

Speaking of Quality and Research that Counts: Making an Impact on Practice¹

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Abstract

Practitioner inquiry can sometimes be seen to sit uncomfortably within the context of the modern university. In this paper we argue that high quality practitioner inquiry, conducted within educational and other practice-based settings, has the capacity to bridge the gap between research, as it is conducted within universities, and practice, as it is articulated and undertaken in the field. We suggest that for both university-based and field-based participants, joint engagement in practitioner inquiry holds the potential for deep and sustained professional learning, and in response to the question of quality, draw on our earlier work to explore the links between quality, ethics and accountability in practitioner inquiry, which we see as inextricably linked. We conclude by arguing that good practitioner inquiry, despite recent attempts by governments and bureaucracies to ‘domesticate’ it, always has a subversive and political edge.

Introduction: Usable knowledge in practical settings – a matter of quality

We ask ourselves, first, what it is that we desire from practitioner research? Seemingly it is that the energy and effort contributes to some kind of improvement in the named practice; whether it is in relation to schooling, health, or other social services. Of course, as we shall argue later, ‘improvement’ can be seen as something of a weasel term, improvement for whom and at what cost? All the same, research that is relevant and aspires to excellence, for us is first and foremost research that has been conducted within an ethical framework; it is trustworthy and dependable and has the capacity to be transformational (Groundwater-Smith & Mockler, 2007).

With further regard to quality we need to ask ourselves a series of questions, some of which might be:

- Is quality determined by reputation?
- Is quality determined by adding value?
- Is quality determined by following the rules?
- Is quality determined by communicability?

So what do we, as practitioner researchers, see to be the impact of quality?

Quality and closing the gap

In recent times there has been a significant and intensifying discussion regarding the perceived gap between research, as it is conducted in universities, and practice, as it is articulated and undertaken the field. For example, in relation to education, in December, 2000 the then Australian Department of Training and Youth Affairs (DETYA, 2000) published a six hundred page document *The Impact of Educational Research*. The report, through a series of invited papers, examined the relationship between university-based research and activities related to school education. In the overview to the report it was stated that: “Policy developers argued that most research that had an institutional impact was commissioned by them. ... In comparison, the influence of university research in schools was largely indirect, unstructured and often mediated through individuals” (DETYA, 2000: 5). In effect this was an attack on the quality of research in

¹ Paper Presented to the CARN Study Day: Quality in Practitioner Research, University of Newcastle, Central Coast Campus, 21st July 2010.

terms of its relevance to practitioners. Furthermore, it was stated that in terms of direct impact “the most frequently quoted examples of systematic educational enquiry was action research since it appeared to bring immediate benefit” (DETYA, 2000: 6).

Using an innovative process of backtracking from practice to research findings the study found that there was a complex space between practitioners and policy makers and what was defined as the ‘connecting web’ (DETYA, 2000: 342 – 343). This web was that which links research knowledge, usually generated in the academy, to practitioners’ and policy makers’ actions through a series of nodes comprising: conferences, professional learning opportunities, taskforces and reference groups, formal meetings, publications, internet sites and the like. It was seen that a powerful node of the web was collaborative research that was capable of joining the thinking and actions of practitioners and policy makers with their academic colleagues. This section of the report concluded that “there is a real gap between research knowledge and the connecting web: research has to be propelled out of its abstract conceptual space and into arenas where educators can engage with it and decide if and how it will be useful to them (DETYA, 2000: 343). What is noteworthy in the analysis is that the gap appears to be in this intermediate space between the academy and the various mediating instruments that could bring the work of the academy to the attention of the schools, or indeed of other service providers. Thus the path is a far more complex one than first anticipated.

Many writers have now acknowledged that some kind of fissure exists between the knowledge that academic research, as conducted in the university, has generated and the practices in the field. Of course it should also be acknowledged, that not all research is designed to make a practical difference but rather is basic research that may lead, at some future time to procedures that could improve work in classrooms, health services and other social provisions. However, the research in which we have an interest, that is practitioner research, needs to be a resource that is trustworthy, useable and accessible. In effect it should be what can be termed ‘exploratory practice’ wherein research and practice are woven together in one cloth that has its own integrity and strength.

So how can this varying warp and weft between academic research and field based practices be developed into an integrated whole? Are the practices of the academy and those in the field and the rewards that are accorded to them too different to allow the gap to be bridged? Is it, indeed, some kind of chasm and does that chasm compromise the quality of the work?

Research that connects

A significant driver for practitioners, leaders and policy makers in the field, in terms of seeking for well informed knowledge about practice, lies in their own engagement in research with all of its contingent opportunities and challenges. Lingard & Renshaw (2010) see for example, teachers as active participants in the research process. They are valued as researchers in their own right with teaching being seen as research informed and research informing. Indeed, they argue for teachers to be generators and utilisers of research within a dynamic construction that recommends that they have a ‘researcherly disposition’ (Lingard & Renshaw, 2010: 27).

There is a real contribution that practitioner research may make to the development of theory in the academy. Indeed, the very existence of Industry Linkage grants within the spectrum of funding provided by the Australian Research Council recognises such a contribution. In Australia a number of state and national programs have enabled all kinds of service providers to investigate their practices in systematic ways that allow for the accumulation of cases; for example take the second phase of *The Fair Go Project*, a joint research initiative by the NSW Department of Education and Training and the University of Western Sydney as an ARC Linkage project. The *Fair Go* team was funded to develop a cross case analysis of what makes for exemplary teachers of students under conditions created by poverty and alienation. Part of the research methodology has been to engage the participating teachers in a six day workshop as co-researchers analysing the substantial case record. While not strictly practitioner research in the sense that the

participating teachers initiated the study it was nonetheless one that bridged the gap and honoured the practitioners.

Studies, such as this one provide the finely nuanced accounts that are required if the variations in context are to be fully understood and accounted for. Researching *for* the profession is a very different stance than researching the profession. It requires academic researchers to face what may be some ‘unwelcome truths’ regarding the impact and relevance of their research (Mockler & Groundwater-Smith, 2010).

The most powerful unwelcome truth for academic researchers to face is how little of their work has an impact upon practice. Gore & Gitlin (2004) found that teachers, for example were dismissive of educational research because it did not provide them with sufficient purchase on their practice and the ways in which they might productively change or build upon it. They saw educational researchers as distanced from the challenging life of the school classroom with little appreciation of its variability, from one context to another. As well, there is the problematic of the alienating and marginalising language that is employed by many (but not all) academic researchers in their publications, presumably designed to disseminate their findings. Dressman (2008: 15) argues that much of the language employed by the academy seems to be written to “resist reading”. He likens it to a Gordian Knot that was so “elaborately and intricately tied that at first even Alexander the Great was unable to find its ends”. Alexander’s solution was to slice through the knot thus rendering it a pile of disconnected cords and so it is for many in the professional field. They may see and recognize some disparate strands but have difficulty in bringing them together into the kind of coherent whole that could meaningfully inform their practice.

Understanding the relationship between academic research and professional practice is one that is both difficult and persistent. Van de Ven & Johnson writing in the field of management outlined three related ways of framing the problem: knowledge transfer; distinctive knowledge forms; and, knowledge production, that they conceptualise as arbitrage, that is by “involving individuals whose perspectives are different” (Van de Ven & Johnson, 2006: 809). In relation to the last of these they propose a way forward is to develop ‘engaged scholarship’ whereby there is significant interaction between scholars and practitioners within an organic and egalitarian relationship. They argue (Van de Ven & Johnson, 2006: 815) that the quality and impact of research improves when four things are actualized, namely:

- Questions and anomalies that exist in reality are confronted;
- The research project is organised as a collaborative learning community of scholars and practitioners with diverse perspective;
- The research systematically examines not only alternative models and theories but alternative practical formulations of the question of interest; and the research is framed to contribute knowledge to academic disciplines and one or more domain of practice.

Drawing on the work of Haberman (1991) in his account of good teaching, we would further argue that the relationship between those with different stances on research may be enhanced by suggesting:

1. Whenever practitioners and academic researchers are working together on problems and challenges they regard as vital, good practical research is going on.
2. Whenever practitioners and academic researchers are together involved in exploring explanations of complex contexts and their impact, good practical research is going on.
3. Whenever practitioners and academic researchers are together identifying major concepts, big ideas and general principles and not merely engaged in the ephemeral and trivial, good practical research is going on.
4. Whenever practitioners and academic researchers are collaborating in the acts of planning, undertaking and analysing, good practical research is going on.
5. Whenever practitioners and academic researchers are observing careful ethical principles, good practical research is going on.
6. Whenever practitioners and academic researchers are engaged in sustained conversations

- that challenge common sense assumptions, good practical research is going on.
7. Whenever practitioners and academic researchers have opportunities to publish together the practical knowledge arising from their inquiries, good practical research is going on.

Most importantly we would make the case that if we are to seek for quality in practitioner research there are further propositions to which we need to attend. Namely these are in relation to ethical practice. We have now developed these in a number of different publications and discussions (Groundwater-Smith & Mockler, 2007; Groundwater-Smith & Mockler, 2009) and most recently Groundwater-Smith (2010). It is to this last iteration that we now turn:

Following the work of Ahmed & Machold (2004: 539 – 542) we take the following set of maxims that are required for ethical accountability, as a form of moral responsibility and a measure of quality, these being:

- The maxim of no-harm (as far as is possible and predictable)
- The maxim of transparency
- The maxim of voice
- The maxim of equity
- The maxim of benefit
- The maxim of integrity
- The maxim of liberty
- The maxim of care

While these were cited by Ahmed and Machold in the context of management they have equal application in the conduct of practice-based research. It is worth considering each one (Groundwater-Smith, 2010).

No Harm

It has long been argued that we cannot guarantee that an outcome of research will or will not be harmful; but we can attempt as far as is possible to minimise harm. Research that sets out to deliberately deceive those who participate is inherently harmful, for it denies agency and opportunities to provide alternative explanations for that which has been investigated and documented. Thus, covert research is highly questionable.

Transparency

In decrying covert research we also wish to advocate for research practice that fully informs all who take part through a process of consent. The challenge lies with the ways in which consent is obtained. Too often the requirement is a legalistic one, couched in a language that is unnecessarily bureaucratic and alienating. Being transparent, particularly with vulnerable groups means providing information that can be readily understood.

Voice

This brings us to the matter of whose voice is heard? Does the research unintentionally seek out those who may be compliant, or articulate, or hold powerful positions? Or is it inclusive of those voices that may express dissent or difference. Much of our own research has been in school-based inquiries that have involved the students as consequential stakeholders (Groundwater-Smith, 2007). We have observed how much easier it is to consult the resilient students, the ones who are seen by their schools as capable communicators rather than having opportunities to engage with those who operate at the margins of school life.

Equity

Closely linked to the matter of voice is that associated with equity. Problems can arise where there is an obvious power differential between the participants in the research process.

Benefit

Practice-based research is first and foremost a human endeavour with all of the dilemmas and traps that can be imagined in complex social settings. ‘Who benefits?’ can be a tricky question. If the truth be told the principal benefit may often come the practitioner researchers’ way.

Integrity

Clearly, the maxim of benefit is closely allied to that of integrity that requires both the individual and the institution to have a proper regard and respect for both self and others.

Liberty

An important value to be considered in the context of practice based qualitative research as that of liberty – being able to ask, debate and publish the difficult questions and issues.

Care

Clearly all of the above maxims impact upon the notion of ‘care’; that is, showing consideration and respect for all who are engaged in the research process. Exhibiting care requires that all who are engaged in the research process are alert to the responses and needs of others.

We might ask ourselves a series of questions:

- Have we been clear about the nature of the research in terms of its goals?
- Have we thought through the most appropriate methodology that will attend to the maxims outlined above?
- Have we ensured that we have engaged with the full range of stakeholders?
- Have we collected data in such a way that allows for confirmation and disconfirmation?
- Has the relationship between the researcher(s) and participants been fully considered?
- Has due attention been given to the publication and dissemination of the research?
- Has the research effort been worthwhile, contributing to the public good?

Whose agenda, whose quality?

We have written at some length elsewhere (Groundwater-Smith & Mockler, 2009) about the perils associated with action research in the age of compliance in which we find ourselves. In many ways the aims of action research or practitioner inquiry, we see as antithetical to the push toward compliance, marked as it is with a desire to snip, tuck, tidy, neaten and tick off, problem solve and minimise complexity. Practitioner inquiry, on the other hand, is more about observing and understanding complexity, problematising practice (particularly those dimensions that are commonly taken-for-granted), and seeking understand and take heed of those ‘problems’ that are less easy to solve.

In short, the compliance agenda is about minimising ‘mess’, while the aim of the critical practitioner inquirer is to appreciate, understand and theorise the ‘mess’ in relation to their practice. These two agendas are very different and for this reason ‘compliance’ and action research or practitioner inquiry make for very strange bedfellows.

This has not always been well understood by those who push the compliance barrow, however. In 2006, Stephen Kemmis noted that

...some – perhaps most – action research no longer aspires to having this critical edge, especially in the bigger sense of social or educational critique aimed at transformation of the way things are. Much of the action research that has proliferated in many parts of the world over the past two decades has not been the vehicle for educational critique we hoped it would be. Instead, some may even have become a vehicle for domesticating students and teachers to conventional forms of schooling. (Kemmis, 2006: 459)

What Kemmis is referring to here is the appropriation of action research as a tool of implementation, improvement, effectiveness, or compliance. To fully understand his disappointment, which we share, it is necessary to look ever-so-briefly at the origins of

practitioner inquiry and what we are really seeking to do when we use processes of practitioner inquiry to inquire into practice.

In the interests of brevity, we shall spare you a historical account that begins in the late 1800s, and jump instead to the work of Lawrence Stenhouse, founder of the Centre for Applied Research in Education at the University of East Anglia in the UK under whose auspices CARN was established. An expanded discussion can be found in *Teacher Professional Learning in an Age of Compliance: Mind the Gap* (Groundwater-Smith & Mockler, 2009).

The roots of the teacher inquiry movement in the United Kingdom can be found in the work of Lawrence Stenhouse in the Humanities Curriculum Project. Teacher research developed as a means through which social inequalities in the education system might be addressed through the reform of humanities education in the 1960s and 1970s.

In his application of Lewin's notion of action research ("research leading to social action") to the education setting, Stenhouse argued that teacher research is defined as that where the research act (which aims at finding something out) is also necessarily the substantive act (which aims at improving learning). Teacher research, he claimed, should also aim to make a contribution to the theory of education which is accessible to other teachers and enters into the critical discourse of the profession. In this way, Stenhouse developed the notion of research as "systematic enquiry made public" (Stenhouse, 1980: 1), advocating to teacher researchers as well as academic researchers, the need to publish more to the "village" within which the research is conducted and less "to the world" (Stenhouse, 1981: 7). Throughout his work, Stenhouse attacked paradigms of research which place teacher research below academic research in a hierarchy of legitimacy, arguing for the acceptance of teacher-as-researcher by the academic community as a legitimate form of field-based research (Stenhouse, 1985b) and advocating for the application of the illuminative research tradition within classrooms as a means to utilising and strengthening professional judgement (Stenhouse, 1979; 1985a).

Stenhouse and his colleagues developed a paradigm of action research which aimed to "demystify and democratise research" (Rudduck & Hopkins, 1985), as a response to their perception that educational research was not contributing effectively to classroom practitioners.

Stenhouse's definition of research and philosophy of teacher-as-researcher has been instrumental in the development of contemporary paradigms of practitioner research. It is important to note here the participatory and collaborative nature of the research advocated by Stenhouse and his colleagues. The research process itself is seen to be a collaborative venture, aimed at strengthening community and understanding through inquiry. Stenhouse wrote of the 'emancipatory' power of practitioner research, which although perhaps a little old-fashioned sounding in the cold hard light of the 21st century, can only really be understood properly when we take a look at what Stenhouse had to say about what constituted emancipation:

The essence of emancipation, as I conceive it, is the intellectual, moral and spiritual autonomy which we recognise when we eschew paternalism and the rule of authority and hold ourselves obliged to appeal to judgement' (Stenhouse, 1979: 163).

This is where we begin to see the 'rubber hitting the road' on the uncomfortable companionship between practitioner inquiry and compliance, because while practitioner inquiry is essentially about building and trusting professional judgement, cultures of compliance and audit are notoriously suspicious of professional judgement, regarding it as an imprecise science that cannot be accurately quantified and therefore should be relegated to the back burner in favour of more reliable processes involving, for example, the current favourite, *standards*.

A note here on standards. We do not wish to suggest that professional standards are in and of themselves problematic. Professional standards, however, do not exist in a vacuum, and neither do they, of themselves, provide an alternative to the unreliable prospect of professional

judgement. Indeed, in order for standards to be an effective tool for professional development or anything else, they rely on effective professional judgement. It is one thing to say that a teacher operating at the level of 'professional competence' should "Design and implement coherent, well structured lessons and lesson sequences that engage students and enhance student learning outcomes" (NSW Institute of Teachers, 2005: 7), but the issue of what constitutes coherent, well-structured lessons and student engagement, for instance, is a matter of professional judgement. Regimes of standards, audit and compliance do not negate the need for good professional judgement, but rather amplify it, despite simultaneously arguing for its eradication.

Another hallmark of the age of compliance where we see a fissure between the compliance agenda and that of Stenhouse's version of practitioner inquiry relates to the endpoint. While practitioner research ideally problematises practice, generating questions for practitioners to grapple with, debate and ponder, audit and compliance cultures favour the answering of questions over the generation of new questions, and the identification of 'successes' over the ongoing identification on problematics and critical focus. In effect, this contributes to the 'celebratory' dimension of practitioner inquiry which we have written and spoken about elsewhere: while we do not deny that there is much in the practitioner research process and its outcomes to celebrate, the celebratory edge does not always encourage us to continue to ask hard questions and move beyond where we currently are. Too often, the effect that this has is to encourage superficiality and 'tidiness' in practitioner inquiry where the imperative to meet the outcomes set by an external body overtakes the imperative to 'keep it real' in the local context.

Some years ago now Mockler and Sachs (2002) identified a range of questions to be used as a guide for evaluating practitioner inquiry in the context of broader 'projects' and the framework of questions developed has become more relevant in the intervening eight years where we have increasingly seen practitioner inquiry hijacked as an implementation tool. Let us consider them in the light of our observations about the context of 'compliance'.

Questions of purpose and intent:

- Who sets the research agenda and questions?
- Does the research endeavour seek to problem solve or problematise, or both?
- Whose interests are served?
- How does the evidence contribute to a broad political initiative/interaction?

Questions of evidence and process:

- What kind of evidence is collected?
- Once collected, how is the evidence approached?
- How representative is the evidence of the field or population?
- How is the evidence collected?
- How transparent are the processes?

Questions of action and effect:

- How far do those involved hold the requisite power to disseminate and act upon findings?
- What are the consequences, are they manufactured or real? (Mockler & Sachs, 2002)

The Politics of Practitioner Research

Practitioner research intersects with politics in a number of different ways. In the first place, as discussed in the section above, increasingly often practitioner inquiry is used as a tool for policy implementation: nowhere have we seen this as clearly as in the AGQTP project which has now been in operation for almost a decade. While we do not dispute that some excellent work has come out of local projects funded by the AGQTP, the project itself has been unashamedly framed as aiming to improve the quality of the teaching profession, and the funds have been used as a means of implementing a range of different strategies designed to do so, Quality Teaching being one of these.

But that's not where the politics of practitioner research ends, because practitioner research is, in itself, a political act. Over a decade ago now Marion Dadds (1998: 5-6) wrote:

At the heart of every practitioner research project there is a significant job of work to be done that will make a small contribution to the improvement of the human condition in that context. Good practitioner research, I believe, helps to develop life for others in caring, equitable, humanising ways.

The best practitioner research, we believe, engages in this task through offering to those with the least power an opportunity to take up their voice. Processes that seek to students, for example, not only as 'data sources' or even 'active respondents', but rather as co-enquirers, knowledge constructors and joint authors (Fielding, 2010, forthcoming) provide us with one education-based example of this kind of practitioner research – there are many more out there across a range of disciplines and practice backgrounds.

Finally, we like to think of practitioner inquiry as something of a subversive activity. Subversive in that in its best form it is sustained, rather than governed by short timelines and agendas handed down to the community from outside; subversive in that it seeks to generate questions rather than neatly answer them, and to build and engage professional judgement and, as importantly, confidence in professional judgement; subversive in that it seeks not to become absorbed in celebrating success, but rather in highlighting, pondering and doing something about challenges and weaknesses; subversive in its commitment to understanding data and evidence as opposed to 'using' them arbitrarily and without concern for their real meaning and significance.

For those of us located within the academy, practitioner research is subversive in nature because it generally doesn't sit comfortably with the research context of the enterprise university, wherein 'impact' is felt as a result of 'big' studies that are supposedly generalisable and replicatable.

To engage in high-quality practitioner inquiry is to one way or another swim against the tide, whether our primary sphere of practice is in schools, hospitals, allied health practices, childcare centres or universities.

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