort and to prevent suffering in future generations of children. Whatever the source, my motivation can be seen as about actively interrogating theory, policy and practice as part and parcel of doing practice.

2. Diverse in form and method; organisational and dynamic 'infrastructuring'

Many practitioners see research as entirely distinct from practice and claim not to have time for this separate task. However, my experience revealed the following different forms of RIP, within and round about practice:

- **Research within the actual practice of teaching and supporting learners – unique to practitioners.** Practice is a research site par excellence. Asking questions, recording outcomes and feeding the findings into one's own teaching demonstrates research built into practice. This kind of work shares some common ground with Mason's Discipline of Noticing (2002), but whereas he views these processes as precursors of research, here they are seen as involving research directly.
- **Small-scale research projects located just to the side of general practice.** These were often set up quickly with small amounts of additional money when questions 'bubbled' out of practice and could not be set aside or 'contained'. One example involved gathering evidence about academic staff attitudes to disability, using an existing staff development email group.
- **Reflective analyses about theory and practice**: Such retrospective and prospective analyses were not ostensibly about gathering new primary data but rather as about episodic ground clearing, showing key moments of synthesis, creativity and construction, from the inside and across practice settings. Their regular recurrence underlines their key function within a longitudinal RIP story.
- **Research within funded development projects**. Within a formal development project, designed to build disability issues into staff development programmes in ten Midlands universities, early findings revealed considerable academic fears about engaging with disability issues. A decision was taken to gather first-hand accounts, via action research, of how some staff were overcoming such fears and constructing new practice. Without this research dimension it is unlikely that these new authentic narratives would have emerged and the ongoing development outcomes would have been weaker. Dynamic 'infrastructuring' here suggested the importance of generating research questions even within already defined development projects (Herrington with Simpson, 2002)
- **Funded research projects.** One particular example reveals the importance of allocating research funds to practitioners. A student-tutor research group which focused on the study of dyslexia produced new knowledge for the field about how dyslexia was described by adults, unparalleled professional development for the tutors concerned and major learning outcomes for the students about their own dyslexia and about dyslexia in general.

3. Dialogic in process

Within all of the above it is possible to discern dialogic processes at work.: from the 'conversation' dialogue of practice (Harste, 1994), to building 'listening and speaking between students and tutors' into the methods for gathering and interpreting information, and for creating new 'stories'. The dialogic nature of research and practice discourse was also present within ostensibly monologic forms, when they clearly drew in the voices of learners, colleagues, and researchers (Herrington, 2001, a, b)

The rationale for using dialogic processes lay in relation to issues of *identity, voice, representation, advocacy* and *power relations,* all of which were central to developing a theory of practice. During this period major writers had exposed the power imbalance in the *representation* of the so-called 'illiterate', by the so-called 'literate' (e.g. Mace, 1992). In relation to dyslexia. the issue of representation was also problematic with individual voices rarely seen as part of the *academic* literature and representation largely in the hands of non-dyslexic researchers within particular disciplines. This work can thus be seen as challenging such misrepresentation.

Bakhtin's identification of the interaction between "*authoritative discourse*" and "*inwardly persuasive discourse (…'telling in ones own words'…)" in "every individual's consciousness"* (Jones, 1989, p.106) usefully emphasises the question of which student voice is represented within these dialogues. It sheds some light on the profound issue that for some, the inward voice is the only one which feels real for writing. It was thus clear that dyslexic students must exercise their voice not only as a matter of right and justice but because their knowledge of their 'disability' must shape the reading, writing and spelling curriculum.

4. Power 'Sensitive'; Democratic Power Relations and Mutuality

Working in a dialogic way does not guarantee that RIP will address power issues between readers and writers and between teachers and students. An additional level of awareness about the exercise of power is essential. Hence, within this example, values which ignore and oppress the knowledge generation of practitioner researchers are challenged and the relative exercise of power by students and staff within RIP processes is explored.

Some practice contexts offered greater possibilities than others in this respect and some research designs focused specifically on enhancing student roles as researchers and co-researchers. One piece of RIP in particular *problematised the idea of sharing power between students and tutors within a research project*. It began to classify the ways in which power was exercised by students and tutors and highlighted the limitations on such power. It challenged ideas of consensual cosiness by exposing some of the contested issues. For example, members of the research group disagreed about preferred terminology regarding dyslexia. Some opted for the term specific learning difficulties (cf. global learning difficulties), because it avoided the unhelpful heat of the contemporary dyslexia debate and because it offered an umbrella concept for coexisting difficulties. In contrast, some students preferred the term 'dyslexia' because it actually described their reality as having 'difficulty with words' and they felt it was generally understood as such. There could be no consensus: one group wanted to claim the word; the other felt that the word itself had to be challenged.

This was problematic. Critical Discourse Analysis involves the deconstruction of what and how language is used to oppress (Fairclough, 1995) and as such emphasises the importance of 'disabled' people exercising power over the use of language about disability (Tremain, 2005). In this case, those student members who wanted to use the term dyslexia were deemed by others to be insufficiently aware of the oppressiveness of this term. Any claims about power sharing or *mutuality* within RIP must always be interrogated in relation to such contests.

5. Individual and Collegial

The strong emphasis here on the importance of the individual practitioner as pro-active constructor of her/his own RIP profile should not divert attention from the collaboration and collegiality often involved. The collegial possibilities in my case were shaped by practice settings (some more flexible than others) and by the availability of local and national networks. Even so, carving out spaces for collegial work was always proactive rather than a given.

6. Habitual rather than occasional

RIP clearly became a developing habit for me: a part of the everyday, both the daily routine – *le quotidien* – and in the deeper interpretation of the everyday in overall practice. And just as Moran (2005) generally sees the global resisted in 'the everyday', so professional life rooted in everyday research in practice proved in this case to be a means of resisting hegemonic

discourses regarding literacy and dyslexia. The regularity of research in practice brought a confidence to such activity.

7. Organic

Looking back, the work reveals not simply a steady accumulation of research in practice findings but rather an organic process of growing knowledge within, from and between practice sites. This had a huge advantage from a practitioner's professional development perspective but also contributed to the tendency in RIP to be slow to claim knowledge gains.

8. Chronologically nuanced

All the above elements embody relationships with time but it is important to acknowledge explicitly the sophisticated, temporal interactions within this research in practice. Time between research activities was not easily predictable and time within RIP narratives was often experienced diffusely. It became, for example, intrinsically connected with the time of practice (even when asynchronous methods were used).

However, all the RIP on my particular journey involved key points, moments or stages in time when leaps in understanding occurred or when the research had become necessary and possible. Longitudinality in RIP thus included for me changes in speed, unevenness and simultaneous speed differentials. There were acknowledged times of not knowing and of 'holding' ideas and different types of knowledge until the connections between them became clear. Longitudinality thus cannot be characterised here s a sequence of projects with identical temporal characteristics nor even a sequence of entirely definable, plan-action-reflection-writing cycles (e.g. Kemmis & McTaggart, 1982). McNiff's 'spirals on spirals' (1988), which describes how action research encompasses unplanned deviations, comes closer to describing the experience here but even so does not quite capture either the micro experience of time within research in practice nor the relationship between the ongoing spirals and the underpinning organic development.

When students were involved in the research, time became involved in two further ways: students showed that they, too, (cf. practitioner researchers) needed time to learn how to do research, valued a differential structuring of time in relation to research (e.g. embedding short pieces of research time within learning and support activity); and required some unpacking of time in relation to the research/action interface. Further, their learning pasts and the reframing of the present had to be taken into account.

Overall, this experience suggests that research in practice required a greater meta-awareness of time than is usually acknowledged in other research approaches.

9. Knowledge 'confident'; reflexive, theoretically aware

One of the most important features of this example of longitudinal RIP was building a personal academic arsenal regarding the knowledge claims I was making. When I became a literacy educator, I was already familiar with many aspects of quantitative methodology, with the methodologies used by historians and with the developments in qualitative methodologies (Glaser & Strauss, 1968). Over the period I extended this knowledge both in terms of new ways of doing kinds of qualitative research (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000) and more generally of the social practice of knowledge making (Clarke et al, 2003). This understanding of the power relations and struggles involved in research enabled me to counter the common criticisms that the new knowledge is small-scale, local, context bound, and even in some cases not *real* knowledge at all. Re-visioning knowledge generation using a constructionist perspective would clearly be helpful for RIP.

It seemed to me that there was nothing in principle about RIP which made it weak methodologically or limited in interpretive depth, although there will always be examples of such. There may also be limitations in scope and scale but these do not make a piece of writing unworthwhile in terms of knowledge making. Such 'limited' pieces of my RIP cannot be characterised as pre-research or even as a necessary developmental stage in advanced criticality. Rather they are an expression of knowledge-seeking with a particular purpose by a particular practitioner in a particular time and place of practice and with a particular background and can be read accordingly. No one else could have constructed this new knowledge in that place at that point. The knowledge was sufficient for its purpose.

The claim about lack of interpretive depth can be challenged by articulating the bases of interpretation and by challenging some unnecessarily excluding practices. There is for example a current fashion in literacy research circles for interpreting educational 'data' through the conceptual frameworks of particular cultural and literary theorists (Tobin et al., 2005). This is usually interesting, not least in signalling the emergent leaders in interdisciplinary contests (Moran, 2002), and offers new insights from larger frameworks than those specifically concerned with literacy, but as an *un-problematised* criterion of advanced interpretation, it cannot be left unchallenged. The model for knowledge making among teacher researchers cannot be one in which selected theorists are given the kind of canonical position they would have been unlikely to seek out for themselves.

This awareness about knowledge generation ensured that I could see practice as the seedbed from which some questions emerged as consistently more important.; and as the space in which to 'play' with ideas; or even to start a 'story' which was never finished. By *accumulating depth*, I was free from many of the barriers which prevent practitioner researchers from fully appreciating the uniqueness of their contribution.

10. Receptive to the unexpected: open ended

Finally, my experience suggested the vital importance of listening to students and staff in an open minded way. Many conversations revealed surprising descriptions for the researchers and students and I began to see the role of 'openness to the unexpected' as a driver for making knowledge as well as an outcome.

It is clear that in this case longitudinality was not in all respects distinct from a short term model. Values and processes overlapped but the explicit reference to time within all these elements allowed more sophisticated complexities in motivation, form, habit, and epistemological awareness to develop.

Outcomes

Though I have not discussed here the *relative* importance of the values and processes noted above, it is nevertheless possible to see how, overall, this infrastucturing of research within practice over time produced identifiable and powerful outcomes (Herrington, 2007):

- the creation of new knowledge about dyslexia, pedagogy and learning support for learners, tutors and for the field as a whole;
- a growing critical confidence about research methodologies, about students as co-researchers, about interpretive depth and about making and using theory;
- a sense of proactively transforming my *professional self*, over time and yet avoiding the 'lone wolf' phenomenon (Huberman, 1995);
- an increasing confidence to act within situations (and contextual constraints) to effect change.

Two comments are needed here: first, I do not want to suggest that 'infrastructuring' in this way was a smooth, onward and upward process. On the contrary, I found myself in some

uncomfortable positions. For example, I was highly critical of existing narratives about dyslexia (both the deficit paradigm and the refusal to consider it at all) and wanted to construct one which was congruent with my experience of dyslexic learners. This was not particularly welcomed by my peers.

Second, this is not the only way of constructing a longitudinal profile - other lives will produce other trajectories. Only when many practitioners see the significance of bringing these living theories together will a general theory of longitudinality emerge. However this one example both invites other practitioners to re-construct their own approach and also to plan their own infrastructuring in an *ex ante* fashion - constructing the future. This is clearly a rich area for future research.

Conclusion

The challenge to articulate the experience of RIP and to build the intellectual and policy case for it, is still a serious one. There is a remaining danger from the continuing separation of research and practice and the low valuation of practitioner generated knowledge. One obvious solution is a radical change in how practitioners' roles are conceptualised. If RIP (both individual and collegial) is built into all practitioner roles, we can move beyond the practice of avoiding research, or of focusing simply on one-off pieces or collections of work. We can instead explicitly recognise that making knowledge as an ongoing part of the everyday. Such a re-conceptualisation suggests a coherent mechanism for long term professional development at a time when such is still not well conceptualised in the field. It also carries clear implications for the teacher education curricula and for ongoing staff development. It offers a serious opportunity for practitioners to be sufficiently confident to challenge inappropriate models of literacy and to check the flaws in both new and existing policy.

Notes

* This approach is discussed more extensively in Herrington, M. (2007) – see below

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