Developing Researcherly Dispositions in an Initial Teacher Education Context: successes and dilemmas

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Abstract

Douglas and Ellis (2011, p. 175) suggest that institutionally universities and schools are required to work with different conceptual tool-kits. Seeking to minimise the potential standoff between academic and practitioner knowledge, and, therefore, to enhance the learning of student teachers, means, they suggest, rethinking both the social relationships and the processes of abstracting knowledge from experience. Lingard and Renshaw (2010) advocate that all education practitioners, policy makers and teachers, should have a researcherly disposition, be interested in research and knowledge production and see themselves as participants in the field of educational research broadly defined.

Keywords: self-study action research, living theory, transformative learning, professional development.
My questions:

- What is the significance for me as a teacher educator as I struggle to encourage my students to develop the ‘researcherly dispositions’ required by self-study action research?
- I believe completely in the epistemological and ontological principles of self-study action research, but I wonder if I am leaving myself open to the charge of colonising others in my institution by allowing my values to influence modules in our college programmes and Continuous Professional Development for colleagues?
- Can the knowledge that is generated through a self-study action research approach (by our students or by any undergraduates) be considered valid knowledge by those who do not hold the values I hold?

Context

In St Patrick’s College Thurles we provide a four year concurrent degree preparing students for teaching in secondary schools. Our programmes are accredited by the University of Limerick and we aim to have our graduates qualified to gain direct entry as teachers of Irish, Religious Studies, Business Studies and Accounting at post-primary level.

The students are encouraged from the outset to engage in personal and professional development, which we hope will encourage them to become responsible and critically reflective practitioners. I believe I have played a significant role in how the Education Department has evolved. We are a relatively new (2004), very small college, and staff work collegially across the four departments to advocate student-centred teaching and learning. There is a college-wide culture of supporting both staff and students as they endeavour to develop critical and creative dispositions in their approaches to teaching and learning. Some staff members have themselves engaged in action research. Regular faculty meetings are
held, during which, in a spirit of self-study action research, we conduct ‘professional conversations’ (Clark, 2001) to review and modify our practice. I have been responsible for providing professional development for staff in constructivist learning approaches and in developing an understanding of self-study action research values. An open and accountable culture enables us to try to ensure that constructivist principles are promoted across all programmes. I like to think that my background in self-study action research has enabled me to have an educative influence in my institution. This same background, along with my position of seniority, also means that my values are rarely challenged by younger colleagues or by students. Could this be contributing to my unease about potential colonisation?

My educative influence

Because I feel that it would be hypocritical to lecture propositionally ‘about’ constructivism, I have tried to weave active learning opportunities throughout all my lectures and tutorials and I feel that others have been influenced by this also. External examiners have commented positively on the scope and variety of our continuous assessments - particularly the opportunities for critical thinking. One external examiner suggested that some of the action research samples she viewed ‘were worthy of MAs’ (comment by TC, Exam board meeting, May 2013).

To ‘enhance the learning’ of our student teachers, we are trying to rethink ‘both the social relationships and the processes of abstracting knowledge from experience’ (Douglas and Ellis op cit), and reflective practice is encouraged and developed throughout each of the four year programmes - culminating in the self-study action research project in Year 4.

- Year 1 students are encouraged, from the outset, to see themselves as ‘education researchers’ and to view any reflective assignments as a form – albeit basic - of education
research. I am course leader for two modules entitled ‘Foundations of Teaching and Learning 1’ and ‘Foundations of Teaching and Learning 2’ in which students are introduced to the principles underpinning learner-centred teaching and to pedagogical relationships underpinned by Buber’s (1965) ‘I-Thou’ theory. They are also introduced to Whitehead’s (1993) ‘Living Educational Theory’.

- Year 2, ‘Becoming critical’ (Carr & Kemmis, 1986): In a module called ‘Critical and Reflective Practice’ of which I am course leader, students begin to examine critically the complexity of the field of education and to recognise the ambiguities inherent in different perceptions of the purposes of education.

- In Year 3, students begin to undertake their two year engagement with self-study action research. They are asked to examine their educational values and to identify an area of concern - based on School Placement experiences – which might merit more careful scrutiny. This culminates in researching the literatures around their chosen area. Rather than being seen as a traditional ‘literature review’, their assignment is entitled "How do I deepen my understanding of ...?"

- In Year 4 students revisit their 'area of concern' and use their final School Placement setting as a site for examining their practice in a critical, reflective and reflexive manner through a self-study action research approach, grounded in Whitehead's (1993) 'living theory' principles.

**New form of knowing for undergraduates**

For students who struggle to see themselves as ‘knowers’ in third level, self-study action research could be perceived as being grounded in a radical and new approach to knowledge and knowing. The students’ previous experience of education has been largely that of
receiver of others' knowledge. Now they are being asked to see themselves as generators of educational theory as they theorise their own practice. Up to this point, apart from their reflective journal assignments, they have been required to use the third-person passive voice in written academic work. This switch of focus to ‘I and me and my practice’ (in an assignment worth 40% of a 10 credit module) can be destabilising for some students.

*As well as being exciting, this way of working is also risky. Action researchers constantly stand on the edge. The next moment is unknown. They commit to the risk of creating a new future. This is a different mental set from traditional assumptions that knowledge is given.*

(McNiff & Whitehead, 2006, p. 31)

**School Partnership**

In Year 1, students carry out classroom observation in senior Primary School settings. During the following three years, they engage in teaching practice in post primary settings. They carry out their self-study action research project during their final placement. School Partnership is a collaborative process: researching practice in such a setting involves many different kinds of documentation: lesson plans, schemes of work, reflections, and evaluations. These documents serve as data gathering opportunities. This then immediately involves others – pupils, tutors, peers, co-operating teachers and principals as collaborators and participants and in the role of critical friends. The ethics statement and permission request submitted to the school authorities in advance of the placement emphasises however, that this is not research ‘on’ the school or the pupils, but that the focus of the research is the student teacher’s own practice.

Some students struggle to understand that self-study action research is grounded in the idea that knowledge is a creative and dynamic process and that people have the capacity for
coming to know in ways that are appropriate for them. They struggle with two main sets of values: ontological and epistemological.

**Epistemological assumptions**

One of the greatest hurdles I have to overcome as I developed this module is the scepticism with which a few students greet self-study action research – particularly mature students, some of whom have already been accredited with MA degrees grounded in traditional epistemology. As I promote a self-study action research approach that I hope will contribute to ‘fluidising historical and cultural boundaries’ (Whitehead, 2013, p. 1) between what some students understand as research, and what self-study can offer them in terms of realising their educational values in their practice, I draw on the work of McNiff (2013), Reason and Bradbury (2001) and on Reason and Torbert (2001) in explaining my rationale.

McNiff (2013) suggests that a 'global epistemological shift' (p 2) has been taking place in recent decades in relation to what counts as knowledge and its production e.g.

- Mode 1 (dominant conceptual, abstract forms)
- Mode 2 (practical) types of knowledge (Gibbons et al, 1994).

Citing the work of several educationalists in the historical development of these ideas, McNiff (2013) states that there have been various arguments presented for the reappraisal of what counts as legitimate scholarship and the recognition of the validity of Mode 2 forms of knowledge. Practice-based, practical knowledge is relevant to real lives and is a valid form of educational enquiry, according to McNiff (op cit). Reason and Bradbury (2001) suggest that the primary purpose of action research is to produce practical knowledge ‘that is useful to people in the everyday conduct of their lives’. Action research, they state, is about
working towards practical outcomes, and also about creating new forms of understanding, ‘since action without understanding is blind, just as theory without action is meaningless’  
(p.2).

Reason and Torbert (2001) again argue the importance of practical knowing and present four rationales. It is worth quoting this argument at length:

**First**, whereas the primary purpose of research in the academic tradition is to contribute to an abstract “body of knowledge” available to third-persons, the primary purpose of research/practice after the action turn is a practical knowing embodied in the moment-to-moment action of each research/practitioner, in the service of human flourishing and the flourishing of the eco-systems of which we are a part. **Second**, since human persons are fundamentally social creatures, human knowing after the action turn is essentially participative, growing from collaborative relations with each other as co-inquirers into our world; and in addition, since human persons and communities are a part of the larger cosmos, all knowing is grounded in participation in the wider ecology of living and non-living things. **Third**, all knowing is based in the sensing, feeling, thinking, attending experiential presence of persons in their world. Any form of inquiry that fails to honour experiential presence—through premature abstraction, conceptualization and measurement, or through a political bias which values the experience only of socially dominant or religiously like-minded groups—ignores the fundamental grounding of all knowing. And **fourth**, all movements of the attention, all knowing, all acting, and all gathering of evidence is based on at least implicit fragments of normative theory of what act is timely now. (Reason and Torbert, 2001, pp. 9 – 10, my emphases)
Such epistemological perspectives suggest that self-study action research is grounded in ways of thinking and knowing that are dialectical and inclusive, and view any knowledge generated as partial and provisional - a process of coming to know, rather than a reified, finished product. Propositional logic attempts to eliminate contradiction from human enquiry, as Reason and Torbert argue (op cit). These values underpin the constructivist learning theories which students appear to embrace readily. Their resistance is all the more baffling then, when some are reluctant to view self-study action research as ‘valid’ research. One wonders if, in fact, it is because of the ‘potential standoff’ (Douglas & Ellis, 2011, p. 175) to which I referred earlier. Douglas and Ellis suggest that, institutionally, universities and schools are required to work with ‘different conceptual tool-kits’ (op cit). Students who have long been exposed to valuing abstract knowledge, or ‘assessable/measureable’ knowledge, over practical ‘knowing’, find this transition from one epistemological ‘tool-kit’ to another particularly difficult. And, being students, they are positioned in a power differential in relation to staff who evaluate, judge and mark. Do they, in fact, have any choice about epistemology when presented with the assignment outline?

A student teacher on placement is caught, I believe, in a sort of no-man’s land of competing pedagogical relationships. This has relevance for the ontological stances underpinning both the relationship I have with my students and they with me (and with other college staff), and the pedagogical relationship they face with their pupils and with school personnel and supervisors.
Ontological perspectives

Ontology is described in McNiff (2013, p. 27) as "the way we view ourselves, a theory of being", and influences how we see ourselves and others. The ontological assumptions of school placement then are to do with several different scenarios:

- How do student teachers position themselves as knowers when they are reliant on the evaluations of college staff - people like me - while they are in ‘student mode’ on campus?
- How do they position themselves as knowers when they are on placement as teachers in classrooms?
- How do these competing perspectives influence how they position themselves as researchers?

Some of our undergraduates found these competing identities difficult concepts with which to grapple. They had been exposed since their first year Foundations modules to Buber’s (1947/1965) ‘I-Thou’ theory, which underpins the ontological implications of saying, for example, “We do not talk about ‘studying the children in Class 2B’. We talk instead about ‘studying our teaching of the children in 2B’ - in collaboration with them”. Where epistemological and ontological areas entwine with methodological issues, we risk confusion. Although self-study appeared to have made sense in theory, in practice several students still felt they were researching pupils or ‘an issue’. I can relate to this: I was several years into my own study before that particular epistemological penny dropped.

Methodology

Whitehead’s action reflection cycles (Whitehead, 1989) formed the questions, ideas and actions with which the students were encouraged to engage. Questions of the type; ‘What
am I doing?’ and ‘Why am I doing it?’ gave a living form to the students’ educational enquiries. They began by asking: “How do I improve what I am doing? How do I live my values more fully in my practice?” (Whitehead, 1993). Most students genuinely tried to engage with these reflective and reflexive questions and most succeeded. Yet there were times when I wondered what I should do when a student is reluctant or unable to adopt these epistemological and ontological perspectives? How do I live my values of encouraging people to learn in ways that are appropriate for them? Am I actually ‘exerting a colonising influence’ (Whitehead, 2013, p. 2) on my students when I set out the criteria by which their work will be judged?

*In seeking to avoid a colonizing influence I hold in mind Buber’s notion of the special humility of the educator. “… his selection remains suspended, under constant correction by the special humility of the educator for whom the life and particular being of all his pupils is the decisive factor to which his ‘hierarchical’ recognition is subordinated.* (Buber, 1947, p. 122, cited in Whitehead. 2013, p. 2).

**Successes - some examples of students’ research:**

Lest it be perceived that our Year 3 and Year 4 experience with self-study action research was problematic, let me assert that no student failed the assignment. Of the 51 students who did the self-study action research, 10 received a mark of 70 or higher, and only 5 received a mark of 45 or lower. Most students were in the 60 to 69 bracket. Of the low scoring group, 4 were students who generally do not work hard in any modules. One student did not appear to engage at all with the principles underpinning self-study action research.
I will now briefly provide three examples of the kinds of concerns about their practice that students identified as areas for research. I choose to highlight the work of these three students because they have already made their accounts public.

**Three examples of students’ areas of concern**

PH described and explained how, acting on a concern about his use of ICT, led to an understanding that he was reifying ICT as a product that allowed him to demonstrate expertise rather than a useful strategy for enhancing pupil learning. He explained how the action research process has led him to become a reflective enquirer in a more authentic way than usual college ‘reflective assignments’ did.

When JC set out in year 3 to research an area of concern, he chose to examine ‘retention rates in the post primary sector’. He had been profoundly disturbed when, on his third placement in a very disadvantaged school, he realised that only fifty percent of the students he had taught in Junior Cycle returned to school for the Senior Cycle. While researching an ‘issue’ such as “retention in the post primary sector” might result in improved propositional knowledge 'about' reasons why some students drop out of schooling, J’s self-study focus showed him that change must begin in himself. Asking himself the question "How can I teach in a way that will not exclude or marginalise any child?”, he saw that he needed to challenge issues of equality and equity so as to engage in authentic inclusive practice.

RM values creativity and began enquiring as to why she found it easier to use creative approaches in one subject area and not in another. Like PH, RM described and explained how her enquiry led to an understanding that reflective practice is not grounded in merely
acquiring a skill-set, but instead has become a reflexive way of being and a desire to continue researching.

**Transformative learning**

Each of these students along with their peers generated a theory of practice that is valid for *them*. They created ‘valid explanations for the educational influences in their own learning, in the learning of others and in the learning of the social formations in which they live and work’ and they were and are ‘willing to hold themselves to account for living their values of humanity as fully as possible in enquiries of the kind, ‘How do I improve what I am doing?’’ (Whitehead 1993). This was learning they initiated, it was not learning that was forced onto them. They each, along with their peers, chose *their* personal area of concern, based on *their* own experiences in previous school placement settings, and grounded in *their* unique educational values. They individually chose creative and original ways of collaborating with colleagues, pupils and critical friends; creative and original ways of gathering data; and unique ways of generating evidence using their unique values as standards of judgement (Whitehead and McNiff, 2006, p. 7). I believe that their learning was transformative in nature: these three students - and many of their peers - have written and spoken about how they ‘now think differently’, and about how they feel that ‘they cannot go back to not-knowing’.

For example, JC said “It would have been much easier just to do research on ‘Retention in the Post-Primary sector’. A bit of reading and writing and thinking would be all that was needed and then I could go on with my life. This action research showed me that I can’t just study something ‘out there’. After doing even this small bit of self-study research, I see now that
the buck stops here – with me. I’m ‘it’: I have to take responsibility for being the best teacher I can be, for being the most inclusive and just teacher I can be. It’s not good enough anymore to go into the staff room and say ‘I can’t teach them: they don’t even speak English’. I have to do something about it.” (excerpt from conversation with JC, 14th June 2013).

RM spoke about how she was taken aback when her interviews with pupils showed her that they didn’t want all of their teachers to ‘use creative methods’ – “To be honest, I was gobsmacked. I was so sure they’d love all the arty stuff – because I would have, when I was in school - but instead I learned that they needed some lessons to be plain ‘delivery’ as exams approached” (excerpt from conversation with RM and PH 2nd June 2013). She realised that by forcing creativity ‘upon them’ simply because she loved using art, music and drama, was in its own way colonising.

PH came to realise that he was allowing his prowess in ICT to feed his vanity about being ‘a really cool teacher’ rather than to assist his pupils to learn better. “So many older supervisors and co-operating teachers had praised my ICT methods, that I began using ICT to garner more praise and feed my ego, rather than stopping and asking if it benefitted my pupil’s learning” (excerpt from conversation with RM and PH 2 June 2013).

Each of these three students documented and disseminated their understanding of transformation they had brought about in their own learning. Along with their peers, each of them has come to the understanding that reflection must be authentic and personal rather than a prescribed exercise. In a conversation about ‘reflection and the written reflective assignments included in school placement requirements’, JC said: “Ah sure look,
we all did it: we wouldn’t have a clue what to write and we had to write something so what I did was I’d go back over my Prep for TP notes and find something like ‘Positive Discipline’ and then I’d weave something together using Dreikurs or Canter & Canter or something. I’d fill my required number of words and print it out and bang it into the SP folder. No way was it real reflection. It was just an essay. After doing the action research, I know better now.” (conversation with JC at IRMSS 16th June 2013)

I believe that this kind of pro-active, creative learning cannot result from colonisation. The ‘prescribed’ aspect – the fact that they were obliged to carry out research for their Continuous Assessment of their Professional and Personal Development Module became an opportunity for them to generate knowledge for themselves. Because I was seeking to develop ways of enabling the assignment to be grounded in constructivist epistemological and ontological principles, and the educational values of Whitehead’s (1989) living educational theory, and because I firmly believe that all education should aim to be transformative in nature, I sought when designing this assessment to make it as broad in scope as possible so as to allow for personal originality and creativity. I could not force transformation on any student. Those who were open to and committed to the process found out for themselves that transformation ‘happened’.

Significance

I believe I have answered for myself the first two questions I posed at the beginning of this paper. The third question - Can the knowledge that is generated through a self-study action research approach (by our students or by any undergraduates) be considered valid
knowledge by those who do not hold the values I hold? - can perhaps be answered to some extent now.

JC, RM and PH made their work open and accountable when they presented their accounts of living their ‘personal theories of practice’ at the International Research Methods Summer School (IRMSS, June 2013) in MIC Limerick.

Comments after their presentations included:

This has been the most engaging and uplifting presentation I have ever attended at a conference. I am so glad I came along this morning. Your idealism, enthusiasm and honesty remind us all of why we became teachers.

I only wish the Minister for Education could have witnessed this presentation.

These three young students demonstrate that they are reflective and reflexive practitioners who have engaged with the ideas, tried to improve as teachers and have generated a personal theory of teaching and learning.

These were comments made by people who largely shared the values I hold. However, during the lunch afterwards, a Science teacher, (currently a doctoral student) who admitted ‘being a physicist and not too keen on interpretative research’, said:

I’m more of a stats man myself but I was impressed by the honesty of your presenters. They gave very credible accounts of how their eyes were opened to the complexities of what happens in classrooms – some of which I suppose is not quantifiable.

In light of this paper, I wish now that I had engaged him more in conversation. However, it would appear that he considers the knowledge generated by the three students to be ‘valid’.
Successes and dilemmas

The kind of transformation described in the research accounts of my students can only happen when people are ready for it. Not everyone will be at this stage of readiness. As JC stated, people can rattle off standard essays on ‘reflection’. They cannot be pressured to be reflective, to write in a way that entails recognising authentic change in themselves: this is something they need to choose to do for themselves.

So whilst I feel validated in encouraging my students to adopt a self-study action research approach because of the quality of authentic learning that was demonstrated by the three students above, and also by nearly all of the other students’ research accounts, I now realise that the student who resisted the approach, who was reluctant to write in the first person, and who engaged in a form of traditional social science research, was possibly not ready to engage with the very risky act of self-study, where, as suggested by McNiff and Whitehead requires ‘a different mental set from traditional assumptions that knowledge is given’ (2006, p. 31), and ‘where the next moment is unknown’. The invitation was issued: he chose, for whatever reason, not to accept it.
References


Whitehead, J. (2013). Research and Practice: A keynote presentation to the Sixth International Conference on Teacher Education with the theme “Changing Reality Through Education”, at the MOFET Institute in Tel Aviv. 4th July 2013.