

**REFLECTIONS ON THE REFLECTIVE PRACTITIONER:
INVESTIGATING OUR OWN PRACTICES**

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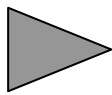
Introduction

Many of us have experienced initial teacher training, a period in which we are required, in a structured way, to explore methods and approaches to teaching in our subject area. Although this is certainly a tough time (I can remember teaching only a couple of hours a day during teaching practice during my initial teacher training, then coming home and sleeping for twelve hours as I was so exhausted by the sheer nervous effort involved), we learn an enormous amount from it. However, this in itself is not sufficient for our professional development. It is only when we enter the profession as a certified teacher or academic that we really begin to develop professional practices based in the reality of the situation, and we undergo (some might say endure) a period of hopefully, continuing professional development. Lave and Wenger (1991) refer to the early period of professional activity within a particular community of practice as 'legitimate peripheral participation'. That is, we enter into this community of practice at its borders and learn from others, and from our own experience, and this is a necessary and unavoidable process if we are to become part of the profession. It can be argued however, that this process never ends, even when we are no longer in a sense 'peripheral', and we have emerged from our apprenticeship, we are in a continuing process of 'becoming', and we never stop learning. This may sound a slightly disturbing concept, in that we may never reach wholeness, but I would suggest that it is rather an exciting process of

continuous change and development, and even though we are teachers, we are also permanently learners, gaining new experiences, experimenting with new techniques and approaches, encountering different students.

This paper is concerned with ways that we, as teachers, can develop our own practice through a continual process of reflection and investigation as part of our day to day teaching activity. It suggests that professional development, especially that aspect in which we are investigating our own teaching and learning, wrestles with the same, or very similar epistemological and ontological issues as research in this area.

I will begin with a discussion of the theoretical, methodological issues related to classroom research, and I will then go on to examine the process of reflective practice. On the basis of this, I suggest a possible framework for our personal professional development through examining our own practices.¹



***Meta/Theoretical Issues: how do we know what we know?
What is it that we know?***

Whether we are researchers or practitioners interested in exploring our own experience and practices, there are epistemological and ontological issues surrounding the ways in which we attempt to interpret ourselves and what is around us. According to Blaikie (1993), epistemology refers to 'the claims or assumptions made about the ways in which it is possible to gain knowledge of...reality, whatever it is understood to be; claims about how what exists may be known. An epistemology is a theory of knowledge; it presents a view and a justification for what can be regarded as knowledge.' (1993:7). Easterby-Smith interprets epistemology as 'a general set of assumptions about the best ways of enquiring into the nature of the world,'(2002: 31). Douglas and Zahr (cited in Eliasmith, 2002) suggest that ways of enquiry will differ according to whence these assumptions emerge: 'Epistemology is the study of knowing (how we know what we know); structure of discourses that surround thinking. The concept of

¹ I am deeply indebted to my colleagues Ali Cooper and Susan Armitage in CELT at Lancaster University for many of the ideas in here relating to professional development activities.



epistemology refers to the idea that different disciplines, or different cultures, approach knowledge in entirely different ways.'

The implication of all this is that we come to know the world not solely by discovering the existence of an objective reality which is out there waiting for us to discover it, but through our own consciousness, our own beliefs, our own ideology, and the discourses which are constructed around these. This is influenced by who we are, where we come from, what kind of activity we are involved in, and so on.

It is not to suggest that we can never actually know anything, but it is to suggest that the process is not straightforward, and that who we are in terms of our social and psychological make up will affect the way we come to know the world. In the case of education, for example, this may involve how we view the purpose of education, the process of learning, the social psychological effects of educational systems, the manifestation of these ideas within a classroom setting, and so on.

In the more specific area of teaching and learning English, this would also involve not only differing views of the purpose of education as it is affected by the social, cultural and ethical environment, but also the nature of language learning and teaching. Indeed, it has long been argued by writers such as Pennycook (1994) and Philipson (1992) for example, that English Language Teaching (ELT) in many parts of world, 'the periphery', has been dominated by an ideology originating in the Western English speaking world, in what they refer to as 'the centre'. In particular, this ideology of language teaching originates in its universities, from academics rather than practitioners. This, inevitably, it is argued, affects the view of effective teaching and learning of English, to the possible detriment of other views.

In the light of this, one might ask, is it possible to 'know' a situation, or is it only possible to obtain a general view of what the various actors 'know'?

In the case of classroom behaviours and the agendas, beliefs and priorities of actors in educational settings, students, teachers, administrators for example, it can be extremely difficult to pinpoint exactly what is 'out there', and why it is the way it is. It is one thing to furnish descriptions of activities and objects, and this can be problematical in itself, but when we get to explanations and reasons for behaviours and beliefs, where are these located? What meanings do people find in their situations? Can these be accurately observed and recorded? Are not these meanings partial interpretations of reality, or the reality itself? Can we grasp an objective

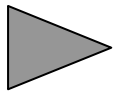


reality outside of individual or collective perceptions, or would it be more useful to try and approach these experiences and phenomena from different angles? And if so, how can we do this?

The danger with such epistemological and ontological questions of course is that they can all too easily be a trap which prevents us from making any claim about knowing reality, and this would be counterproductive. This does not have to be the case, however, and rather than conceiving of these as questions which have to be answered before any action can take place, the opposite can be so; reflection and investigation which may or may not have a solid meta-theoretical, epistemological grounding can still be valuable in its contribution to these questions. As Hammersley points out:

‘Certainly I do not believe that philosophy is foundational, in the sense that the problems in that realm can or should be solved before we engage in social research. Indeed in my view, empirical research accompanied by reflection on its practices and products, has much to contribute to philosophy.’ (1992: 43)

An awareness of these epistemological and ontological issues, however, and the realization that a clear apprehension of reality is an issue to be problematised, can contribute to a richness of data and a more vivid picture of a situation than assuming it can be seen from a single, solid position of conviction and truth, or solely from our own point of view. It may well be the case that a phenomenon needs to be seen from a variety of perspectives in order to understand it more clearly.



Social science research traditions

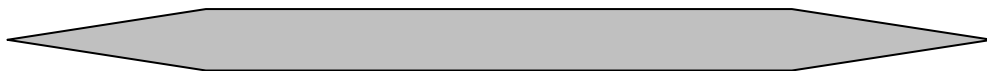
Research traditions have developed with their own methodologies and methods in response to these questions. There are two broad traditions of research which attempt to grapple with the issues of knowledge and reality. The Positivist approach is usually more closely related to the natural sciences than the social sciences. Its advocates, including Auguste Comte (1853), John Stewart Mill, and in more recent times Karl Popper (1959), hold that there is an objective reality, a truth which exists outside ourselves and that the purpose of investigation and



research is to apprehend that truth. This can be achieved, as in the natural sciences (of which, Popper, 1959 would argue, the study of man is a part) through empirical investigation. This involves the gathering of verifiable data as supporting evidence for an initial hypothesis developed after prior consideration of a phenomenon. That hypothesis is then tested and investigated, using objective, often quantitative methods. The quantifiable data collected may support the hypothesis wholly or partially, or it may not. The results of this investigation then form the basis for the development of further hypotheses which will in turn be investigated. This is often referred to as the 'hypothetico-deductive' approach. (Cohen and Manion 1985)

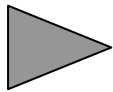
Within the social sciences, this approach has been felt by many to be inadequate or inappropriate for investigating human behaviour, motivations and interpretations of reality. Investigating the cultural beliefs of a community for example, may not be so easily observed or quantified in the way that rainfall or temperature can be measured. An alternative tradition emerged which grew to see reality as a social construct involving interpretations of language, community, individual consciousness and so on. The tradition of Phenomenology, as developed by figures such as Husserl, (1913) emerged from this. Essentially, the phenomenological approach to research within the social arena focuses more on the human interpretations of reality and meanings derived from experience, to which we are all subject. This also implies that the researcher is subject to these variables, and is not necessarily in a privileged position of being able to ascertain an objective 'truth'. Methods relating to this approach may well involve the collection of quantitative data, but this type of data is often seen as insufficient for explanations of human behaviour, and so more qualitative methods or data are also used. A further implication is that the hypothetico-deductive approach as a way of deriving theory is not the only way to approach issues through research, and that theory may emerge from the act of collecting data itself. So research may be data-driven as well as hypothesis-driven.

Phenomenology has engendered numerous methodological approaches to data collection such as Ethnography, Action Research and Grounded Theory. Many of these approaches accept that the researcher may not be above the researched with a privileged perspective, and so objectivity in the Positivist epistemological sense of coming to know an object completely outside ourselves is not a realistic proposition. It may be the case that in order to know, the researcher becomes part



of the context she/he is investigating, in order to gain insight, rather than attempting to remain within but apart from the context.

To summarise, the positivistic view of the broad epistemological and ontological issues is that there is an objective reality, and that we can come to know this reality through rigorous empirical investigation. A broad phenomenological view would be that reality is constructed socially between individuals, among communities and in cultures, and that coming to know it is inevitably problematical and subject to interpretation. This may then result in multiple interpretations from individuals or groups who are influenced by a different set of social, cultural and even professional conditions. This potential multiplicity of viewpoints is often referred to in the social sciences as the 'Rashomon Effect', which is explored below.



The Rashomon Effect

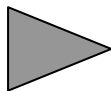
The 'Rashomon Effect' (Mazur, 1998, Davenport and Litras, 2000 Fanselow, 1987) is an idea named after a puzzle film by the Japanese director Kurosawa, in which a murder and a rape incident are retold by the various characters involved, each one of them telling their story and giving radically different interpretations of what actually happened. Eventually it proves impossible to discover a unitary 'truth', and all we are left with as reality are the conflicting interpretations, implying that in such instances a single truth is constantly deferred or possibly inaccessible. Indeed, one of the characters is literally left holding the baby, as though the wordless innocent child is the only one sufficiently untainted by agendas to be able to tell us the truth, but has not the words to do so. Davenport and Litras (2000), writing in the area of Politics and International Relations describe Rashomon thus:

The information that we rely upon to identify and understand political events often is compiled from a variety of sources. At the same time, however, the content of each individual source is likely to be influenced by the source's values, focus, or underlying agenda. As a result, it is common to find conflicting interpretations of the same events across sources when chronologies are compiled for empirical analysis. This phenomenon has been popularised in social science literature as "the Rashomon effect" (e.g., Scott 1985, Mazur 1998:3).



Within ELT, Fanselow (1987) refers to the 'Rashomon effect' in the classroom to denote the different meanings teachers and learners take from the experience. Given the existence of multiple perspectives, the question of whether or not there is an objective reality 'out there' is perhaps secondary to discovering the way different people see and interpret their experience.

It seems therefore, that an investigation of human activity, in which there can be expected to be multiple perspectives will need to take the Rashomon Effect into account in its approach and in its methodology. This implies a variety of methods rather than a single one, a record of various accounts and perspectives rather than one point of view, and a variety of sources of information. If this diversity of perceptions exists, which seems likely, what approach can one take to try to ensure at least some kind of accurate picture? One possible approach is that of triangulation, which is discussed below.



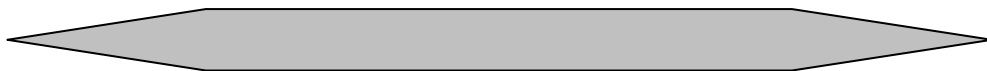
Triangulation

The issue of multiple perceptions of a situation or event is a common thread running through this discussion. Throughout the social sciences it is recognised that there will inevitably be varying perceptions when considering human activity, very often centred round the fact that individuals are sometimes involved as both researchers and subjects, and that it is essential that this is recognised and recorded in some way. One way of dealing with this is to use triangulation. According to Cohen and Manion:

Triangulation may be defined as the use of two or more methods of data collection in the study of some aspect of human behaviour (1985:208).

The focus for Cohen and Manion is on variety in the method of data collection, but there is another way to see this. Walkerdine et al (2002) refer to Denzin's description of triangulation, which is concerned more with the source of the data:

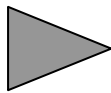
'Triangulation' is a method developed within mainstream qualitative sociological research for dealing with problems of validity (Denzin 1978) and refers to the



injunction to check pieces of information against at least one other independent source before regarding them as credible. (2002:189)

I take this to mean, then, that triangulation occurs through the identification of different data sources, at least more than a single source, for the same or a similar phenomenon. Given the multiple sources of data within any educational context, rather than attempting to form prior specific hypotheses, it seems wiser to allow knowledge of a situation to emerge from the data collected.

The discussion thus far has centred around central problems of constructing our knowledge of the world where there exist different perspectives. As Hammersley suggests, we need to keep these issues in mind, but they should not deter us from investigating and reflecting on our experiences and our environment. The questions also relate explicitly to ways of approaching research. However, do they have any relevance to practitioners, teachers who go into class each day and have to deal with the reality of the classroom? I suggest that they do, both in terms of researching one's own practice, and of one's own function as a reflective practitioner.



Reflective Practice: investigating our own practices

Researching one's own practice in order to inform oneself and the community of practice in which we operate is a well-established tradition, although people have used this research for a variety of reasons. It could, for example, be used mainly to reflect on and evaluate what we do in our own classrooms so as to improve and adapt what we do from day to day. While this type of 'Action research' is valuable for our own practice, it may also illustrate an issue which is of wider interest to our colleagues, and could be the basis for a more in-depth approach to the issue. Subsequently, one may wish to expand this investigation not only for one's own classroom but for other similar types of class and for other learners and teachers. Alternatively, we don't need to position ourselves as researchers; it can simply be a question of maintaining an interest in, and an ongoing concern for our own teaching, and finding ways that we can improve our own and our students' experience in the classroom. In other words, functioning, as Schön puts it (1983), as reflective practitioners, ones who think what they are doing, while they are doing it.



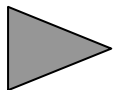
This kind of reflective approach can involve thinking about and investigating what we do from a variety of angles. Brookfield (1995) refers to four different ‘lenses’ which can be used to reflect on what we do in our professional daily practices. For example, we can use our own feelings and reflections about what we do, and this might involve using learning and teaching logs, critical incident analysis and reviews of lesson planning, so that we record whatever we feel is significant from day to day. Without an explicit effort to record the way we feel, our reactions to student behaviour, our interpretation of events, without the process of putting these things into words, we can easily lose an important way to think about what we do. As Aristotle said, ‘An unexamined life is not worth living’.

Personal reflection recorded in a variety of ways, or ‘reflection on action’, as Schön (1983) calls it, is very useful, but bearing in mind the previous discussion concerning perception and triangulation, it is not likely to be sufficient as an approach on its own, and may need to be triangulated with other sources. Colleagues are another valuable source; informal discussions with perhaps more experienced colleagues who have worked with similar groups of students, or with similar materials can help to put one’s own feelings in perspective. Equally so, a great deal of value can be gained from talking to colleagues who have not been in the profession for a long time but are engaged in experimenting with different techniques, methods and approaches to their teaching. This kind of informal activity is important because it is not always possible to understand what we are experiencing simply by thinking about it ourselves, as we are not necessarily aware of other interpretations of those experiences. It is quite possible, for example, for us to misinterpret verbal and non-verbal signals. Silence in a classroom can be an unnerving phenomenon, and we may interpret this in a negative way, but there may be good reasons for this silence; for example, learners may be processing information, they may be thinking about what one has said, and need a moment of quiet to think things through. If this is the case, then the students would be very active cognitively, but would not necessarily appear so to the teacher. It helps to discuss these issues with colleagues, in order to think of other critical perspectives, and so broaden the possible interpretive possibilities. Peer observation is another source of support between colleagues. This does require a great deal of mutual trust, and the reasons for peer observation need to be made as clear as possible to all involved, but the process of observing can inform our teaching as much as being observed and receiving feedback.



Another important source, of course, is our students. Both formal and informal feedback is invaluable, and it has a twofold function of giving us an idea of how they are progressing, how they are feeling, and at the same time giving them a voice in the process, opportunities to express themselves about their own experience of the teaching and learning activities in which they have been involved. Developing a feedback strategy over a period of time, rather than relying on end of course questionnaires helps us discover the effectiveness or otherwise of teaching and learning activities, and of a programme of study over an extended period of time.

An additional source is the literature available in the area. This gives us ideas for our work, techniques and approaches we can adopt and adapt for our own use, a chance to explore other ways to do things, and other reasons for doing things. For our part, it gives us a chance to test these ideas out in particular contexts, in the reality of our own situation to see if they work at all, or whether we can adapt them. And we can also derive ideas about how we can reflect on what we do.



Conclusion

So, what I want to say here, is that in very real ways there is a direct link between the epistemological questions raised at the beginning of this paper, approaches to research in an educational environment, and the day to day development of teachers in their own classrooms. Whether we are researchers carrying out a major project across a number of schools with tens of teachers and thousands of students involved, or whether we simply want to improve our own teaching day by day, we still need to take into account the basic issue of how we come to know our world, and what ways we can use in order to make sense of it, and learn from it; the classroom is a rich and multi-faceted experience, and if we approach it from one angle we lose the ability to see it in all its glory and complexity.



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