A RESEARCH JOURNEY

Val Evans
Department of Education and Training, NSW

ABSTRACT

Honouring the diversity of perspectives and acknowledging our own in an inquiry is the easy part - dealing with it is quite different! This paper shares with you my research journey as I blended research philosophy and methodologies to investigate the question *How do you nudge a culture towards self-managed professional development?.*

Introduction and Background

I embarked on my research journey with the question *How do you nudge a culture towards self-managed professional development?.* The question emerged in response to TAFE NSW Institutes seeking appropriate strategies to support the Professional Development Scheme (PDS). The PDS was implemented across TAFE NSW in 1996. The underpinning principle of the strategy was for educational staff to take responsibility for identifying their learning needs, strategies for learning, and the development of personal learning plans and professional portfolios. The strategy however, failed to involve staff in the process of self-managed learning, and seemed to have failed to achieve its intent.

> Between the idea
> And the reality
> Between the motion
> And the act
> Falls the Shadow
>
> Between the conception
> And the creation
> Between the emotion
> And the response
> Falls the shadow   (From The Hollow Men by T S Eliot)

Based on the premise that organisational learning is not a purely individual process but rather an ongoing process within a learning community, traditional staff training and development strategies such as face-to-face workshops are no longer considered the most appropriate. More collaborative approaches to learning such as action learning, mentoring, learning partners, and workbased learning strategies are being implemented. These strategies require individuals to become comfortable with challenging, as well as being challenged, and to become more reflective practitioners. Senge postulates that one of the identifiable characteristics of an organisation which is learning is *... a difference in the quality of dialogue* (1994,31).

The assumption underpinning the research question was that some staff are not engaging in dialogue, are not planning their own learning, and are relying on being 'told' what they need to learn and how they should go about their learning. This was incongruent with the new paradigm of teaching and learning being implemented across vocational education and training – that of flexible learning.

The merger of School Education and TAFE NSW into the NSW Department of Education and Training provided a unique opportunity to develop this concept in students moving through the educational system, from primary to tertiary. It is considered critical that staff shares this commitment and is able to model the process.

The involvement of another public department and an industry partner would draw on the experiences of the different sectors to develop a supportive framework for professional development. To this end, two other organisations were invited and agreed to participate.

Aim of the Project

The overall aim of the project was to develop a framework for public and private organisations to support self-managed professional development, and hence a commitment to lifelong learning. Building the framework was to be done collaboratively, drawing on the creative ideas of the research participants, and the findings of a literature review.

The Research Group

A Research Group was formed comprising representatives of the three organisations targeted in the scope of the project. The Research Group was to work as a collaborative inquiry group in designing the methodology, undertaking the interviews, leading the Focus Group meeting, synthesising the data, and compiling the report.

The Design

We agreed to use a participative qualitative research approach based on our alignment with a Constructivist paradigm.

The project was divided into two distinct phases - Finding Out and Testing Out.

PHASE I – FINDING OUT

The Literature Review

A full literature review was done focusing on self-managed professional development and the culture of lifelong learning and included both current and former research done nationally and internationally .

The Methodology

A Hermeneutic Dialectic Process methodology was chosen to gather data in Phase I.

> The hermeneutic aspect consists in depicting individual constructions as accurately as possible, while the dialectic aspect consists of comparing and contrasting these existing individual (including the inquirer's) constructions so that each respondent must confront the constructions of others and come to terms with them. (Guba 1990, 26)

The selection of this methodology was based on the belief that each of us (the inquirers and the inquired) brought our own interpretations to the project. This method allowed us to interpret data in a collaborative and communicative manner,

> with the aim of generating one (or a few) constructions on which there [was] substantial consensus. (Guba 1990, 27)

The technique used was informed by the hermeneutic circle model depicted by Guba and Lincoln (1989, 149-155), as follows:

Firstly, the Research Group identified our own constructs by answering the strategic questions being given to respondents. Our individual constructs served as a reminder of our own subjectivity and were checked as each of us 'wrote up' our interviews.

There were two circles of interviews: In the first circle, three respondents - representing a range of stakeholders and viewpoints on professional development - were selected to be interviewed by each member of the Research Group. Eighteen interviews thus took place.

Strategic Questioning (Peavey 1992) was used in the interview process to allow the 'bigger' picture to emerge, and then a move towards the identification of possible action/s at an individual level to take place. The strategic questions were:

The General Environment: What do you see? What do you know? How do you feel?

The Vision: How could it be? What needs to change?

> Whatever you can do.
> or dream you can, begin it.
> Boldness has genius,
> power and magic in it. (Goethe)

Strategic Planning: What can you do? What support do you need?

Using a hermeneutic dialectic process, the interviews proceeded as follows:

The first interview was conducted using the strategic questions above. At the conclusion of the interview, and after 'writing up' the interview, the respondent was asked to verify that what had been written was an accurate account of what they said, and data was corrected if necessary.

The second interview was with a staff member whom it was considered, by the inquirer or by the first respondent, had a differing viewpoint on the research question. Strategic questioning was again used to capture the data, and at the conclusion of the process, the views of the first respondent were shared (without identification) and the second respondent was asked to comment. These comments were captured. The second respondent verified the 'written up' interview.

The third interview was again with a staff member who might, or might not, have had a differing viewpoint to the first two respondents. The same process as with the second interview was followed, but this time the respondent was asked to comment on the constructs of the first two respondents. Again, the third respondent verified the 'written up' interview.

In some instances narratology was used when respondents chose to email their professional development stories.

Data collected from the 18 interviews was analysed for common themes and major differences. Each participant in the first circle was given a copy of the synthesised data, to remain part of the feedback loop.

The second circle (another 18 interviews) used the same process as for the first but had the added dimension of respondents being asked to comment on the emergent themes of the first circle.

At the completion of the second circle, data was again synthesised to capture emergent themes and differences.

The Focus Group

Each participant in the circles (36 in total) was invited to participate in a focus group meeting. Eighteen participants plus another seven interested staff members across the three organisations joined the Focus Group meeting.

The emergent themes/differences were given to participants with the aim of developing a possible framework to support professional development, with identified action/s to be tested out in Phase II.

PHASE II - TESTING OUT

Phase II is currently under way and involves the 'testing out' of the ideas captured in Phase I.

An Action Research process is being used to test out the different components of the framework within sample groups across the three organisations.

The Research Group is continuing to meet throughout this phase to share findings, reflect and make changes if necessary, leading towards a more refined framework to support professional development, and lifelong learning.

The findings of Phase II will be merged with Phase I into a final project report and disseminated to key stakeholders.

Reflecting on the Journey – A Personal Perspective

In reflecting on the journey, five issues emerged as having significantly impacted on me as I travelled the windy research road. They were –

1. the power of strategic questioning as a research technique
2. the search for certainty
3. the commitment of participants in a collaborative inquiry group
4. the presumptuousness of the research question itself, and
5. the emergent question.

STRATEGIC QUESTIONING

The Research Group chose to use Strategic Questioning (Peavey 1992) in the interviews. We felt that this would allow the respondents to tell their 'story' by first sharing with us what they saw and how they felt. By then being asked how it could be they were able to create a vision. And finally, they moved from the macro environment towards taking action by being asked what they could do and what support did they need.

Focusing on the general environment elicited much negativity towards the organisation and its commitment to professional development. It allowed participants to share with the interviewer their perspective of how it is and how they felt about it. Being given the opportunity to share their vision provided a shift in focus - they moved from the negative towards the positive. And finally they were able to say how it could be done - what was achievable within their vision - what they could do and what support they might need.

The questions asked were open allowing the stories to emerge, rather than seeking responses to specifically designed questions tailored to meet the perceived needs of the researcher. And the responses were varied and creative. Certainly, as a professional development specialist, I found new and exciting ideas emerging.

There is no doubt that the use of strategic questioning moved respondents from feelings of much negativity towards positive action. The mood in the interview often changed from fairly withdrawn responses towards stimulated conversation.

And so, through this positive research experience, I intend promoting strategic questioning as both a research technique appropriate for a qualitative approach to research methodology, and as a powerful 'tool' to promote dialogue and support change.

THE SEARCH FOR CERTAINTY

In deciding on a qualitative research methodology, I was aware of the need to ensure the validity of the findings, and to be able to argue for the acceptance of them as such based on the research technique used. The hermeneutic dialectic process was chosen because it required the perspectives of the different stakeholders to be fed back for verification, and for all the perspectives to be exposed to all the stakeholders for comment and feedback. This allowed the stakeholders to verify what had been said, and to have input from beginning to end. (Guba and Lincoln 1989, 245). The criticality of the feedback loops was also stressed by Heron (1981, 160).

The tension arose for me when I began to make sense of the data gathered. This was partly caused by the inability of the Research Group to do this with me because of other commitments. It therefore became my task to capture the emergent themes from the interview stories and present these to both the Research Group and the research participants for interpretation.

It was intriguing at first to note that the constructs of the research participants weren't all that different, even though we had deliberately set out to interview staff from different levels of the organisation, and with different perspectives on professional development.

I started to feel on shaky ground - had we interviewed a broad enough sample of staff? Were the emergent themes my interpretation of the data gathered and not truly representative? My constant seeking of feedback elicited very little response - surely I couldn't be that right all the time!

My fears were allayed somewhat when we held the Focus Group meeting, which brought together the Research Group and some of the research participants. The Focus Group went about the task of interpreting the data and it was my job to capture their interpretations, feed them back after the event for verification, and include them in the final report. Still no disagreement!

I'm obviously not feeling totally comfortable with the findings. I know that the process is valid and that every attempt has been made to seek the feedback for verification, but how valid is it when you don't get the sought feedback?

I'm also wondering if the paradox of a collaborative inquiry is the consensus gained - I keep seeking a challenge to the final interpretation through the process and am nervous that silence doesn't necessarily mean agreement. Why are they silent? What is it about silence which bothers me so?

THE COLLABORATIVE INQUIRY GROUP

Participating in a collaborative inquiry group proved to be the most frustrating aspect of this research project.

I have stopped and considered my own perspective on commitment throughout this journey, and have asked my colleagues to give me theirs. I know that I enter teams with a commitment to participating fully and completing the tasks assigned to me. It seems I have this expectation of others to do the same and I have trouble dealing with the inevitable - the different levels of commitment which become evident throughout the life of a project. I need to learn to deal with this I know, but through numerous similar experiences I continue to be frustrated by it. How can I deal with this better will remain a continuing learning for me!

This research project was no different. I was very excited when I first began to formalise my research project, identify the criteria for participation in the Research Group, and form the Group. It seemed that my criteria was very much aligned to that developed by De Venney-Tiernan, et al (1994, 120-137).

My first hurdle was actually forming the Group. Many colleagues expressed interest in participating, but very few were prepared to commit the time. I concede that their time was already stretched to the limit with many other organisational demands on them.

Finally a group of seven was formed. Finding a common meeting time proved to be the next hurdle - all seven participants had very full diaries! The first meeting did take place but perhaps the fact that only four of the seven were able to be present did not auger well for the collaborative process I had envisaged. However, that first meeting proved exciting for all present as we began to map out the process.

By the second meeting the seven members had reduced to six - we lost a critical member again not from lack of interest, but lack of time!

I accept that participation in project teams very much depends on priorities and members of the teams do not always set these. However, I struggle with the dilemma of reprioritising when it affects the meeting of deadlines and the workloads of others.

I had envisaged a truly collaborative process in regard to both the Research Group and the research participants. Certainly a process of consultation has been achieved, but I admit to driving the project, presenting the process, the initial 'making sense' and the report writing. Throughout I have sought agreement but have made few changes to data or process, not because of lack of preparedness to do so, but rather through lack of feedback. Most feedback has been received from the research participants as part of the feedback loop rather than from the Research Group.

I believe yet another research question has emerged - what conditions need to exist for full participation in collaborative project teams? I'm sure this question isn't new for those more experienced than I!

THE PRESUMPTUOUSNESS OF THE RESEARCH QUESTION

The assumption of how staff were meeting their learning needs was challenged a good deal through the research process.

If I reflect on my own endeavours, as a staff member of my organisation, to map out my learning needs, identify learning strategies and immerse myself in the learning, I present a fairly intense involvement with professional development. I have completed three postgraduate programs. My job requires me to be knowledgable about current research into professional development strategies and methodology. I thus attend seminars and conferences, network with key contacts both nationally and

internationally, read a variety of articles and journals relating to professional development, and 'test out' ideas as part of my practice. Why did I think others were different to me? What assumptions were I making about others and myself?

I'm embarrassed to say that I obviously didn't think that all my colleagues were as committed as I - at least I didn't see any evidence of it, but had I been looking? How arrogant!

As I went about my part of the research process and began interviewing participants from different parts of the organisation, I was very much enlightened! I heard exciting stories about the different areas of study staff were engaged in, both formally and informally.

One such story emerged when the interviewee mentioned that they hadn't 'done' any professional development since they had acquired their teaching qualification. Being in TAFE NSW, it prompted me to ask how they remained abreast of what they were teaching, ie their technical area of expertise. I was then exposed to a variety of professional development techniques used by the interviewee to maintain currency including participating in a community group on a voluntary basis, searching the Internet for the latest technical information, discussing key journal articles with colleagues, and learning from their students as they shared what they did in the workplace. This story was similar to others shared in the research process.

It highlighted, for me, two factors. Firstly, not being seen at 'formal' professional development activities does not constitute a lack of responsibility for one's own learning, and secondly, the lack of recognition of one's learning by both the individual and the organisation. In the instance above, the interviewee had at first made the statement that they didn't engage in professional development, and there didn't seem any recognition by their colleagues, supervisor or management that they did!

It was exciting to hear the stories unfold, and even more so to have my assumptions found wanting.

THE EMERGENT QUESTION

In teaching and learning, one of the most fundamental requirements is to ensure a common understanding of the topic itself - what is it all about? The focus of this inquiry was professional development and, although the Research Group was aware that professional development could mean different things to different people, we decided to see what emerged rather than attempt to define it up-front.

Along the way we were asked what is professional development? Is it the same as staff training and development? Can personal development be classified as professional development? and so on.

Within the Focus Group meeting some tension arose as one group wanted to have a clear definition of professional development. Others, including myself, felt to define professional development was to restrict it. We worked towards developing a shared understanding. Perhaps though, the next research question has been identified - What is professional development?

> What we call the beginning
> Is often the end
> And to make an end
> Is to make a beginning
> The end is where we start from (T S Eliot, source not cited)

THE CONCLUSION OF A JOURNEY

This research project provided me with a fertile learning environment as I explored the different perspectives and reshaped my own mental models as my assumptions were constantly challenged. It was a rewarding and fulfilling experience. I set out to 'find out' and truly achieved this both personally and professionally.

My need to blend paradigms at different stages of this research project highlighted the dichotomy of a constructivist paradigm as I slipped in and out of a search for certainty throughout the journey. I wanted to allow the stories to emerge, but struggled to allow them to be heard without validation!

I still wonder about the validity of the findings if research participants related their stories about something that they each interpreted differently, ie their understanding of professional development. The different interpretations were to be expected of course - our different world views allow the

diversity of interpretations to exist. But do the findings represent the differences? However, a positivist approach to this research would not have recognised the different perspectives at all!

I wonder if, apart from the more concrete research methodologies such as quantitative research that may not rely on human interpretations, data gathered can ever be considered truly valid. I wonder. Of course, from a constructivist paradigm it can't, or it can!

REFERENCES

Bly, Robert, Hillman, James and Meade, Michael. (Eds.) 1992, *The Rag and Bone Shop of the Heart: Poems for Men,* Harper Collins, New York.

De Venney-Tiernan, Moira, Goldband, Annette, Rackham, Lyn and Reilly, Nancy 1994, Creating Collaborative Relationships in a Co-operative Inquiry Group in *Participation in Human Inquiry*, 1994, Sage Publications, London.

Dick, B. (1997), Several papers on Action Research [On-line]. Available at http://www.scu.edu.au/schools/sawd/arr/

Dick, B. (1997), *Choosing action research* [On-line]. Available at http://www.scu.edu.au/schools/sawd/arr/choice.html

Eliot, T S 1961, *Selected Poems,* Faber and Faber Limited, London.

Goethe, Johann Wolfgang von in Bly, Robert, et al. (Eds.) 1992, *The Rag and Bone Shop of the Heart: Poems for Men,* Harper Collins, New York, 235.

Guba, E G 1990, The Alternative Paradigm Dialog in *The Paradigm Dialog*, Sage Publications, Newbury Park, California, 17-27.

Guba, E G and Lincoln, Y S 1989, *Fourth Generation Evaluation,* Sage Publications, Newbury Park, California.

Heron, John 1981, Experiential Research Methodology in *Human Inquiry: A Sourcebook of New Paradigm Research*, 1981, John Wiley & Sons, Chichester, 153-166.

Heron, John 1996, *Co-operative Inquiry: Research into the Human Condition*, Sage Publications, London.

Peavey, Fran 1992, *Strategic Questioning for Personal and Social Change,* A compilation of several talks delivered by Fran Peavey at Heart Politics' gatherings in New Zealand and Australia, 1988-92. (Unpublished).

Reason, Peter. (Ed.) 1994, *Participation in Human Inquiry*, Sage Publications, London.

Reason, Peter and Rowan, John (Eds.) 1981, *Human Inquiry: A Sourcebook of New Paradigm Research,* John Wiley & Sons, Chichester.

Senge, Peter M 1994, How do you know if your organization is learning in *Reflections on Creating Learning Organizations*, 1994, Pegasus Communications, Cambridge. 115-117.