

Collaborative insider research in VET

Anne Herbert
University of South Australia

ABSTRACT

This paper talks about my experience as a TAFE staff member who opted to do a PhD on VET practices using a collaborative methodology. It will describe why I chose this pathway, a PhD, and on a topic intimately connected to my workplace. The research is about action learning as a professional development strategy. The data gathering methods I chose included participating in ANTA funded action learning. While doing this research I was working part time in TAFE, the other participants seemed to embrace me like any other member of their action learning group. The participants all consented to being part of the PhD, though their identities were to be protected. In planning my methodology for this research, I espoused an ideal of collaboration for mutual benefit. However, some of my ideas about collaborative methods came into question through the research process. Here I will re-count what happened and suggest some explanations connected to the nature of work in VET and the place of academic research in VET culture.

Topic area: research methods

Key words: research methods, collaboration, action learning

As a TAFE staff member who opted to do a PhD on professional development in VET, I have found many challenges with regard to using collaborative methods for my research. This paper will explain why I chose a PhD pathway to research professional development in my workplace. It also describes my assumptions about collaborative research methods and my experience of trying to put them into practice for a PhD. This leads me to a discussion of the challenges in trying to be a collaborative researcher in the VET context.

Two key things propelled me into a PhD project. Firstly, I had spent years grappling with an understanding of the dynamics at play in my workplace, TAFE, and the wider VET sector. Second, I was keen to address the complexities and contradictions, look for new insights, draw on and extend my intellectual and creative capabilities as much as possible. My regular work in TAFE did not seem to be extending me or encouraging me in these directions. I expected a PhD would provide some structure for my thinking, and ultimately, a qualification as a reward for my efforts.

When action learning became popular for staff development in TAFE in the 1990s, I listened to the rhetoric and wondered what would happen. In brief, action learning promises to contribute to a better future wherever it is used, by facilitating collaboration between participants to find workable solutions to immediate problems. In theory, the action learning methodology emphasises reflection to develop fresh perspectives on existing knowledge and experience. This process makes the participants feel more powerful to influence their own situations, and committed to improving their situations (Revans 1983, Mumford 1996, Bunning 1991,1995, ANTA 1995, Framing the Future 1998). I was very interested in how, and upon what, action learning participants were reflecting, and whether funded action learning projects were making a difference to the participants' sense of self-direction and power in the workplace.

So it was, that I developed a research proposal around some of these questions about the practice and experience of action learning as a professional development strategy in VET. I have pursued the research by participating in three ANTA funded action learning projects for professional development. Each project was funded for four months and met four or five times over that period. There were about ten regular participants in each project. I have had numerous conversations with the project participants about their action learning and their work. I have monitored ANTA policy and literature regarding professional development practices in VET. Now I am in the final stages of writing up my PhD. To me, "collaborating" has meant serving the joint interests and purposes of the participants' professional development projects and my research. This is close to Levin's definition (Levin 1993, 331), but as Tom pointed out, "Collaborative research... is held together more by an enthusiasm for inclusion... than it is by a strong theoretical tradition" (Tom 1997, 243).

In writing the research proposal I decided on critical interpretive methodology because this provided a means to examine the dialectic between historical, cultural, structural and ideological issues and individual action; in this case, between the VET system and VET staff in action learning. I aspired to the revitalising power of this methodology to develop social insights, and to probe the possible transformation of current constraints (Angus 1986, Thomas 1993). This proposed methodology seemed consistent with action learning processes. I envisaged that using this critical interpretive methodology, I could simultaneously contribute to the action learning and the goals of the professional development projects, and in collaboration with others, critically reflect on my perceptions and experience of the constraints and opportunities.

I saw my research as a caring act, an act of commitment to the VET sector and to professional development for others and myself. As a PhD student, I was bound by university research regulations and guidelines, and as an employee of a government department, I was simultaneously bound by those departmental regulations and guidelines. The Departmental research approval process was based primarily on a concern for "Maximising collaboration and positive research outcomes" (<http://www.nexus.edu.au/Divisions/StrategicServices/planacct/researchcouncil/21ExtRschersGd.htm>) . This departmental priority was entirely consistent with my own personal and professional concerns.

Nonetheless, in practice, collaboration has been problematic. I agree with Cochran-Smith and Lytle (1993), that like all human behaviour, collaborative relationships are context bound. Shacklock explained that collaborative relationships in research depend on "respect, trust, equality, flexibility and reciprocity and the conditions which establish them" (Shacklock & Smyth 1997, 4). He emphasised that collaborative relationships cannot be static, always being shaped and re-shaped by negotiations and resistances. Power emphasised that in collaborative relationships we must acknowledge and reflect upon our own political, social, generational, professional, geographic and other diversity (Power 1998). There is limited value in commentary on collaborative educational research that masks these issues and problems. As Cochran-Smith & Lytle (1993) and Smyth & Shacklock (1997) advocate, I wish, through the descriptions and analysis in this paper, to contribute to a conversation about the particulars of how and why what works in collaborative research relationships, and for whom it works, within a particular contexts. This particularity was a VET context where I saw myself as an insider.

I did not want to objectify the participants in this research. I was and am deeply concerned about issues around using power *with* others rather than using power *over* them, and how I have used what power I had and still have in this research project. Like Shacklock & Smyth (1997), Noddings (1986 & 1988), and VanManen (1990 & 1991), I hoped that by engaging with me in this research project, participants would exchange new and different insights that would not have necessarily emerged otherwise. Like Day and other authors, I envisaged that my research could be "valued by, and of use to, those without whose collaboration and active participation it could not occur" (Day 1991, 538, also Sultana 1992, Gitlin 1992, Reimer 1993, Heron 1996). I aspired to what Lather described as an "interactive" approach to research "that invites reciprocal reflexivity and critique, which guard against... imposition and reification on the part of the researcher" (Lather 1991, 59).

When I conceived this research I worked full time in TAFE, and intended to continue working in TAFE, aspiring to work more in professional development. I had no interest in "hit and run" research (Day 1991), the term used to describe the processes where researchers enter a site, collect data on or from participants, take that data away, analyse and interpret it without further reference to the site or the participants, and then publish reports which the participants may never see, or may not identify with. Such processes are not in my interests if I want to maintain credibility and respect among my TAFE colleagues; that credibility and respect I need to keep working effectively in the VET sector.

I depended on the trust and respect of the participants to ensure I was able to collect data. My chosen methodology relied on me participating in action learning sets, and the participants' willingness to interact with me openly in conversation about the action learning process. However, by the time I approached the action learning participants, I had chosen my initial research questions and preferred methods. About those aspects I did not consult, although I believed I was open to challenge and change.

Due to my work history in TAFE, I knew most of the participants in the sets. If not from working together directly in the same work team or committee, we knew each other by reputation. As far as I knew and could tell from these particular participants, my reputation was one of integrity, trustworthiness, being hard working and out spoken but a good listener. These are qualities I value and aspire to, but take effort to maintain. I also wanted to be open, inclusive, negotiable, encouraging,

supportive about the action learning. I planned how I might be able to maintain, practice and demonstrate these with the action learning sets. My strategies were to

- explain my research questions and motivations as openly as I could;
- answer questions about my research as fully as I could;
- invite participant access to the field notes and conversation transcripts, data analysis and interpretation;
- try to explicitly address and incorporate suggestions from participants about the research process, data analysis and interpretation;
- maintain open and on-going dialogue with the action learning participants about my research;
- participate actively and as fully as possible in the action learning projects; and
- write accounts of the research in plain English.

Now I want to reflect on the evidence about how other people saw this PhD project. This is an account of how I have experienced of the responses of other VET staff.

My line manager did not seem supportive. Although it was conceivable that I do my PhD while I maintained my regular job, I have not done so because I have perceived such a lack of support at my regular workplace. It has been a conflicted situation, reflecting at least a mismatch between my professional values and those with local power in my workplace. I have had leave from my regular position, and worked in a variety of short term, part-time arrangements. This experience has affected my self-image as an "insider", but the action learning participants actively included me in the projects as if I was one of them.

As I have described above, my idea to do this PhD did not arise out of a stated organisational interest in research on professional development. The action learning groups who collaborated in the study did not suggest a PhD. Having decided to do a PhD, and formulated the research questions, I sought, and quickly received, letters of support from the Department of TAFE (as it was then) and the Australian Education Union. When the funding for professional development was awarded, I approached the project managers to make the initial contact about what I wanted to do. There were four projects funded to do action learning at that time. On hearing about my research interest to participate in their action learning set, three of the managers immediately responded positively. I had to remind each of them that the question needed to be discussed with the participants, to get their permission and agreement about the processes. One of the four managers explained that she had a previous experience with another researcher that was not positive, and she decided she did not want to risk a repeat of that. She was unwilling to ask the participants in her project about my possible involvement.

In three projects, the project managers made me feel very welcome. Two project managers asked me would I facilitate the set because they wanted to draw on my experience in the VET sector, and my experience with action learning. After long consideration I agreed to facilitate the first set because the manager assured me she had approached other potential facilitators to no avail. At that point in time, there were no other projects funded to do action learning, and I felt heavily dependent on this project to proceed with my research. If I agreed to facilitate, the action learning and my research could begin. By the time I received the request from the second manager, I was participating in two sets, and did not believe I had the time and energy to facilitate another set as well as proceed with my data collection. I was able to recommend another man who agreed to take the facilitation contract. In turn, he used me as a consultant and confidante about facilitation of that particular action learning set. The third manager had already appointed a facilitator, but was enthusiastic about the prospect of using me to help her evaluate the project. I pointed out to this manager that my research was not an evaluation, but I would probably be able to assist her as she wished based on other experience I had with evaluation.

In each project I had to negotiate for time with the action learning set to present the proposition of participating in the research. From my reading about research methods and ethics, and the account of the experience of the manager of the fourth set I approached, I was well aware that unforeseen challenges could arise in research processes, as human interests and understandings diverge. So much depended on participant consent, and our mutual understanding of expectations, our ability to negotiate openly if differences emerged. In each project, when the time came for me to introduce my research and invite my colleagues to participate and sign the consent form about their participation, I became very anxious that these potential participants may refuse.

The participants readily agreed to participate. That meant they were accepting me as part of their action learning group, knowing I was doing a thesis on action learning using the group as an example and data source. They seemed much more interested in getting on with the project, than discussing the research questions and methods. Each one signed the consent form that made explicit how I intended to collect and use data, and that each participant was invited to contribute to interpretation of the data. In the set where I was facilitating I had some more control over the agenda and process than in the other sets. Nonetheless, it was still not easy to engage the participants in considering the issues connecting with being involved in my PhD research project. The participants did not question me about my participation in the sets. They were concerned about whether contributing to my PhD would take more of their time, and stressed to me how busy they were. I told them I would like to engage in conversations about why they got involved in action learning, how the action learning was working for them, and their perception of the place of action learning in VET.

When I pursued these conversations, I was challenged by how little time the participants were willing to give to talking to me. Clearly it was not a priority for them, amongst all the other demands on their time. I had undertaken to come to talk with them at a time and to a place that suited their convenience. Still it was difficult to get them to identify in their schedules a space for those conversations I requested. Some people postponed the arranged times, and some were only willing to talk to me on the telephone in the evenings. The participants were initially expecting me to have a list of questions, like a structured interview. What I was looking for was a reflective conversation where participants and I talked openly about the action learning process and experience. I wanted a conversational space to pursue greater understanding and envisioning of the action learning and the teachers' work in the VET system. Once I had engaged participants, and clarified my purpose, I found that it was difficult to disengage from the conversations. However, the next time I approached the participants for an appointment for a "conversation", it was still very difficult to find time.

In the set meetings, I felt included like everyone else. I contributed to discussions, learned from the other people present, participated in all the set activities. At various times I had unique knowledge about certain systems or activities that I was glad to be able to share. I felt well-used as a sounding board by two set managers and one facilitator. In the set I facilitated, the responsibility for many administrative functions, editing, and final compilation of the set's product fell to me. In this set, I felt indispensable to the on-going process and successful completion as per the contract requirements.

I was also aware of my difference, being the only one doing a PhD. I was the only one taking field notes and recording people talking. In other ways, like age, anglo-western cultural background and professional experience, I seemed more similar than different. The participants were conscious of my research activity because they asked me when I would finish. I explained to them that it would take me at least another couple of years. It surprised me that they seemed so surprised. I explained something about how I saw the PhD process. They told me that they could not understand my motivation to do something like that. I was left with a feeling that most of them did not appreciate what was involved in a PhD, but they had no intention to obstruct the process. Once a participant in the third set asked me what I took notes about in my field notes book. I showed her, and talked to her about what I thought I was looking for.

In each participating set, about the time of the third set meeting, I checked with the participants that they were comfortable with the research processes. I felt there was a cursory agreement, and an unwillingness to spend a lot of time on my query. Two sets only had four meetings, and one set had five meetings. At the last meeting of each set, I thanked the participants for their cooperation. I did not find a cue to say that I had hoped they would be even more involved than they had been. I did ask them whether they would like to read any of my draft writing for the PhD, or conference papers on action learning in VET. A few people indicated they would like to read, a few were silent on the matter, and the rest said definitely not.

I have sent writing about the action learning to nine participants. Three have responded. I am unsure if the other six have read what I sent. I have been able to incorporate, as additional data, comments I have received from the participants who read what I sent them. However, I have not been able to establish an on-going conversation about the data analysis, since the end of the action learning projects.

The lack of on-going conversation disappoints me to some extent, and has made me question myself about how collaborative the meaning-making in this research has been. On one hand, the participants did contribute to the conversations we had about the action learning during the projects. On the other hand, as the final analysis of the data and writing up my interpretations is such an intense process,

and I am on-leave from my work in TAFE to do this writing, I am feeling less collaborative and less like an insider.

In the final section of this paper I wish to consider then, to what extent can I sustain the claim that this was "collaborative insider research", as I intended it would be? I observe that collaboration is often connoted, in the research methodology literature, with mutual interests and mutual benefits (Reimer & Bruce 1993, Edelsky & Boyd 1993, Brennan 1999), and shared authority over design, process and outcomes (Day 1991, Tom 1997).

In this research the participants did not expressly contribute to the design, nor have direct control over the outcomes. However, there is little doubt that the participants willingly cooperated with the data collection processes. Their purposes were not the same as mine, with respect to my aspiration to do a PhD dissertation, so they were not so willing to spend as much time as I would have liked in reflective conversations and analysing data. Time was a constant challenge in the action learning. Short timelines restricted the participants being able to meet the purposes they set themselves, let alone assisting my different purposes. The circumstances of always needing to deliver outcomes in short time frames make the VET culture a responsive one, with little time for reflective thinking and theorising. A PhD typically requires extensive reflection and theorising, and thereby, it is not a common undertaking among VET teachers. This partly explains the sense of a relative lack of appreciation among my work colleagues of what is involved in a PhD.

(Interestingly, academic literature searches have also indicated that collaborative research in VET is relatively rare. Searching for terms "collaboration" or "collaborative research" and "vocational education" in ERIC and AEI returned very few matches relevant to this conversation.)

So what motivated the participants to collaborate with me in the way they did? It is clear that I was getting data for a PhD out of this contract. What did they get out of it, since they were not aiming for doctorates? My answer is that I was able to offer practical assistance and information to them in return, so that the participants did get value from having me in their action learning set. In one project, I carried the responsibility of facilitation, considerable administration, editing and overseeing final production of their publication. In all projects, the participants drew upon my considerable knowledge of and experience with VET systems and action learning. My access to academic literature was also used when the participants wanted to find information on particular topics. They have invited me, also, to make presentations about the action learning, that is, nominated me to be a spokesperson for them in a number of forums.

This collaboration was based partly on an exchange. The give-and-take is one kind of "reciprocity", although perhaps not exactly what Lather referred to. Lather (1991) and Brunner (1999) wrote of "give and take", but apparently referring more to give and take in the "mutual negotiation of meaning and power" (Lather 1991, 57). As I have described, the action learning participants and I have had some mutual negotiation of meanings in conversation. It can be seen as a practical exchange: they gave their time and thinking in reflective conversations with me, and I gave my time and thinking in the projects. Brunner suggests that reciprocity involves the researcher being "committed to inviting participants' reactions to particular theories offered [by the researcher]..." I would claim that I was committed to this, but the participants had other priorities. The participants did not always accept the invitation, so I can only claim that I have tried to be collaborative. I have a moral obligation to be frank that there was a material exchange of resources between the participants and I, but the theoretical (Lather and Brunner style) exchange was more limited. I am not confident that I achieved my initial goal to exchange new and different insights with the action learning participants, insights that would not have necessarily emerged without my research project.

I claim this is "insider" research, despite my conflicts with my line management. I have a past, current, and hopefully a future role in TAFE, and in the research process, I have drawn on my experiential knowledge of organisational history, working relationships and personal alliances. This is characteristic of "insider" research according to Smyth & Holian (1999), and they say typically, there is stress involved in maintaining working relationships, job requirements, role expectations and doing the research. That stress is part of my experience although it is not elaborated at length in this paper.

Here I have tried to describe my researcher role in action, and explain my claims that it has been insider and collaborative research. I have indicated that "insider" and "collaborative" are problematic terms, but have shown what they meant in the context of my PhD research. The ideal in collaborative research does still seem to be joint involvement of participants with the researcher/s in defining research aims and goals, data collection, analysis and interpretation, and decisions about form and

forums for presentation of results. While not being absolutely achievable, this ideal provides a reference point for aspirations and discussion of what is possible in specific situations.

References

- Angus, L. B. (1986). "Developments in ethnographic research in education: from interpretive to critical ethnography." *Journal of research and development in education* 20(1): 59-67.
- ANTA. (1995). *Guide to Action Learning*.
- Brennan, B. (1999). "Research and practice: working in two different worlds" *Changing Practice through research: changing research through practice*. 7th Annual International Conference on Post Compulsory Education and Training, Griffith University.
- Brunner, C. C. (1999). "From Trust to Betrayal." *Journal for a Just and Caring Education* 5(2): 134-136.
- Bunning, C. (1991) "Turning experience into learning: the strategic challenge for individuals and organisations" *Training and Development in Australia* Vol 18 No 4.
- Bunning, C. (1995). *Professional Development using action research*. Brisbane, International Management Centre.
- Cochran-Smith, M. and Lytle, S. (1993). *Inside/outside: teacher research and knowledge*. New York, Teachers College Press.
- Day, C. (1991). "Roles and relationships in Qualitative research on teachers' thinking: a reconsideration." *Teaching and Teacher Education* 7(5/6): 537-547.
- Edelsky, C. and Boyd, C. (1993). "Collaborative Research: more questions than answers" *Delicate balances: Collaborative research in language education* eds Sarah Hudelson & Judith Wells Lindfors. Urbana, National Council of Teachers of English.
- Framing the Future. (1998). *Framing the Future: Workbased learning - a ready reference*. Melbourne, Australian National Training Authority.
- Gitlin, A., et al. (1992). *Teachers' voices for school change; an introduction to educative research*. London, Routledge.
- Heron, J. (1996). *Teachers' voices for school change; an introduction to educative research*. London, Sage.
- Lather, P. (1991). *Getting Smart: Feminist Research and Pedagogy with/in the Postmodern*. London, Routledge.
- Levin, B. (1993). "Collaborative research in and with organisations." *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education* 6(4): 331-340.
- Mumford, A. (1996). "Effective Learners in Action Learning Sets." *Journal of workplace learning* 8(6): 3-10.
- Noddings, N. (1986). "Fidelity in teaching, teacher education , and research for teaching." *Harvard Educational Review* 56(4): 496-510.
- Noddings, N. (1988). "An ethic of caring and implications for instructional arrangements." *American Journal of Education* 96 (2): 215-230.
- Power, A. (1998). *Collaborative research and social justice: feminism, collectivity and the politics of difference*. Sydney, University of Sydney.
- Reimer, K. M. and Bruce, B. C. (1993). *Building Teacher-Researcher Collaboration: Dilemmas and Strategies*. Urbana, IL, Center for the Study of Reading.
- Revans, R. W. (1983). *The ABC of action learning*. Cartwell-Bratt.
- Shacklock, G. and Smyth, J. (1997). *Re-conceptualising collaborative educational research: moral decisions, relational forces, and cultural articulation*. Adelaide, Flinders Institute for the Study of Teaching, Flinders University.
- Smyth, A. and Holian, R. (1999). "The credibility of the researcher who does research in their own organisation: the perils of participant observation" *Issues of Rigour in Qualitative Research* Conference. Melbourne, Latrobe University.
- Smyth, J. and Shacklock, G. (1997). *The politics of collaboration: excavating the problematics of university-school collaborative research*. Adelaide, Flinders Institute for the Study of Teaching, Flinders University.
- Sultana, G. (1992). "Ethnography and the politics of absence" *Qualitative Studies in Education* 4 (1): 19-27.
- Thomas, J. (1993). *Doing Critical Ethnography*. Newbury Park, Sage.
- Tom, A. (1997). "Challenges in inclusive research." *Journal of Educational Thought* 31(3): 239-257.
- VanManen, M. (1990). *Researching lived experience: Human science for an action sensitive pedagogy*. New York, SUNY.
- VanManen, M. (1991). *The tact of teaching: The meaning of pedagogical thoughtfulness*. New York, SUNY.