



Editorial

Higher Education Research and Scholarship Group Special Issue: Action Research in Higher Education

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One of the greatest pleasures in life is to read about people's good work, and this collection of papers represents just this – accounts of people doing good work in a range of ways. Collectively the papers offer accounts by practitioners about how they are conducting innovative and courageous forms of practice-based enquiry that have implications for other people's wellbeing, as well as their own. The papers also carry possible significance for how other people might think about and be prepared to explain why their own practices should be understood as good work too.

The reasons why I say these papers may be seen as accounts of 'good' work are as follows.

The authors, individually and collectively, offer descriptions and explanations for what they are doing in their separate contexts, and many provide evidence to show that their emergent knowledge claims are well grounded and justified. The authors' contexts are varied, as is the focus of their research, yet they all share the idea of exercising educational influence in learning – their own, their learners', and their professional colleagues'. The idea of 'educational' is key, because each author shows that they take account of the other people they are working with and try to encourage them to think more critically (perhaps a key aim in education), and so develop collaborative forms of enquiry – inter-generational, inter-disciplinary and inter-organisational approaches. This idea of 'taking account of the other'

has far-reaching implications for how quality, or ‘goodness’ in educational research may be judged: do we show how we have taken account of the other’s needs? Are we working towards addressing those needs? Or is the research only about our own needs and how these may be fulfilled? It is perhaps indicative of the corporate spirit of the Faculty at Sheffield Hallam University and its leadership that these issues take high priority, as manifested in the studies presented here.

At a methodological level, each author adopts a different approach to their enquiry, though all accounts fall into the domain of practice-based research. Some authors explicitly say that they are adopting an action research perspective, though there are different opinions here, too, about what counts as action research and how research work should be theorised. This, it would seem, may also be construed as working towards the ‘good’, for, in my opinion, it is important to show that people work from their own interpretations and perspectives, and not toe a specific party line, provided they can justify what they are doing, and how and why they are doing it. This is an especially important issue in higher education contexts, for higher education as a sector is still positioned as one of the most powerful bodies for legitimating what counts as research and theory. It is therefore key that practitioners in higher education should make explicit how they appreciate their work as theory generation and not only as professional development. These issues permeate the accounts here, often implicitly, but they are there.

This focus on methodological and epistemological accountability then transforms into moral accountability; for education, and educational research involve other people’s lives and wellbeing, and it is essential for higher education staff to explain how and why they are involving other people, and contributing to their wellbeing, as well as to the wellbeing of the discipline of educational research. This is not simply a matter for ethics committees, more a matter of the practitioners themselves explaining how what they are doing can have benefit for others, as well as themselves. This would seem an obvious and commonsense criterion for judging quality in educational research – a really important criterion, since it includes issues of methodological rigour and epistemological responsibility, and these themselves constitute ethical awareness, in the sense that a researcher shows that they are holding themselves accountable to the people they are working with, including the general public and their peer readership. Disciplinary accountability then transforms into social accountability – ‘How do we show, through demonstrating methodological and epistemological rigour, that we are thereby serving our peers and client groups well?’

These matters are especially relevant for several contexts, especially within the broader current higher education contexts of the Research Excellence Framework, and its potential implications for the profile and legitimacy of work-based learning. A key issue, it seems, is the idea of ‘impact’ – what it is, how it should be understood, and how it should be judged. Too often crude instruments are used to judge whether or not a piece of work is ‘good’, and important debates are being conducted in the literatures at the moment. What often does not get emphasised are aspects that most practice-based researchers tend to take for granted, so tend not to articulate them: aspects such as concern for the other – the ‘end user’ – and how work conducted by a practitioner will influence the quality of their lives; or

how they should be involved in the work; or how the practitioner-provider's learning will actually have some benefit for the people they work with as well as people in wider contexts. These are key issues and should contribute to debates about how practice and research should be judged (McNiff 2012).

They are also relevant for debates about what constitutes the focus of higher education practitioners' work – and by default, what the purposes of higher education should include, since practitioners are not 'in' the Academy but actually constitute it – they are the Academy – and it is through their discussions that policies get formed and practices conducted. So it is important to consider what those discussions involve and what might be the commitments that underpin them. Perhaps several points would appear especially relevant.

The first point would be about intellectual responsibility. There is a salutary literature, including Berlin (2002) and Lilla (2001), that explains how some intellectuals focus on demonstrating why their own standpoints should be seen as the right one, a perspective that actually often contradicts their own espoused commitments of, say, freedom or respect for others. Writing in educational research demands a particular kind of humility, an approach to the topic that says, 'I think I am right here, but I need to check everything with you.'

A second point would be about demonstrating how values transform into practices, and, first, explaining how and why those values should be seen as morally accountable. All the papers here are informed by the values of participation, respect, inclusion and cooperation. These are the kinds of values that prioritise the needs of the other, good service delivery, and awareness of the complexities of the social, economic, political and cultural systems in which the research takes place.

Third, all authors show that they are aware of their own processes of becoming, of learning with and from others, and the need constantly to engage in relational practices that will enable all to grow. These processes involve exercising a sense of agency, the capacity to act intentionally in a social situation and exercise their educational influence in learning so that people can take control of and develop their own situations. This issue is at the heart of a body of work about the identity and role of academics. Tennant, McMullen and Kaczynski (2010), for example, emphasise throughout the need to conceptualise higher education work as learning, cooperation, appreciation and full participation; Barnett (2011) speaks about these ideas as constituting 'the spirit of the university'; and Nixon (2008) speaks about how such practices can position the university as a virtuous institution. The literatures are full of ideas to do with developing communities of practice (Wenger 1999) that focus on learning; on developing new kinds of curricula that are embodied in practices; of the need to know yourself before you can begin to know others. These issues return us to our roots: we are always already in relation with others.

Each in their own way, these papers communicate these ideas. And the fact that the papers have come into existence, in their present form, attest to a key point: that they don't just 'appear' as a collection but are brought into life. It takes strong visionary leadership to

make such collections possible, and this leadership is shown through the editorial capacities of the individuals who convened the conference and who then worked with the authors to ensure that their works could be placed in the public domain. The work of such leadership is often invisible because those leaders work from the same values identified here – humility, care for the other’s wellbeing, cooperative enquiry. Such leaders tend to go unsung. I am here singing their praises, together with the praises for the authors; for this has been a cooperative venture that has paid off. The Greeks’ theme of *parrhesia*, brought strongly into focus by Foucault (2001) is about the capacity and the responsibility of people to speak their truth as they see it. Exercising this capacity can often be risky. However, authors here speak their truth, from their own values base, and test its authority and validity through their individual and collaborative research programmes. The significance of their claims is to do with how they have learned how to encourage others to engage with their learning; and so they set important precedents for others, to show how they are contributing to new thinking and new practices, by explaining what their work is about and how they are contributing to educational wellbeing.

It does not get more important than this.

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