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A Walk in the Park: creative unsettlement developing practice based learning

Abstract

In this paper we explore practice based learning (Strati 2007) from the perspective of our own practice. We are keen to address two points as part of a meaningful (Alvesson et al. 2017) conversation at the conference and beyond: 1) what is the potential contribution to practice based learning (PBL) knowledge; and 2) how can this way of working add to the quality (Reason 2006) of interpretivist research methodology (Bryman & Bell 2015). We take a collaborative autoethnographic approach to challenge, unsettle and develop each other's learning and practice. It was a dionysian process (Heron 1996) process, namely emergent and imaginal.

Introduction

This is an invitation to join a conversation about PBL. Our work is as organisational change consultants and tutors. We both have a foot in the practice of change in organisations and another in the Academy. Our business clients tend to be what we call 'marginals in the mainstream'; people who work inside large organisations as change practitioners and who pay attention to and work with the whole of human experience; that is the relational, emotional and embodied aspects as well as the conceptual, rational and practical aspects which tend to predominate in discussions.

We have been engaged in a personal research project into PBL for a year and our hope is to bring others who have an investment in this into a conversation about where it goes next. Climate change, political upheaval in Western democracies, the impact of new technology are examples of an upheaval where PBL will be important. Through this commotion, we need to be able to understand and be reflexive (Cunliffe 2004; Antonacopoulou 2010; Cunliffe 2002) and to support others to do likewise as a social process.

Methodology and theory considerations

Long walks along the coast, the countryside, river footpaths or the gardens of a palace were the venues of our inquiry. We would reflect upon our own experiences asking open searching questions of each other. We chose this method because we are both keen walkers and 'walking and talking' is something of a practice, a method of inquiry, for us. In terms of exploration John Heron (Heron 1996, p50) draws on Nietzsche's distinction between the apollonian and dionysian, the former dwelling on the rational, planned and controlled. Our approach tended towards the later: emerging from the within lived experience, which can be messy and unpredictable, and acknowledges the way that we learn is not in straight lines but following a: *'more imaginal, expressive, spiraling, diffuse, impromptu and tacit approach to the interplay between making sense and action'*. (Heron 1996 p 50).

In a practice that has a 'chicken and egg' quality about it, it starts in conversation between the two of us, about our own practices and then we widen the circle with further conversations. It means we don't start with a clear definition, because it might close down opportunities for others to define it in their own terms.

This means that as people join the conversation, it changes and we the authors lose control of it and become followers of it ourselves, as well as co-leaders and co-conveners, facilitating and

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shaping without aiming to dictate the course. In these formative steps, we explore: 1) what it says about our practice; and 2) our reflexive approach of working together. The opportunity and the challenge of this method of inquiry is that it is open to growth and change as people join the conversation. Writing this paper and inviting you into the conversation is another example of such facilitation. In other words, how our Dionysian approach can invite others to do likewise.

We want to acknowledge the many flavours of PBL that are and have been theorised, including action learning (Revans 1979) and self-managed learning (Cunningham 1999). We want to pay attention to the specific and contextual nature that often sits behind such approaches. This ‘practical knowing’ (Heron & Reason 2008) is what counts, in the places we find ourselves, particularly as the complex nature of experience that cannot be easily abstracted.

Exploring our practice

During a recent conversation, walking in the grounds of Hampton Court Palace, we came across six things that were intriguing us about our practice. These included: the dangers and importance of reification in how we communicate (themes we draw on here); how we show up in an embodied way becomes reflected in our practice; how we can nurture and close down curiosity and openness to experience (again that we reflect here).

What follows are two narratives, created in response to our conversations written a few days later; notice how the themes of our conversations enabled us to interpret and understand our own practice in new reflexive ways.

Rob’s response:

On reading my hand written notes of the six themes one stood out vividly: ‘Noticing ourselves noticing, to dwell, I’ve been really busy – I’ve lost my capacity to see the wood for the trees’. This prompted reflection and in doing so see wider themes that were apparent in my day-to-day practice. In the following narrative I was not dealing with an abstract problem, it was closer to home, it was emotional too, and it was affecting who I believed I was as a teacher.

When I talk about my practice as a university teacher I often mention ‘creative unsettlement’, the ethical imperative as I see it to encourage students to challenge themselves. I want them to consider their own developing practice, to be reflexive in what they do and think and to test their own position in the world. This was challenged when I was team-teaching with a colleague. I will call him Tim. Tim was keen to tell me from the off that he had always had great module evaluations and feedback stemming from his very clear instructions. However, I would prefer conversations with students along the lines of ‘tell me what to do’, to which I would say ‘you need to decide, but in doing so think carefully how you are making that decision’. I could see how this clarity building was frustrating, but from this we would enter a coaching type conversation around their decision making process. As the semester progressed, I became more frustrated that we were handing everything to the students on a plate. In writing this, I am sensing that I am affirming my view of the ethics of teaching, but not entirely. I am unsettled, my concern broader than working with Tim. I am seeing my own ethical stance

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in higher education increasingly at odds with the sector and Government policy. These are vivid connections between my practice and global patterns and I'm beginning to ask questions.

Here I was connecting my day-to-day practice with wider educational policy themes I was seeing writ large. The irony is of course not lost that I am the product of my own creative unsettlement.

James's response:

The walking conversations with Rob around PBL has stimulated me to notice how my understanding of my own practice develops and changes in discussion with others. I often imagine that I won't really know what I know until I talk about it with others. But this goes deeper. I wonder whether I can know anything about my practice, at some level, until I am in some kind of dialogue? My understanding changes with every encounter. Here's an example that made this vivid for me:

Recently I was asked by a colleague to answer some questions on how I approached my work, for a short film he is making to publicise the doctoral programme (Marshall 2019) of which I am a faculty member. We talked for about an hour whilst the camera was running. A few days later he sent me the rushes, with an invitation to watch them and ponder on 'witnessing self'. At first, of course it is unnerving to watch myself; it was hard to get over the self-consciousness of it. But then a different sensibility grew. As I listened to myself, the thought occurred to me that 'I didn't know I thought that!' It occurred to me that it was only in the conversation with this colleague that the understanding we had was developing. It was as if the 'mind' that was doing the thinking wasn't my own, or his own, but *between us*. Sometimes we talk about the socially-constructed nature of knowledge, but this was deeper somehow. I had a sense of dwelling with and witnessing that construction in action.

The relevance of this to practice based knowing strikes me here on two levels. Firstly there is the revelation of this relational thinking. To experience it is startling. I realize I am deeply imbued in a paradigm of Cartesian dualism, where the thinking is done by individualized and wholly discreet 'minds', and this is reinforced by a knowledge-forming system (in academia and society) that tends to reinforce individualism (especially in the age of pre-dominant neoliberalism). Despite professing of a relational paradigm, I realize that this experience shows me the gap between my espoused and my lived values (Argyris & Schon 1991).

But secondly, it revealed to me a process of inquiry, akin to what Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749-1832) called a 'delicate empiricism' (Shotter 2005). Rarely do I take the chance to dwell in an experience, in this case a conversation between two colleagues, experiencing it again from a different angle, and allowing it simultaneously to reveal something about myself and about the world. This is what might be called a gentle unsettlement, and it is this that provides the essence of PBL. It challenged me to question whether I or others spend enough time dwelling in an experience. When I dwell on my experience like this, I notice the same kind of patterns of self tend to show up. Be it talking with others (which I do for a living), or playing tennis, or

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swimming (my favourite exercise), or sitting by the Sea watching the waves, my mindful attention shows me myself in the study of whatever else I focus my attention on.

Wherever I look, I show up. I notice for example, in all of these activities my tendency to over-complicate, which is the shadow side of my ability to see through complex patterns, an ability that enables me to do the work of systemic change in my client organisations. This shows up in all of my practices. I need to look through my own implicit way of looking at the world in order to see what I am looking at. Goethe described this simultaneous process of mindful attention inwards and outwards like this:

Every act of looking turns into observation, every act of observation into reflection, every act of reflection into the making of associations, thus it is evident that we theorize every time we look carefully at the world (quoted by Amrine 1998).

This is a process of subtle and persisting looking, a kind of inquiring that requires the opposite of the kind of dopamine-fix swiping that our culture, with its restless surfing, currently encourages.

Reflection on our learning and an invitation

Both narratives provide an account of unsettlement, of the paradoxical nature of knowing and unknowing our practice in what the ethnographer Pollner would recognize as ‘an “unsettling” i.e. an insecurity regarding the basic assumptions, discourse and practices in describing reality’ (Pollner 1991) that his own academic tradition had shied away from.

We have left open the definition of PBL to enable us to explore our practice further. We provide descriptions of our reflexive learning process that others can live in and relate to, to spark their own imaginal and expressive sense of practice. Although defining something makes it ‘talkable’ it dwells on life lived rather than life being experienced with its multiple possibilities. It is our conjecture at this moment, before we expand the circle of our conversations and inquiry, that this process has something to offer research into PBL in terms of the insights we are forming and to improve the quality of our research.

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