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Autonomy And Autogenesis: Practitioner Research And The Self-Made Literacy Tutor

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Abstract: Examines the conduct of a practitioner-led action research program in Scottish literacy, and challenges the extent to which PLAR can be adopted as a professional development strategy. Expresses caution about the potential for PLAR to reinforce individualized and managerial approaches to the field as promoted by new public management.

Practitioner-led research holds fascinating possibilities for adult literacy education as well as for education more generally. It promises a way to generate local knowledge on the pressing issues of practice, with insights tailored to the interests of those working most directly in teaching. More than this, it seems to offer an opportunity for professional development where the control lies in the hands of practitioners. In this discussion we highlight the benefits of practitioner-led action research (PLAR) and challenge the broader significance of those benefits. We wish to suggest that the apparent "win-win" outcome of PLAR is grounded in a certain set of assumptions about the desirable professional identity of literacies practitioners. This discussion is informed by a critique of the ideas of New Public Management currently holding sway in education.

Background To The PLAR Project

This paper examines a practitioner research project in Scotland funded by Learning Connections, the branch of the Scottish Government concerned with adult literacies and numeracies. The project set out to achieve two aims. First was supporting practitioners in conducting a research project around the individual learning planning (ILP) process. ILPs are central to the literacies field in Scotland, used for defining objectives, planning instruction, and assessing learners' achievements. Second was to record the process of practitioner research systematically and refine a model that would be viable in the Scottish context. It was hoped that lessons could be learned from the project about ways to improve practice and encourage practitioners to continue research beyond the project's limited timeframe, hopefully increasing research capacity in the Scottish literacies community.

The essence of practitioner research is a structured, systematic enquiry enabling those engaged in the work to identify, analyse and understand real practical problems in their immediate environment and work towards solving them. PLAR projects in adult literacies work have been conducted in several countries around the world in recent years. Perhaps the highest profile project is the five-year long "Practitioner Research and Development Network" developed by the National Center for the Study of Adult Learning and Literacy (NCSALL) (Smith, Bingman & Beall, 2006). The factors that NCSALL identified as supporting practitioner research were activities such as study circles that involved practitioners examining their own and other researchers' work, combined with paid staff release time and sustained opportunities to engage in these activities; a practitioner in the role of 'leader' to help them connect with research and researchers; and state support, including funding and a designated staff person (Smith et al., 2002, iii). One interesting offshoot of the NCSALL work was an initiative to promote practitioner research as staff development, and a systematic curriculum to support such projects was

developed (Virginia Adult Learning Resource Center, 2003). Though this guide is both clear and useful, it says little about the context or supports necessary to make PLAR sustainable in practice. In Canada, a significant report on practitioner research was published about seven years ago (Quigley & Norton, 2002). Much Canadian literature supports the integrated approach put forward by NCSALL, but emphasises the needs of practitioners more clearly. A framework written for the National Literacy Secretariat points out the importance of:

> Working conditions that encourage practitioners to engage in reflection and research include such aspects as long-term adequate funding, fulltime jobs, adequately staffed programs, long-term and permanent contracts . . . (Horsman & Norton, 1999, pp. 4-5)

Overall, the extensive and relatively well-funded North American experience strongly suggests that infrastructure is important for the success of practitioner research. An extension of this argument is that isolated and occasional efforts to establish PLAR within a practitioner community are unlikely to be successful. For PLAR to be an effective strategy, it seems that practitioners have to be engaged over a substantial time within a framework that creates real opportunity for them to participate and to make a difference to the field.

In the UK, practitioner research appears to have been slower to take off. Nonetheless, the National Research and Development Centre in England completed a substantial project lasting three years. The Practitioner-Led Research Initiative funded 17 projects each lasting nine months and each involving from three to six people with £10,000 allocated per project (NRDC, 2008). Hamilton (2006) made the following observation:

> First, we must spread the word about the difference a relatively small amount of research funding can make to individual practitioners and their organisations, as a spark to further work . . . Participants have told us that practitioner research offers validation of their status and knowledgebase, visibility, levers for funding locally, and ideas to feed into training and management (p. 16).

In Scotland, two important precursors to the current research were the 2003 pilot project, "New Practice, Good Practice: the role of reflection in adult literacies tutor training" and the more substantial PLAR project from 2006 "New Ways to Engage New Learners." The latter project produced valuable insights into the process of conducting practitioner research, and the development of the current project was strongly influenced by its recommendations. The authors suggested that consideration should be given to alternative models of supporting practitioner research, and that mechanisms should be clearly established for securing research time in work for all participating practitioners (Maclachlan et al. 2006). Once again the importance of structural considerations in the promotion of practitioner research is emphasised.

The overall message of the literature appears to be that practitioner research should be approached with caution. Doing it well requires paying attention to a number of difficult structural issues, not least employment conditions. While experience elsewhere provides key principles for developing PLAR, it is clear that the context matters a great deal. It was with these cautions in mind that we developed plans for the PLAR projects on Individual Learning Plans.

Methodology For The Participatory Research Project

The methodology chosen for the most recent Scottish PLAR initiative resembled professional development activities more than traditional research in a number of ways. It was a very tightly scheduled process explicitly located within organisations rather than working with individual participants. Instead of asking busy practitioners to learn and adopt traditional research approaches, we specifically designed the process to fit the context and priorities of participants. The team's approach was to demystify the research process for participants, making it into a tool

for future professional and pedagogical development. Participants were expected to commit to attend one half day workshop per week for ten weeks, plus spend limited time in preparation and writing. This relatively intense schedule was intended to address the issues regarding time commitment and perseverance by moving the project work out of practitioners' daily working lives into a "protected zone" of workshops.

What Did We Learn About Practitioner Research?

The practitioners were all employed within literacies education, though their roles varied from part-time tutors with a portfolio of employment to those in managerial positions. The majority were local authority employees, though three worked for voluntary organisations. The majority described themselves as having no research experience at all. Some had written a dissertation during an undergraduate degree, but generally they were new to formalised research. Participants' reasons for joining the project were quite consistent. They were both interested in and enjoyed research itself, but were also attracted by the possibility of improving practice around ILPs within their organisation. One participant, interestingly, said that being involved might help to strengthen the relationship between a participating voluntary organisation and local authority community education. These answers suggest that participants entered the project with a positive orientation to research and the contributions it can make to practice.

There was considerable variety in the outcomes participants hoped for. They ranged from personal curiosity to a wider ranging hope for "new ideas for learning plans that will be embraced by learners and tutors." If there was a common thread, it was the emphasis on practical outcomes. A second survey and interview, both conducted on completion of the research, provided an opportunity for the practitioners to reflect upon their experiences and contrast them with their initial expectations. Most participants felt that they got out of the project what they expected:

> I think the project went well. We encountered problems along the way, and it was always going to be difficult to give it the time we wanted to, but I think we have come through it having developed and piloted something that will benefit learners and the service they receive. This was what we wanted from the project, and so that's good!

The connections and opportunities for reflection with colleagues were mentioned widely:

> It was a very positive experience because it improved the service we offered, gave an opportunity to work closely with a colleague, and to make connections with other people and the university.

Several were very positive about the potential of PLAR in professional development:

> It does contribute to professional development because the whole process of going through the different stages of research helps you to take a step back and look for evidence on which to base changes. It is a good learning experience.

Overall, these responses suggest there is reason for cautious optimism about the potential of PLAR, if designed correctly, to contribute to staff development.

External issues also affected participants' experiences of conducting the research. The most common was time, both in sheer amounts and availability. Almost everybody put in more time than they were allocated from their work, and some did the entire project in their own time. There were a number of issues that affected specific groups, such as working with a trusted colleague or being inspired by other research. There was some disagreement about an ideal timeframe. Some felt that ten weeks was too short, while others appreciated its intensity, and yet others suggested shorter and even more intense would be better.

Reflecting on the Project

There appears to be growing practitioner support for PLAR as a method of professional development within the adult literacies community in Scotland, but this is not unconditional. The practitioners identified a number of key factors that need to be addressed for PLAR to be viable. The first is time, which has to be protected from the demands of everyday work, be flexible, and able to be allocated by the cluster members because the same set period every week was not practicable for many of them. With other demands in the practitioners' lives changing constantly, it was important that PLAR could fit into the natural rhythms of the work without too much disruption. The second area is funds, for travel, materials and to "buy out" research time. Thirdly, support is crucial, and this takes several forms. Support from line managers is essential, and this has to go beyond "turning a blind eye" to the research activity. It matters that line managers positively support the projects, showing interest in them and a willingness to act on the findings.

New Public Management and PLAR

Here, we wish to step back a little from the study in Scotland, and consider the issue of PLAR as a strategy for staff development. As we worked our way through the project we started to become increasingly aware that PLAR is more than just an alternative to conventional means of professional development—the implementation of PLAR profoundly changes the structure of staff education. For example, if the majority of staff development time were to be dedicated to PLAR, it would reduce the consistency of training and preparation across the ALN workforce. It would also reduce the requirement on literacy partnerships to provide and pay for training. PLAR could be rolled out with the implicit message that professional development was now to be a self administered process. Literacy instructors would have the responsibility to create their own professional identity, and build the knowledge necessary to that identity on an individual level. PLAR can be more than a way to deepen the research capacity of the ALN field and start to build a corpus of well-educated workers. It can also be a way to individualise responsibility for that knowledge generation. The reduced need for partnership-wide training and the ability of partnerships to limit their commitment to the training function is consistent with recent developments throughout the public sector, and to understand why they are acceptable and what they mean, it is useful to review the nature of public sector management in Scotland.

Since the early 1990s, there has been a change in the philosophy of public management in many countries and in many sectors within those countries. The post-World War 2 consensus regarding the desirability of a strong and protective welfare state ended thirty years ago, and since then there has been a degree of thrashing around in the search for an approach to public management that could secure the pragmatic provision necessary for advanced economies without leading to spiralling costs and de-incentivisation of the workforce. By the late 1980s the idea of applying private sector management tools to public sector enterprises was taking shape, and by the early 1990s "New Public Management" (NPM) had emerged (Horton 2006).

The changes to management in the public sector have been profound, affecting culture as well as the procedures. There was a move away from rule-bound hierarchies and towards networks and partnerships of smaller, self-managing units, often situated within the private and voluntary sectors as well as the public sector (Horton 2006). So while traditional public sector bureaucracies have been interested in standardisation and equality of response in the form of services, NPM pushes state agencies towards an entrepreneurial, individualised approach.

The change to New Public Management has been somewhat piecemeal due to institutional and wider contextual factors, but in the last ten years has affected education quite markedly. Sachs

(2001) analyses the debate in terms of two competing identities: democratic and managerial professionalism. Democratic professionalism is described as seeking "to demystify professional work and build alliances between teachers and excluded constituencies of students, parts and members of the community on whose behalf decisions have traditionally been made either by professions or by the state" (p.152). Readers with an adult education background may find this description familiar. Managerial professionalism is far more consistent with NPM approaches. It is based on the notions that all institutions can benefit from adopting the concerns with efficiency found in the private sector, and that services can be managed to maximise this.

Particular moments in education have the potential to collapse into either managerial professionalism or democratic professionalism. Sachs (2001) uses the example of teacher research as one such moment that she sees as falling more into democratic professionalism, breaking down the isolation of educators and building their knowledge. We would suggest, however, that the identity of teacher researcher, whether in a school or other educational setting, has an equal potential to fall under the notion of managerial professional.

The conditions of NPM push towards a particular managerial notion of professionalism referred to as the entrepreneurial professional (Menter et al. 1997). A key influence here is captured in the notion of performativity, requiring practitioners to "set aside personal beliefs and commitments and live an existence of calculation" (Ball, 2003, p.215). Being good at what you do as an educator is no longer enough; you must be able to *demonstrate* that you are good.

The Autogenesis Of The Literacy Educator

It is not our intention to deny or minimise the potential benefits of PLAR as a knowledge generation strategy. It offers many benefits such as responsiveness to local conditions and a degree of immediacy. It challenges and disrupts universalising discourses in adult education—whatever they may be—and we see this as a good thing. However, in the light of the NPM and the spread of managerial professionalism, we suggest there is another, somewhat less positive, perspective that has to be recognized when considering PLAR as professional development.

This perspective begins from the realisation that PLAR, in placing the emphasis for research development and process in a new location, not only gives practitioners more control but also changes the nature of professional development in fundamental ways. This is evident when PLAR as professional development is compared to systematic and consistent provision of opportunities and workshops. PLAR is highly individualized and potentially quite eclectic, as would be expected from its local focus. Related to this, however, PLAR is also relatively untransferrable. It leads to no credentials and can often involve work that is directly related to specific pragmatic—and programmatic—outcomes. There is a danger that PLAR can become procedural and technicist if it not managed appropriately. It is easy to imagine scenarios where PLAR processes could contribute to the aims of the wider organization even where educators expressed some caution about the desirability of those aims—and in fact this was very nearly the case in one of the Scottish projects.

There is also the very salient issue of resources for the conduct of research. This issue arises again and again in the literature, and did once more in the Scottish projects. Even with a written commitment from line managers to make time and space available for the PLAR work, no responsibilities were actually removed from participants, and it generally ended up being an extra burden. The notion of standardizing PLAR in practice rewards the energetic and those with fewer demands outside their working life—a scenario which has already persisted too long in much of the education field.

Seen from this angle, PLAR is strikingly consistent with the NPM agenda. It individualizes, and can reward espoused effort rather than enacted skill. It doubles in on itself, tending to favour the ends of organizations rather than the strengthening of practitioners. It places a requirement on educators to create their own practices, pulling themselves up by the bootstraps to form an individuated identity of narrowly defined competence. It can be far from clear to what extent practitioners are being empowered and to what extent they are being abandoned.

Be Careful What You Wish For

Finally, our argument is about the use and application of PLAR, and the need to make a careful distinction between professional development and knowledge generation. The current tendency to assume that PLAR can serve both ends needs to be considered deeply. It may well be that the ends are incompatible, and that it serves educators and learners badly to assume that they can both be achieved by any one strategy.

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