

13 An adventure in 'postmodern' action research

Performativity, professionalism
and power

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Participatory action research

In this chapter I tell the story of a 'postmodern' participatory action research project which I undertook between 1995 and 1997 among a group of teachers who were experiencing a stressful period of institutional change.¹ That the focus is on teachers is quite incidental as the story is applicable to many contemporary professionals who face work contexts of ambiguity, rapid change and restructuring. I had three main aims in undertaking this project. The first was to support the teachers by facilitating a series of discussion meetings about the issues affecting them at work. The second was to gather research data about how teachers were engaging discursively in the field of adult literacy and basic education in 'difficult times'. The third was to explore a 'postmodern' version of action research based on Foucauldian notions of power and discourse.

Action research is now well established as a means of educational, professional and organisational development (Zuber-Skerritt 1996: 3). It is commonly defined as a form of collaborative, reflective enquiry carried out by practitioners on their own practice, in order to find ways of improving that practice (Kemmis and McTaggart 1988; Zuber-Skerritt 1996). This definition reflects the two different, but related, purposes of action research: learning from reflection on practice and taking action to improve practice. The metaphor of the action research 'cycle' refers to on-going processes of planning, action, observation and reflection. The 'steps' in the action research cycle structure the approach to action for change and the research method.

The documentation of the processes and outcomes of projects, in which groups of people engage in cycles of action and reflection in a deliberate and planned way, is the basis of the research data. The knowl-

edge produced from such projects emerges at the interface of institutional practice and struggles over change. Such working knowledge may primarily be of local interest, or it may contain broader significance.

A number of authors have grappled with the theoretical challenge that post-structural and postmodern ideas pose to traditional notions of action research (McTaggart 1994; Hall 1996; Kemmis 1996; Jennings and Graham 1996; Usher *et al.* 1997). My objective was to explore the implications of post-structuralist theory for the *practice* of participatory action research. My hunch was that Foucault's theory of discourse could facilitate more effective reflexivity about ourselves as workers, the institutional environments in which we work, and the broader social and political context. I considered that discourse theory would be a useful resource in exploring, and coming to terms with, our institutional and professional realities. This case-study was an explicit attempt to facilitate more complex and historically-informed understandings, among all of the participants (including myself), of the discourses which construct our working environments and which constitute us personally, professionally and politically.

I came to the project both as an adult literacy teacher sharing many of the concerns and passions of the other participants, and as a university researcher who had an academic investment in the research. As facilitator, I had more power than the others to make judgements about what was significant and to shape the process and outcomes. I continually shifted between the positions of participant, academic theorist and facilitator as I strove to keep pace with, to document and sometimes to lead the changing energies and preoccupations of the group. I felt I was on a risky, stimulating and illuminating journey in uncharted methodological territory.

Context

Adult literacy teaching (like many professional practices throughout OECD countries) has been profoundly affected by the rise of neo-liberalism in government. Since the early 1990s, neo-liberal policies have radically changed the ways 'adult literacy' is constructed and teachers' work is organised. Teachers have had to adapt to formally accredited, competency-based frameworks and pressures to measure and account for 'outcomes'. Other changes have intensified the effects of the new requirements: the establishment of the competitive training market with pressure on providers to compete with each other for tenders; the downward pressure on pay and conditions; the increasingly fragmented and casualised nature of available work; and the bureaucratisation of technical and further education (TAFE) institutes as these reform themselves in the model of lean, mean, competitive business enterprises.

The implementation of competency-based assessment has reconstructed adult literacy teaching along neo-Taylorist lines, positioning teachers as the 'deliverers' of pre-defined sets of skills and competencies. For example, the competency-based Certificate of General Education for Adults (the CGEA), developed in Australia (in the state of Victoria), is an enormously complicated framework of streams (subjects), domains (genres) and levels of competence. Modules at each intersection are defined as 'elements', which are associated with one or more 'competency' or 'competence statement'. Each competence statement has an associated set of performance criteria, defined ranges of application and defined conditions. The progress of students is tracked and assessed by their performance of tasks, each of which has been constructed in order to display a particular competency in conformity with the given range and conditions. Competency-based assessment in adult literacy and English as a second language (ESL) has been found by teachers to have certain benefits, but to have pedagogical effects that are deeply problematic (Sanguinetti 1995).

These changes have been described and interpreted in terms of 'performativity' (Lyotard 1984; Yeatman 1994; Lankshear, forthcoming). Performativity, according to these authors, is the meta-discourse of the globalising state. It arises in the world of transnational capital and *makes sense* of the idea of technologising the functions of the state with a view to minimising public expenditure and streamlining the provision of services to the private sector. In Lyotard's words:

the goal is no longer truth, but performativity – that is, the best possible input/output equation. The State and/or company must abandon the idealist and humanist narratives of legitimation in order to justify the new goal: in the discourse of today's financial backers of research, the only credible goal is power. Scientists, technicians and instruments are purchased not to find truth, but to augment power.

(Lyotard 1984: 46)

As government policies and public institutions reconstruct themselves to reflect and implement the meta-discourse of performativity, the worldview of globalising capitalism increasingly penetrates all aspects of work and society. Old certainties and securities are disintegrating and the demands of work (for those who have it) are intensifying (Hargreaves 1994). Workers are facing new sets of dilemmas about how to resist unpopular measures, how to practise ethically and how to survive these pressures to perform in a context of industrial insecurity and deep social and spiritual uncertainty.

I wanted to explore how the teachers were accommodating, surviving

and resisting the various changes that flow from, and are required by, the meta-discourse of performativity. I began with the view that an orientation to the 'politics of discourse' (Yeatman 1990) might help us/them think more reflexively and therefore more strategically in that context. I saw action research as a process of collaborative learning which would provide a structure and a 'space' for examining the contending discourses of practice which structure the work of adult literacy teachers and constitute their personal and professional subjectivities.

Reflection and reflexivity in action research

The action research 'cycle' is built around processes of group reflection. According to Kemmis and McTaggart (1988: 86), group reflection is: 'the basis of the initial reconnaissance stage, in preparation for planning and action'. Further reflection – analysing, interpreting, synthesising, explaining and drawing conclusions – takes place subsequently as the basis for further planning and action.

Recently, a number of authors have written about reflection in action research in the quite different sense of 'reflexivity', or 'reflexive critique' (Schratz and Walker 1995; Hall 1996; Winter 1996; Usher *et al.* 1997). These authors discuss reflexivity as a kind of ethical/epistemological obligation on the part of the researcher, who should explore and disclose his or her own biases and investments in research projects. In Hall's words, it is about 'the obligation to "own up" to our personal contributions in the process of our knowledge construction' (Hall 1996: 47; see also McTaggart 1994: 2). More deeply, it is about 'living with recursiveness', the presence of the knower in the field which is to be known: the recognition that knowledges are always partial and incommensurable and that the subjectivity and purposes of the knower are inevitably embedded in the language through which the knowledge is constructed (Legge 1999).

Reflexivity also implies having an awareness of the ways in which personal preconceptions and passions feed into the development and outcomes of projects. The action researcher needs to develop a reflexive awareness of the power dimensions of her relationship with participants and the dynamics of power structuring her relationship with funding and auspicing bodies (Sanguinetti 1998: 48).

In this action research project, I set out to explore discursive positioning, subjectivity and power so as to facilitate greater reflexivity on the part of all participants, including myself. It was an attempt to test the extent to which action research could be used as a 'space' for collaborative reflection on the discourses that constitute professional subjectivity in particular institutional contexts.

A postmodern approach to action research

My intention in developing a postmodern version of action research was informed by the Foucauldian framing of power as 'capillary': dispersed throughout society and operating through language and discourse (Foucault 1980: 96). It was informed also by the insights of feminist post-structuralist research methodologists (Stanley and Wise 1983; Fine 1994 and 1995; Weiner 1994; Lather 1991 and 1997). In recent years, the notion of action research as an 'emancipatory' undertaking has been significantly challenged from post-structuralist theorists (Ellsworth 1989; Gore 1991; Usher *et al.* 1997). Ellsworth, for example, suggests that the emancipatory meta-narrative rests on a 'phallogocentric' paradigm of rational knowledge and abstract logic. It relies on the notion of the ideal rational person who will act rationally once they understand the cause or context of their oppression (1989: 306). It does not problematise our own implication in the structures we are trying to change (*ibid.*: 310).

The postmodern critique of action research is now being addressed by leading action research theorists. Kemmis (1996), for example, has written about the 'challenges of postmodernisms' to action research and the need, in the light of those challenges, for action research to be reconstructed. For him, those challenges centre around 'the death of the subject' as autonomous rational agent; 'the death of history' (that the Enlightenment notion of progress or the possibility of emancipation is no longer sustainable); and 'the death of metaphysics' (that science and rationality merely construct the illusion of an independent reality as a mask for human purposes of controlling the human and natural world) (Kemmis and McTaggart, 1988: 2). Authors such as Sanger (1996) and Jennings and Graham (1996) also apply postmodernist theory in order to build a more sophisticated understanding of the possibilities of action research.

Theories of discourse linking language and texts to particular institutional structures and structures of global power suggest an important shift in the way in which power can be theorised in action research. Knowledge, meaning, political and social values, and notions of 'self' are all constituted in discourse. Discourses reflect social and political contestations and we (who are the subjects of discourse) live out this contestation constantly, in the everyday language we use, the choices we make and the politics we enact. It follows that, if power is enmeshed in discourse, then 'action' can be theorised as action in the realm of discourse. To act, in this sense, is to follow a deliberate strategy of 'language politics' or the 'politics of discourse': speaking in ways which challenge dominant discourses and produce alternative meanings. In Yeatman's terms, 'discourse is the power to create reality by naming it and giving it meaning' (Yeatman 1990: 155).

Foucault's concept of power as productive and dispersed throughout society widens the scope of action research from an emancipatory meta-narrative of 'them' and 'us' to a deliberate investigation of discourses which construct our understandings of ourselves and our social situations. This becomes a focus on 'the practices, techniques and procedures by which power operates ... it involves the tracking of knowledge production (webs of power) and its power effects' (Jennings and Graham 1996: 174).

The post-structuralist notion of the discursively constituted, fragmented, 'in process' subject can be applied in action research in place of the modernist notion of the unitary rational self (Jennings and Graham 1996: 170). Action research participants are no longer regarded as rational, purposive beings who will automatically proceed to planning and action once they have been enlightened as to the cause of their problems through processes of collective reflection. Instead, and more realistically, they are conceived as complex, multiply positioned, and shaped by a multitude of historical, psychological and social forces. Their 'actions' are constrained by a dynamic and contradictory field of subconscious or conscious beliefs, apprehensions and ways of being – the discourses which constitute their sense of who they are and how they might act.

Reconceptualising the 'subject' of action research in this way requires a shift in focus beyond 'action' to 'reflection', in the sense of reflexive, critical praxis. This implies three levels of self-reflection and acknowledgement: reflection about our own discursive formation in relation to the problem at hand; reflection about how we might be implicated in the structures and practices we are trying to change; and reflection about our investments in the research project itself, our role in the dynamics of power structuring projects.

The case-study that I present in the following section was an attempt to develop and carry out such a postmodern version of participatory action research. I analysed the transcriptions of the teachers' discussions with a view to identifying and describing the discourses 'at play' within those texts. I progressively fed back my analyses and interpretations to the participants. I was hoping thereby to contribute to a more politically and historically informed level of self-reflective (reflexive) practice within the action research process. By introducing the notion of discourse and presenting the research collaborators with analyses of their own discursive practices, I hoped that we might reflect on and make connections between their representations of institutional and classroom experiences, and the broader social and historical context. Developing cycles of reflexive praxis in this way might correspond to a postmodern model of participatory action research that focused on strengthening the reflexive and theoretical skills of the participants and the possibility of more strategic action in the longer term.

Mapping discourses of professional and pedagogical practice: a case-study

The project was undertaken with a group of teachers of adult literacy and ESL in a teaching department in a large Melbourne TAFE college. The teachers, all of whom were previously known to me as colleagues, agreed to participate in a series of meetings in which they would reflect on and address issues of concern to them in the changing policy environment. I would share with them the transcripts of the discussions and my theoretical interpretations of their issues. My interpretations were to be based on the theory of discourse as developed by Foucault (1980, 1981), contemporary discourse theorists (Fairclough 1992; Lemke 1995) and leading feminist post-structuralists (Weedon 1987; Fraser 1989; Lather 1991; Davies 1994). I planned that together we would build our understandings of the structural and institutional changes taking place and how the teachers were teaching (their pedagogical practices) in the context of those changes. The teachers were keen to take part in the project. They were intrigued by my preoccupation with discourse and saw the project as an opportunity for working through the issues that were a cause of a good deal of stress at work.

There were six teachers in the group, not including me. Most were part-time teachers on short-term or sessional contracts. We had seven meetings between 1995 and late 1998, although not all participants attended all the meetings. I took notes and taped and transcribed most of the meetings, made analyses of discourses which I defined as 'present' in the discussions, and fed my analyses progressively back to the group.

Several themes featured during the discussions and in this chapter I am focusing on two of the most central of these. The first was the theme of institutional change: how the teachers were representing those changes and engaging discursively in that process. The second theme was about how teachers were teaching in the context of that change: how they were 'living the contradictions' (Seddon 1994) in the course of their classroom practice, and the forms of pedagogy which were emerging in that context. In this paper I report on part of the first theme: the teachers' representations of themselves as professionals, faced with the down-grading of their professionalism and loss of jobs through the introduction of marketisation into the field of adult literacy and basic education.

The case-study I am reporting here is one part of a larger research undertaking among adult literacy teachers (Sanguinetti 1999), which involved two separate action research projects and the use of discourse mapping as a method of analysing the teachers' writing and transcripts of interviews.

Discourse mapping

I had developed a method of analysing transcripts by 'mapping' the discourses that are prominent in structuring them. I adapted this mapping method to the particular texts being produced and to my interpretive purposes – to understand more about how teachers engage as professionals in rapid-change contexts.

- 1 I read and re-read the texts to familiarise myself with the way the teachers were representing the institutional environment, their practices, pedagogical understandings and individual struggles to survive and to teach well.
- 2 I iterated between the texts and my previous study of policy trends, movements and contestations within the teaching profession, the changing structures of institutional management and the pedagogical theories and traditions constructing the field of adult literacy.
- 3 I looked for traces, anywhere in the texts (in the themes, value statements, anecdotes, metaphors, arguments and lexical items), of the schools of thought and traditions (the discourses) of teachers' professionalism and pedagogical practice.
- 4 I developed a web chart in which the main traces are named as discourses and their interrelationships (interdiscursivities) with other traces could be depicted. The rules I used for determining whether or not a pattern of speaking could be termed a 'discourse' were that it must:
 - recur across the texts (but not necessarily be in each text);
 - be identifiably associated with a particular institutional sector, tradition, theory and set of practices; and
 - reflect a set of power relations and a worldview.
- 5 After representing the discursive elements which I found to be present on the web chart, I collapsed these elements into two main discourses for the purposes of the analysis.
- 6 I then marked up each text in terms of the main orders of discourse. These were 'teacher professionalism' and 'performativity'.
- 7 Finally, I used the web chart as a reference point for studying the interdiscursivities as these appeared in the detail of the texts, and used this as a guide for my theoretical commentary on the teachers' discursive practices. Figure 13.1 illustrates this 'web'.

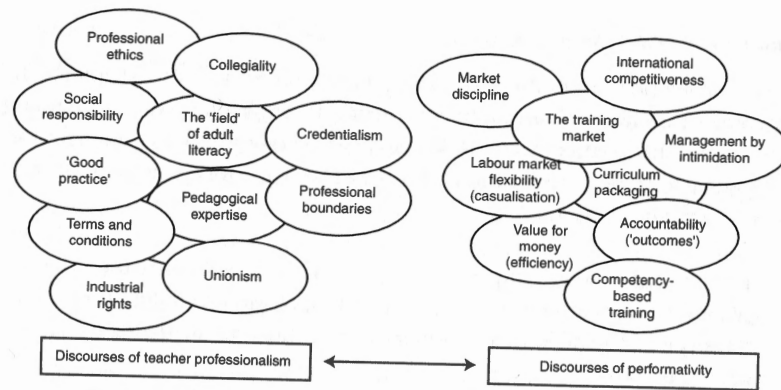


Figure 13.1 Discourses of teacher professionalism and discourses of performativity

Teachers' perceptions of institutional change

I shall describe and discuss the content of a discussion in which the participants chewed over the increasingly coercive style of institutional management, the effects of competency-based assessment and the overall impact of the marketisation of their field of practice. I will then summarise the findings of my discourse mapping exercise and my further interpretation of the discourse map.

During this discussion, the teachers gave a scathing and sometimes emotional account of the varying and interrelated impacts of competency-based assessment, marketisation and the down-grading of their industrial conditions (including the loss of tenure) and professional standing. They talked about the managerial attempts to contrive 'collegial' relationships, the loss of control over allocation of students to programmes, the insecurity caused by competitive tendering – especially the breaking down of professional networks – the with-holding of information about tenders by management, the rigidities of the competency-based assessment requirements in the Certificate of General Education for Adults (the CGEA) and new imperatives to 'prove' their capabilities by regularly having to report on 'measurable' outcomes. At bottom, they saw themselves as expendable in the push to centralise managerial power and to reduce unit costs so that their college could better compete against other providers.

The experiences of this group of teachers are similar to those of teachers in other Australian institutions of TAFE (Hattam 1995; Seddon 1998). With the leverage provided by short-term contracts and lack of permanent tenure, unpopular changes could be implemented with minimum resistance.

These teachers felt that their professional identity and autonomy was under attack. A theme which recurred throughout the discussion was the demise of adult literacy teaching as a profession. Conversely, the theme of teacher professionalism emerged as a discourse of resistance.

Interpretation of discourses

Everyone in the group denounced the new policies and the managers who were implementing new forms of control over teaching staff. The teachers were hurt, angry and bemused at the developments. A high level of consensus emerged from the intensity of their shared experiences. A collective adversarial subject position had been formed in opposition to the worldview and values associated with intimidatory management styles, marketisation, casualisation and the commodification of curriculum. They spoke as members of the teaching department, as members of a wider collectivity of teachers of ALBE and ESL and on behalf of the teaching profession in general. Almost all of the discussion was couched in the use of the 'we' ('we are at the cross roads', the 'we' being interchangeable with terms such as 'teachers', 'the teaching profession', 'people'). The 'we' sometimes constructed teachers passively, as victims of the current policies and college management, but at other times as active subjects who were ready to take action (if they only knew what action to take) in defence of students and teachers and in defence of good pedagogical practice.

In denouncing the new managerial and policy arrangements, participants positioned themselves firmly within a discourse of teacher professionalism. 'Teacher professionalism' was in opposition to and in implicit dialogue with an 'enemy' discourse, which was referred to as the 'the new Zeitgeist', 'materialism' or 'economic rationalism'. I named the implied enemy discourse as a discourse of 'performativity', following Lyotard, Yeatman and Lankshear. 'Performativity' in my analysis was a meta-discourse that was implied by the teachers throughout their discussions, the meta-discourse which was associated with and which underlay the many unpopular changes which they described.

Teacher professionalism, as a discursive field, was constituted by a complex mélange of discursive elements. First, there was a discourse about the specialist skills and knowledges of the professional teacher: both the formal knowledge and the practical, intuitive knowledge, which are central to 'good practice'. There was a discourse about teaching as a profession in the wider sense. The discourse of professionalism constituted teachers as having rights and responsibilities, a level of individual and collective autonomy, a sphere of proper authority, intellectual and educational skills

and resources and socially committed values expressed as professional ethics – a commitment to students and to the wider community of practice (Preston 1996). The discourse about teaching as a profession was also implied in the frustrated expectation of being involved in collegial decision-making structures within the college. There was also an element of ‘boundary-keeping’ in the expressions of concern about how aspects of what they saw as educational work – decisions about the placing of learners in courses and class groups – were now being taken over by bureaucrats from the Commonwealth Employment Service. Teacher professionalism also drew on a discourse of industrial rights and unionism that rested on traditions and histories of struggle for better teaching conditions as well as equity and access for students. Here, subject positions of solidarity, defiance against the oppressor, courage and collective action were being constructed.

The analysis shows the teachers shifting among and drawing upon all of these discourses of teacher professionalism as they talked about the many changes taking place. Preston (1996) claims that there is an inherent contradiction between the industrial and the professional discourses of the teaching profession; that is, that there is a contradiction between the ‘elitist’ and self-serving claims to special knowledge and privilege and the ethical and social commitments associated with teaching. In these texts, however, this dual positioning was not so much a ‘contradiction’ as a dimension of complexity in the way teachers saw themselves as professional workers.

The discourse of teacher professionalism was being used rhetorically, as a discourse of resistance, in response to the undermining of professional status and industrial conditions locally, especially the trend towards casualisation. Teacher professionalism was being invoked against the meta-discourse of performativity and its material and discursive effects. In asserting a (complex) discourse of teacher professionalism, the teachers were positioning themselves as ethical, professional subjects, *and* as workers who were being oppressed and exploited by the new wave of managerialism.

At the same time, a certain sense of powerlessness was evident in the anger and bitterness with which people denounced the new arrangements and those in managerial positions who made use of them to further their own agendas of power, institutional control, competitiveness and corporate advantage. The subject positions associated with the discourse of teacher professionalism seemed, in this case, to be insufficiently powerful to support positive visions of adaptation, survival or resistance.

Responses to discourse mapping

Most of the seven meetings were dominated by reports of the latest developments and expressions of distress about new happenings and industrial arrangements at the college. Each time we got together to consider (as I hoped) my latest analysis of discursive configuration, there had been a new series of distressing events which had to be talked about. The theoretical focus of my analysis was overwhelmed by the practical concern of all present to defend jobs, their professional standing and their notions of ‘good practice’. While reading the transcript and considering my mapping of discourses within it, some were more interested in building and embellishing their story with new examples and more strident denunciations, than in reflecting on their own textual representations and the implications of these.

In an atmosphere of reduced of job security, worsening industrial situation and threats of non-renewal of contracts, it was not a priority to reflect on the transcripts of previous meetings and what might be learned from these about our discursive constitution as professionals. They were tired, anxious and in no state to engage in any depth with my post-structural analysis of their earlier discussion. Despite my best facilitatory efforts, the impact of their immediate problems meant they had little space to take up my invitation to use the analysis as a basis for reflection about their own discursive positioning and practice.

I had hoped that they would reflect upon the complex elements of the ‘professional teacher’ discourse they were using, and see the analysis as a resource for thinking about how they were positioning themselves as teaching professionals and how they might position themselves the light of an uncertain future.

I also had hoped they would follow up my observation, based on mapping the discourses in the text, of the disjunction between the (historically powerful) discourse of teacher professionalism they were drawing on and the sense of powerlessness they projected. Was this sense of powerlessness a reflection of their actual institutional and industrial situation at this time? Or was it more a question of how they were constructing and positioning themselves at a time of policy turmoil and institutional restructure? Were they being immobilised by the inherent contradiction in the discourse of teacher professionalism, as suggested by Preston (1996)? Or had the discourse of performativity colonised notions of teacher professionalism, and therefore undermined the ability to resist and oppose it? What were the sources of discursive and organisational power we could now draw on? Would it be possible to ‘reconstruct’ teacher professionalism in the new context, in such a way as to include some elements of performativity while still holding on to our basic beliefs about education and the

teaching profession? This deeper level of questioning did not take place. Were the teachers resisting being drawn into and colonised by my theoretical interpretations of their struggles? Were they in fact resisting the 'discourse of discourse' as presented by me?

One obvious conclusion is that the immediate stress associated with being 'in the thick of battle' goes against the kind of meditational reflexivity which my discourse mapping exercise suggested. However, there was some evidence that my introducing the notion of discourse through feeding back a discursive analysis of their discussions may have contributed to more reflexive thinking about the broader issues.

Throughout many of the discussions, we kept returning to the question of 'why?' and how the local situation was reflective of the broader political context. We were practising the 'discourse of discourse' through using it in the light of our own texts and contexts. Increasingly, the teachers were using post-structural terms in their representations of what was going on and how they should best act in those circumstances. However, they (we) were not using it so much to interrogate their (our) own discursive positionings in those struggles.

I have also found a positive response in sharing my work among teachers more widely. That response suggests that the tools of post-structuralism are potentially useful to teachers and other practitioners addressing difficult issues of change. The 'discourse of discourse' is valuable precisely because it is an epistemology, a language and set of ideas which constantly directs attention to connections between text, subjectivity, and social structures and thus provides new and more complex insights into old problems.

Some methodological reflections

This was an informal, loosely structured version of action research based around a series of discussion and feedback sessions. Re-framing 'action research' in a post-structuralist framework, the 'action' was theorised as 'action in discourse'.

I had begun with three main aims: to support a group of teachers in a time of crisis, to produce data reflecting practices of discursive engagement and to explore the possibilities of combining post-structural discourse theory with action research. The aim of supporting a group of teachers by helping them to theorise their immediate struggles may have been achieved to some extent. The project provided opportunities for collective discussion and reflection away from the college, and there was support on the level of my personal friendship and solidarity. Without permanent tenure, however, this small group of teachers was powerless in

an environment of contracting funds, marketisation and increasing managerial control. It is not clear how new insights and new ways of talking could have empowered them (in that particular situation) to negotiate these issues more effectively or more strategically.

The aim of testing out the usefulness to that group of ideas about discursive engagement was only partially achieved. The stress and 'chaos' experienced by the teachers during the course of the project, the many cancellations and the constant domination of the meetings by more urgent, practical issues made it impossible to facilitate processes which would enable them to study and reflect in depth on the theory I was offering. The feedback that I did get was mixed and inconclusive. The initial enthusiasm for the ideas waned during the period of crisis and then seemed to return in the final meetings.

Were the three research aims incompatible from the start? Was I attempting the impossible by combining research for academic purposes with a project which, if it were 'pure' action research, would have been owned by all the participants and shaped by their needs for knowledge and empowerment? In this case, the motivation and the momentum for the project came mainly from my research commitment. Although this in turn was part of a broader (shared) political project, the contradictions lingered. The teachers' participation was born of a mixture of genuine interest, their expressed need to make meaning of the current unsatisfactory situation, and loyalty to me as a colleague and friend. On one level, the meetings were about helping me; but they were also enjoyable social occasions at which they could let off steam and talk through the issues in a safe place. Some, but not all, of the group engaged critically with my re-framing of their issues.

At some stages, it seemed that my theoretical project would be overwhelmed by the teachers' imperative of self-defence and survival. The teachers' immediate issues kept bubbling up and crowding out the theoretical focus and I was never quite able to bring the theory together with the immediate practical concerns. It was not until much later, when the immediate period of crisis had been passed and after some teachers had left or had been relocated, that the two seemed to come closer together.

Throughout the project, I had been working with a divergent and in some ways contradictory set of aims. At the same time I was mediating complex currents of power (my theoretical 'power/knowledge' and my dependence on their willing collaboration), desire (strong personal relationships, the desire on all our parts to support each other) and emotion (anguish caused by difficult times and loss of jobs; my anxiety to produce appropriate data).

The contradiction I was experiencing at that time can be seen as a

methodological problem common to many attempts at combining academic research with participatory action research. I was positioning the group on the one hand as co-researchers, and on the other hand as objects of my study and reporting, continuously iterating between *insider* and *outsider* positions (Cochrane-Smith and Lytle 1990). At the same time, I was trying to use each of those positions to interrogate the other, using the tensions to think critically and reflexively about what it means to do research (Schatz and Walker 1995) and to interrogate the ethical and professional basis of my own practice. In Fine's terms, I was attempting to 'work the self-Other hyphens' (Fine 1994: 72) to build a method which would be reflexively honest and rigorous within the terms of postmodern or post-structural enquiry.

Conclusion

In this 'postmodern' participatory action research project I used discourse mapping to analyse transcriptions of teachers' discussions about their work and progressively fed back my discursive interpretations to the participant teachers. Judged by the response within the meetings themselves, the project was only partially successful. The feedback I have received more broadly, however, leads me to maintain that the 'discourse of discourse' is a powerful tool in developing more reflexive and perhaps more strategic approaches to change, especially in the context of the profound changes now taking place in institutional, professional and industrial aspects of work.

This project aimed to produce useful knowledge about how teachers are resisting, surviving and engaging discursively during a period of radical institutional change and deteriorating industrial conditions. At the same time, it was an attempt to take up some of the methodological challenges posed to action researchers by postmodern and post-structural theory. Overall, this has meant thinking in more complex ways about the problem, the method, the texts produced and the outcomes. It has meant constantly interrogating my own purposes and investments, recognising 'the non-innocence of any practice of knowledge production ... doing it and troubling it simultaneously' (Lather 1997: 67).

I am hopeful that the small research adventure recounted here will be of assistance to other ('postmodern') action researchers who are working with groups of people in coming to terms with unwanted change and struggling over how they might influence the direction of change.

Notes

- 1 In this text I use the term 'participatory' to mean that all participants have an active role in planning and doing the research and shaping the outcomes. In this project, as in many others, there was a high (but certainly unequal) degree of participation among those directly involved.

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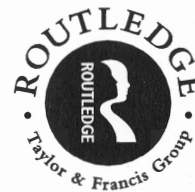
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Research and Knowledge at Work

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innovative strategies

**Edited by John Garrick
and Carl Rhodes**



London and New York

First published 2000 by Routledge
11 New Fetter Lane, London EC4P 4EE

Simultaneously published in the USA and Canada
by Routledge
29 West 35th Street, New York, NY 10001

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group

© 2000 John Garrick and Carl Rhodes for selection and editorial matter;
individual contributors their contribution

Typeset in Baskerville by Taylor & Francis Books Ltd
Printed and bound in Great Britain by
TJ International Ltd, Padstow, Cornwall

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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available
from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data
Research and knowledge at work/edited
by John Garrick and Carl Rhodes.
Includes bibliographical references and index.

1. Employees—Effect of technological innovations on. 2. Technological
innovations—Economic aspects. 3. Organizational learning. I. Garrick,
John. II. Rhodes, Carl.

HD6331.R44 2000
331.25—dc21 99-087147

ISBN 0-415-21337-1 (hbk)
ISBN 0-415-21338-x (pbk)

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