

# How can we help classroom teachers produce research from their practice?



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***Abstract:** Over the past two decades in Australia, New Zealand and the U.K., teachers in technical and vocationally-oriented educational institutes have found themselves part of universities, or in situations where they now offer degrees (sometimes by choice on the institution's part and sometimes because of government imperative). Resultant pressures on teaching staff to carry out research have caused significant problems and frequently resistance. The purpose of this paper is to describe an initiative undertaken at a New Zealand polytechnic, in a department that is shortly to offer a degree programme. Early childhood educators, who have not previously been published researchers, have been encouraged to construe their reflective practice as research using the action research method, and to take this research into the public domain for peer review and feedback. The particular example of such practice reported on in this paper was based around an initiative resulting from critical reflection by the early childhood team. "Sensori Saturday" attempted to involve students in creative teaching practice in a way that had not previously been done; the writing up of "Sensori Saturday" as a retrospective action research project attempted to show the early childhood team how their work can easily be construed, presented and published as research. The work shows a 'quality conversation' between an active and published researcher (Bruce-Ferguson) and a team of active but not publicly-identified researchers, the early childhood team.*

***Keywords:** mentoring, action research, reflective practice*

## Introduction

Change seems endemic in educational systems throughout the world. During the time that Pip has been involved in staff development in a New Zealand polytechnic, an Act of Parliament has been passed that gave polytechnics the right to offer degrees, and required those staff teaching on degree programmes to be actively involved in research (New Zealand Government, 1990). Our polytechnic chose to start offering degrees in 1991, a change that has had a considerable impact on staff identities and workload in the subsequent years.

New Zealand is not alone in this move. In Australia, the Dawkins White Paper of 1988 effectively disbanded the Advanced Education sector, forcing the former Colleges of Advanced Education into the existing university system or into new mergers with universities.

In the U.K., polytechnics have been able to become universities for over a decade. The impact on staff in these institutions, who in general tended to pride themselves as ‘teachers rather than researchers’, has been immense. It has damaged the pride that many previously experienced in their identity as teachers, as the following Australian quote, reported in Moses and Ramsden (1992:115), shows:

There is a strong tendency [by researchers in the new institutions] to put teaching lower in priority. And people who are just very good teachers who just want to teach and that’s all they want to do, and they want to do it as well as they can, are considered to be drones on the system rather than being rewarded for filling a niche.

### **The local context**

This concern is not restricted to Australian universities. In New Zealand, Pamela Wood from Otago Polytechnic reported on the ‘wonderdread’ that staff expressed to her about their new requirement to carry out research (Wood, 1994b). She elaborated on this emotional state in another paper (Wood, 1994a): ‘There is anxiety at having not only to learn new skills but also to display them publicly by opening up their initial research efforts to the scrutiny of their professional peers’ (p.350). In our own institution, similar concerns have been expressed. A new researcher, putting her work forward in an in-house forum for the first time, reported the following feelings:

I wouldn’t say it was totally easy, it required a bit of guts to do that when you stand in front of your peers, you think...they are just going to sit there and think what’s she doing, standing up there? What’s she got to say? (in Bruce Ferguson, 1999, p. 241)

One of the concerns that is often expressed by new researchers is that of being able to report their work in a suitable academic style (see, for example, Bazeley, 1994; Bruce Ferguson, 1999). Pip was keynote speaker at a Conference on polytechnic research held at Northland Polytechnic in 2000. Her topic was based around ‘releasing the research/er within’ and one of the strategies she suggested was that experienced academic writers in departments ‘buddy up’ with a classroom teacher. Symbiosis would occur through the description of the classroom teacher’s practical research married with the experienced academic writer’s skills, to produce joint publications. In this way, the excellent classroom-based research which Pip noted in carrying out classroom observations as part of her work could be publicised; the classroom teacher could begin to learn how practice can be construed as research, and hopefully to pick up writing skills through work with the experienced researcher. This suggestion was warmly received at the conference, and several follow-up requests for further information have been received.

### **Theoretical underpinning**

At this point, the reader might be inclined to query an assumption that has been advanced in the above description. The assumption is that classroom-based teachers *are*, in fact, doing research. We as authors are not claiming that this activity occurs automatically. There are, no doubt, teachers who teach the same content in the same way for 20 years compared with the reflective practitioners who teach differently each year for 20 years because they are constantly inquiring into, and improving, their practice. But it is the observation of both of us that critical reflection occurs when classroom teachers investigate and work to improve their practice, and the contention of Pip that this investigation and improvement is research. This

contention is borne out through the definition of research used at our institution, part of which says that

Research...is expected to assist staff employed [at the institution] to maintain currency in their field of knowledge; contribute either directly or indirectly to the identification and improvement of best practice in teaching and learning [here], and be applied to stakeholder activity (students, staff and the wider community) (GAA 9/42/96).

The discourse of reflective practice is prevalent at our institution (see Bruce Ferguson, 1999, pp. 25ff). A course covering the formal development of reflective practice is compulsory in the initial teacher training programme, and the concept underpins the ongoing diploma and degree that the department provides to staff across the institution (the degree is currently going through its final stages of accreditation). The notion of the 'teacher as researcher' was one promoted by Stenhouse at the University of East Anglia in the 1970s (Stenhouse et al, 1970; Stenhouse, 1975) as a way of grounding research and making it more applicable to practitioners than the academic research which was frequently 'inflicted' on them by academics seeking publications. Elliott's work (1978, cited in McKernan, 1991) argued that teaching is inescapably a theoretical activity and that teachers should interpret their everyday practice through the pursuit of reflective self-development.

There is some debate about whether teacher research *is* or even *should be* replacing a reliance on university-based research (Bruce Ferguson, 1999 pp. 27ff) and some authors, such as McIntyre (1997) have polarized the practice of teachers in their classrooms against the research done by 'professional researchers' (p. 131). McIntyre argued that it seemed unreasonable to demand that teachers be researchers as well as teachers, 'when the expertise required for the two activities is so very different' (p. 132.) His perspective was backed up by that of David Woodhouse, a keynote speaker at this conference, who claimed that teaching and research are activities of 'quite [a] different nature' (Woodhouse, 1997, p. 360). Interestingly, later in his paper Woodhouse stated that 'a good teacher must be a 'reflective practitioner', thereby engaging in an activity with research characteristics' (p. 361), a statement that appears to contradict his earlier claim. However he points out in the paper that his comments arise out of pragmatic recognition of the difficulty of conducting 'both activities' rather than a belief in the polarity of the two.

The position that we are advancing, then, that practising teachers *can and do* conduct research in their classrooms, is not unproblematic theoretically. Practically, however, we can demonstrate its achievability through the huge increase in classroom-based research that has occurred and been recorded since our institution undertook to offer degrees in 1991 (see Research Registers of the institution, 1996ff). Pip's PhD thesis dealt with the congruence of teaching and research via the action research approach, and was passed without revision, so her argument was deemed sound by supervisors and examiners.

### **Quality conversations with the ECE team**

Pip has been Research Leader for the department over the past two years. She noted the resistance of practising teachers to engage in what they then perceived as 'more work on top of teaching' when encouraged to engage in research. They also expressed concern, mentioned earlier, about the lack of formal writing up skills. Wood, identifying the same concern at Otago Polytechnic, commented: 'There can be a degree of hostility that this new

endeavour is required of them on top of an already full workload, with what they regard as little practical support in the way of reduced responsibilities' (Wood, 1994a, p. 350).

Despite Pip's encouragement of research among members of the Early Childhood education (ECE) team, little published work has been forthcoming, although one member completed her Masters thesis in an ECE-related area during 2001. The taking of papers to conferences has not been part of the 'culture' of the team, and Pip wished to bring about change in this culture. Both Susan and the Head of Department had done Pip's action research course for staff, so had carried out a small action research project and understood the concept. Pip decided that, other approaches having been unsuccessful in eliciting publications from the team, she would implement her own advice from the keynote speech at the Northland Polytechnic conference and identify an aspect of the ECE team's practice that would lend itself to publication. It should be mentioned here that Pip is a *de facto* member of the team, having been engaged in teaching action research courses in the Diploma of Teaching (ECE) programme for the team over the past two years. Therefore her activity in working with the team to identify research-compatible practice is not as 'outsider-based' as might otherwise be thought, a position that she would find incompatible with her own values and with best practice in action research (see Altrichter, Kemmis, McTaggart & Zuber-Skerrit, 1990; McNiff, 1994).

In consultation with Susan and other team members, Pip selected an innovative intervention that the ECE team had implemented during 2000 as a way of changing and improving their practice. The team had noted that there were insufficient opportunities for practical hands-on experience in a range of creative areas for students in the various programmes that the team offers. They felt that this dearth of creative practice was impoverishing students' ability to expand the creative work that they carry out with small children in their Centres and homes. This tendency has also been identified by other early childhood writers – one writer (in Middleton & May, 1997:136) commented on staff's tendency to be 'standing by and watching rather than actively 'helping' a child to play'. The work cited is historical and progress has been made since then; nevertheless our team had concerns that they were not doing all they might to encourage creative play with the children.

The team brainstormed ways of addressing the concern they had noted. The solution that they hit upon was the running of a one-day workshop at which students could experience a wide variety of creative workshops and reflect on the ways that they could use these with small children in their care. The workshop, overall, was entitled "Sensori Saturday". Students were strongly encouraged, although not actually *required*, to attend this Saturday's session. Because this is a conference for higher education, the authors will not be expanding on the finer points of how the workshop was set up and run, aspects that would be of interest to early childhood educators. Rather, we concentrate on its benefits for both students and staff, before going on to explain how we decided to present it as a 'retrospective action research project'. Student feedback was varied; some did not know what all the workshops were about so found choice of which ones to attend difficult; others found the choice excellent and had difficulty deciding because they wanted to attend the lot! Some recognised that attending on a Saturday was initially a chore but felt that 'once we got here we had a great time', that it was 'relaxing to do something hands-on.' An interesting side-effect of the day was that students commented they 'didn't realize there were so many students on the E.C. programmes' and found it beneficial having first years mixing with subsequent years' students.

As a result of the feedback from both staff and students in the 2000 occurrence of "Sensori Saturday", and compatible with the principles of reflective practice, the team ran the

workshop again during 2001, incorporating changes on the basis of the previous year's input, but with an expanded range of workshops. Interestingly, the 2001 workshop included ones offered by three ECE students to their peers, an activity which took some courage, considering the quote mentioned above by a polytechnic tutor who found putting her work in the public domain for her peers intimidating. The team felt that the benefits of the day were that it helps students to mix 'across' programmes in a way that doesn't happen otherwise; it helps students to see others' practice (as in the student workshop just mentioned); it helps students to develop energy and passion for their practice by exposing them to new ways of presenting creative activities for small children; it shows students that 'tutors can play too', that they are aware of what goes on in Centres and ECE contexts; and finally, and most importantly, it builds some practice into an otherwise strongly theoretical curriculum.

Attendance was generally very good, although the team's reflection after the 2001 occurrence was that the benefits of the day were so great that a way should be found to make attendance compulsory. The Head of Department, Donna Behl, was an active participant in the day, being an EC educator herself. This involvement is an example of the support advocated by Phillips (1992) at a seminar held for polytechnic staff in New Zealand. She stressed the 'absolute importance of top-level commitment to supporting staff undertaking research' (in Bruce Ferguson, 1999:156). As we are claiming this workshop's development and continuing improvement as a form of research, our HOD's involvement shows her commitment to supporting staff undertaking research, as Phillips suggests.

### **Construing practice as research using the action research model**

The workshop is a good example of collaborative practice among the ECE team for the good of the students and, eventually, of the children in their care. Collaboration for mutual improvement of practice is a common feature of action research (Altrichter et al, 1990; Carr & Kemmis, 1986; Kemmis & McTaggart, 1988; McNiff, 1988). A common feature of both action research and reflective practice is that both are based on the four stage cycle described by Kolb (1984), although common before his description. The plan, act, observe, reflect stages of what Kolb calls the experiential learning cycle underpin both action research and reflective practice, which leads to an easy transition to understanding this research approach by those who are already reflective practitioners. Kolb notes that one can commence the reflection at any stage of the cycle (Pip finds 'observation' a convenient place to start, although the normal place is 'plan'). Gilbert (1994) identifies the congruence thus:

It [reflective practice] is a process of *research* through which the development of professional knowledge and the improvement of practice occur together (in much the same way as in action research). (p. 516) [Italics are Gilbert's.]

After Pip pondered on how to involve the ECE team more in taking their reflective practice-based research to conferences, she consulted with the team about the possibility of re-presenting the "Sensori Saturday" workshop as a retrospective action research project. In this way, she believed that the team, who had already demonstrated great innovation and passion in this area, would be motivated to speak of what they knew. They could share this effective intervention with colleagues, thus benefiting the early childhood arena. They could come to see, and to share with their colleagues, how easily reflective practice can be re-presented as action research. And they could identify with and help to support their students, all of whom in the Diploma programme are now conducting action research into aspects of their own practice.

Accordingly, Pip produced a draft copy of a possible paper, which she hoped members of the ECE team could take to the forthcoming Early Childhood pre-conference day for the New Zealand Association for Research in Education Conference held towards the end of 2001. In the event, this presentation was not possible; we missed the deadline for abstracts to be accepted, but the idea is sound and will be trialled again this year. Meanwhile, for the benefit of readers, the action research cycles identified through the process of consultation with ECE team members appear below (very truncated).

### ***Cycle One***

*Observation:* There is insufficient development in our programme for students to learn how to work creatively with young children

*Reflection:* As the result of a brainstorm, it was decided to offer a day's programme aimed at stimulating creative practice among our students

*Planning:* Tutors were encouraged to contribute workshops as part of the day's programme, that would help to develop the skills sought

*Action:* The first "Sensori Saturday" was held in August, 2000

### ***Cycle Two***

*Observation:* Most of the students attended and seemed to enjoy the experience, based on informal feedback received. A number of students did not attend

*Reflection:* This was a worthwhile event which should be made a regular feature of our programme. It encouraged trans-class interaction; there was some discussion about encouraging attendance more strongly

*Planning:* A further occurrence of "Sensori Saturday" was planned for August 2001. More workshops were planned this time, including some from students

*Action:* The day was held as planned. Wet weather hindered one or two of the workshops which had to be held under cover

### ***Cycle Three***

*Observation:* As before the feedback was very positive from attendees and from staff involved. There are still some students who opt not to come

*Reflection:* This day is deemed so beneficial by the staff, and based on feedback from attending students, that we should make it part of the assessable requirements of the programme. Including a critical account of the day's session and follow up work in students' workplaces may be included in students' practicum portfolios.

Cycle Three is as yet incomplete, as the third academic year is not yet under way at the time of writing. However we believe that this re-presentation of our work clearly shows how simply the team's reflective processes and passion to improve practice can be construed as action research. In terms of the World Congress definition cited earlier (Altrichter et al, 1990:19) our work demonstrates the following criteria, deemed necessary for action research to be occurring.

In our situation we:

- reflected and improved on our *own* work and our *own* situation
- tightly interlinked our reflection and action
- in this paper, made our experience public, including our theories about the work

We are increasingly:

- data-gathering in relation to our own questions
- participating in decision-making

- sharing power (including *de facto* participants, team members and HOD in the process, as well as having a workshop presenter from the department who is not a member of the team)
- collaborating as a ‘critical community’
- learning progressively (and publicly) by doing and by making mistakes in a ‘self-reflective spiral’ of planning, acting, observing, reflecting, replanning etc
- reflecting in ways which support the idea of the ‘(self)reflective practitioner’

## Conclusion

The proof of the pudding, as the saying goes, will be in the eating. We conclude that classroom practice is a practical site for research; that to avoid charges of ‘colonising’ the work of teachers, such research can (and maybe even should) be done by the practising classroom teachers themselves; that the reflective practice which is common among many teachers provides a sound and familiar basis from which to proceed with action research. We cannot, at this point, comment on how effective this process will be in terms of encouraging *all* members of the Early Childhood team to engage in published research. However the paper written for the NZARE Conference last year remains to be polished up and delivered, and meanwhile here we are as collaborators who have engaged in a quality conversation, bringing ECE work forward for peer scrutiny and sharing. We firmly believe that one way through the concern and tension expressed by ‘practising teachers’ who may not yet see themselves as researchers but who are under pressure to conduct research, is to identify how their own workplaces may act as potent sites of research practice. We believe that the mentoring model which we have used in this paper, with Pip encouraging and supporting Susan to bring her work into the public domain, is also a good model for encouraging new researchers in their initial research endeavours.

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