We often hear mention these days of practitioner-oriented research, but it is not always clear what this means or how it might be done. In this issue, the author provides some insights from an area somewhat removed from the regular classroom (p8).

GROWING PLANTS AND GROWING PEOPLE: AN INSTANCE OF PRACTITIONER-RESEARCH

ANNETTE STREET

INTRODUCTION

In 1985 I co-ordinated a job creation project (CCJIAH) providing an introduction to horticulture for eight young people who had been tagged "most unlikely to obtain and sustain a job or further study", by CES officers.

I came to this with a 'research' interest - researching my own practice, that is. This interest in practitioner research grew out of an intense frustration with the kinds of social and educational research that had been practised on me in the past. Social and educational researchers, intent on scientifically replicating someone else's research or proving their own hypotheses using the methods of the natural sciences, would arrive with their bag of tricks of quantitative methods. I would be pitted with questionnaires that asked all the wrong questions; questions that caused me great difficulty in deciding whether I "strongly agreed", "agreed", "disagreed", "strong disagreed", or "did not know". Others had me collecting statistics on all manner of things - generally in my own time - to be fed back to them, at their convenience. These researchers then disappeared either without the promised feedback or left me with an analysis of the statistical information that taxed my statistical knowledge beyond the limits, but even worse left me asking "so what?". This

Relevance for the planning of social and educational resources but it was useless in helping me with the problems and dilemmas confronting me in my daily practice.

These experiences served to confirm in me an antagonism towards academics and researchers who told me "about" the statistics relating to incest and teenage pregnancy, but failed to explain why I had to spend all night sitting through the traumatic birth of disabled twins to a twelve year old victim of incest. Research of the traditional kind left me feeling totally impotent in the face of human tragedy and the system that produces these victims.

There were two alternatives - give up on research, or do it for my self. Because I continued to want answers to my questions, I chose the latter by using an empowering research methodology - one that enabled both myself and the practitioners I was working with to do research on ourselves. As I did, I found myself experiencing the "aha" phenomena as I began to recognise the interpenetration of theory and practice, and to discover ways that enabled me to research and reflect - to make meaning of my practice and of the situation, and to be an agent of change.

My job description stated that my job as Coordinator was to be in charge of all aspects of the program with particular responsibility for the supervision of the horticultural skills component and direct responsibility for providing Life Skills training. The Life Skills program had been designed to teach basic education and social skills deemed to be lacking in the lives of young people who had been disadvantaged. What concerned me was that these skills had all been pre-determined without my involvement or that of the young people with whom I was working.

My concern was that existing Life Skills courses were making a host of assumptions about deficits in the lives of young people, based on the kind of behaviours that middle class adults associated with the youth culture in general. I saw existing courses as being designed to tinker

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with the social and educational behaviour of long-term unemployed, without dealing with the structural issues underlying widespread unemployment. I felt that the young people were being treated as if they were unemployed because they did not have the necessary life skills. For me, there was a need to recognise the inadequacies in the educational system, and the prevalent social and economic situation.

I developed the distinct feeling that Life Skills course were designed to develop someone who "accommodates to conditions", rather than the empowering perspective that I wanted to bring to the project.

The problem for me was how to develop a program that was emancipatory in intent and structure. What I wanted was a program to enable the trainees to share in the decision making processes to uncover the hidden assumptions and agendas on which the program and its participants were operating; to recognise the place of the historical past in present actions; to reveal contradictions - particularly between theory and practice; and to develop a critical perspective in which action and reflection are in balance.

**METHODOLOGY**

The research design I used was based on asking questions such as "what is the problem?", "what could we do about it?", "what will be the consequences of our actions?", "what is the planned action?", "how will we evaluate it?". The strategies would be ones that involved trainees in reflecting on the various issues they confronted, asking questions, getting information, and making sense of it as a basis for change. Data to support the research both I and the trainees did was collected in a number of forms.

A. Professional Journal

I kept a personal journal in which I included documentation about the program, quotes from relevant individuals, insights from my professional reading, ideas for future developments, and my personal reactions to the current situation. After a while, other staff in the project began their own journals, and trainees developed work diaries which they used as journals and discussed with the staff regularly.

B. Case Study Notes

Case study notes were kept on each trainee containing personal information, records of work experience placements, skills experienced and skills mastered, observations of behaviour and records of attitudinal changes. In accordance with my own beliefs and with current welfare practice each trainee, had access to their own case study file. These files were used as a basis for discussion and negotiation on the interpretations of behaviour and attitudes. The trainees had the right to challenge the information contained in the notes, and we would negotiate until we had an agreement that the record was accurate. This negotiation process was the result of regular reviews comprising open ended interviews.

**STRATEGIES FOR CHANGE**

The strategies for change that we collectively instigated at CONJARA as a result of our on-going "research" were varied. I want to talk about one of them here - communication.

Communication

We developed a number of formal communication strategies to develop communication, none of which were original, and some of them were ones that were in fact generally in place in the workplace, anyway. Many of the first initiatives came from me, mainly because previous experience had lead the trainees to expect this. As the project continued, however, the trainees adapted my initiatives, rejected them, or adopted new strategies. For example, I put forward the notions of "the Suggestion Box", on the grounds that it was a normal practice to some parts of industry. The trainees were initially enthusiastic about it and spent time and effort working together to write suggestions. They covered a variety of requests from those that were testing out the staff (eg. a request for a week long ski trip), to others that were practical and productive (eg. a request for a power box to enable them to reorganise the work and storage areas). They decided when the "grand opening" of the suggestion box would occur, and time would periodically be made available to discuss each suggestion.

Initially the box was filled with suggestions but the box opening ceremonies became less frequent until it was no longer used. This was three months into the project, and when I asked individuals and the group why they had chosen to stop using it the answers were:

"I'm too lazy... I always say what I want to say to you."

"We can bring up those things in the meetings anyway... we don't need to write them down."

"If you aren't around when I want something I write you a note and then we talk about it."

The strategy, therefore, was important in the early stages as trainees were afraid to be identified with their comments. However, after they gained confidence to personally express themselves to me privately, the anonymity was no longer necessary.

Another formal communication strategy was the joint staff/trainee meetings; there were five distinct stages.

**Stage 1.** This stage was characterised by a lot of staff input and information-giving. Trainee questions were usually dealt with through the suggestion box and questions from staff to trainees often brought the response of "I dunno" without any effort to attempt an answer.

**Stage 2.** This stage was still heavy on staff input, but much of this was in response to questions asked by one or two members of the group.

**Stage 3.** This stage coincided with the disuse of the suggestion box. It was also in the middle of winter when meetings had been cancelled due to holidays and ill health experienced by all of us. The meetings became
outlets for discouragement and at this stage they were reverting to earlier forms of dependence. Their conversations were often characterised by flights of fantasy:

Trainee: I am fed up with being sick. I was unemployed for four years and I was hardly ever sick. It's stupid to work outside.

Supervisor: You asked for an outside job. This is a bad year for illness but you are not helping yourself by not wearing appropriate clothing. You won't wear the protective clothing for wet weather and you sometimes wear things instead of regulation books in freezing cold weather.

Trainee: I hate thick clothing. I am used to wearing light clothing with the heater on high. Anyway next month I am going to Queensland and I am going to live on the beaches ... you know, live on tropical fruit and make myself a bark hut and relax in the sun. As soon as I get my next cheque I am off.

This kind of conversation seemed to be repeated amongst almost all trainees with variations; the staff felt discouraged by the lack of motivation displayed by the trainees. My own interpretation was that they were engaging in an over-simplification of their problems, a nostalgia for the past, a lack of interest in investigation, a fragility of argument, a strong emotional style, and an accentuated taste for flights of fantasy and for magical explanations. It was if this was a necessary pre-condition to change. The unreality of their future options represented a way of beginning to see a future with options.

Stage 4. This stage was characterised by a change from the "outbursts" of the previous stage, but with a deliberate return to questions and answers. They set the agendas through their questions, but we as a staff directed the questions back to them. Although we had used this practice with them from the beginning, we had used it sparingly with the group in the early stages, because of the inevitable "I dunno" response. The trainees were anxious about future options and began to question in a way they received information. It was here that they decided to take a more active role in deciding what they wanted to learn and how they could best do it.

Stage 5. In this stage, although the trainees set the agenda, and the staff continued throwing their questions back at them, the style of questioning changed. This could best be seen from an example:

Trainee: I don't think we should grow those herbs any more. People don't want them.

Me: On what evidence are you basing that opinion?

Trainee: I didn't sell any last week when I went out on the truck.

Me: Did anyone else sell any?

Trainee: I don't know. I still think I am right. We have plenty left in the nursery. I bet you have to agree with me later.

Me: At present all you have given is an opinion based on two facts - that we have plenty of herbs left in the nursery and that you didn't sell any last week. Do you know the marketing strategy for herbs? ... (nod)

Did we expect to sell them on the truck in that area? ... (shakes head)

O.K. lets go through the marketing strategy and work out how we can make responsible decisions.

This conversation went on quite some time and involved the group in looking at the role of "research" and "reflection" as a basis for responsible action and decision making.

This stage also witnessed the emergence of supportive group behaviour, rather than the previous style of competition and manipulation. For example:

Trainee: Some of us are faster at propagating than others. If we plan work quotas we shouldn't make the slow ones work as fast as the others.

Me: I agree. How will we resolve it so that the faster ones aren't being slowed down or the lower ones under too much pressure?

Another trainee: I think we should work in teams and fit the team members together so they both work at a similar speed.

Other somewhat more informal communication strategies also worked. For example, I initially tried to work alongside each individual on a one to one basis at some time every fortnight. This game me an opportunity to deal with some of their specific needs within the framework of a work environment. As a staff we had decided to make the program as similar as possible to the demands of the work place, whilst recognising that this was not always possible or desirable given the fact that this group of adolescents each had difficulties that precluded them from functioning in a regular work place.

Opportunities to work alongside individuals was a compromise in that it enabled me to provide support and at times specific counselling on very complex problems (e.g. sexual interference, drug abuse, family breakdown, accommodation needs, unwanted pregnancy, petty crime, future options etc.) without taking the trainee away from work and creating a mini counselling service.

Obviously not all problems were resolved in this way but this approach did enable trainees to raise issues, ideas and problems without having to feel that they needed counselling. The trainees didn't have to admit their problems to anyone else or need to take time off work to resolve them.

During the progress of the project it was apparent that most problems were being resolved in daily discussions that occurred during work and break times. The trainees had resolved their major concerns or learnt to deal with them more effectively and my role became more a resource person.

The use of trainees in constantly changing teams to work on various tasks meant that there was a constant need for staff to resolve differences of opinion between themselves and staff. Initially I found that both trainees and staff were coming to me to intervene to resolve the difficulty or support their point of view.
My response was to get both sides together to talk it out. We had a few guidelines to deal with conflict.

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Listen ... you may be wrong!
Other people have a right to a different opinion. Sometimes there are more than one right answer. If you know you are right stick up for yourself. Accept that anyone can make a mistake. Separate the person from the problem.

We all made it a rule to listen to trainee complaints, but after the initial settling-in period, we would ask them "What are you going to do about it?" If we felt the complaint was unrealistic we would tell them so and give our reasons. As the project progressed the trainees began talking more and more responsibility for contacts with the community. In particular dealing with the general public constantly and confidently - in ordering nursery materials, taking the truck on rounds of nursery retailers to sell plants, showing visitors around the nursery, speaking about CONJARA to local community groups etc.

ON REFLECTION

The opportunity to reflect using the kind of research process I chose, has provided me with valuable insights about the way I work. It has also provided me with an opportunity to look at the realities of practitioner research from the perspective of the practitioner.

Although it was a valuable experience for me, it was also very frustrating and demanding. The process required constant discipline. I had to keep writing all the time and I often hated that.

Journal Keeping

My journal was at times a joy. I would write enthusiastically about ideas, new insights from my reading, and quotes from anyone involved in the project. The journal also provided me with an outlet for my frustrations about the constraints of the project, the progress of the trainees and my own feelings of inadequacy.

My journal also depicts my feeling of frustration at the process of keeping a professional journal. Fortunately the value of constantly writing and the opportunity that the journal provided to look back and reflect on past understandings and past actions won out and I didn't give up on my journal. My writings tended to be an outpouring and in no way resembled the good ideals I started out with.

Ethics and values in self-reflective research

At times I found myself wrestling with the need to evaluate whether decisions were being made with the best interest of the trainees and staff in mind, or whether I was influenced by the need to keep the researcher process going. Was the timing of the introduction of my actions and strategies related to my desire to implement the ideas that were flowing from my own reading and thinking, or was it really the most appropriate thing to do for the trainees at the time? Whose values was I espousing, and how did I react when the group decision supported values of competition rather than collaboration? These and other similar questions were faced regularly and because they were faced they were also resolved ... until the next time!

Negotiation

I had spent time negotiating with the staff, trainees and the sponsor from the outset. I have explained to each exactly what I wanted to do and how I was going to do it. However, I found that staff and trainees were unfamiliar with and suspicious of anything written let alone something called "research". I attempted to re-assure them. I found that although they readily agreed that what was recorded was an accurate record, they also wanted me to write it so that it "sounds better". When offered opportunities to change that which was not direct quotes (these they had to accept in their entirety or refuse permission altogether) I received material that bore little resemblance to reality.

Over time, however, the participants became used to the data collection procedures and the fact that I liked to write things down in my journal. They began to understand that I was using the information to research my own practices and not to use against them.

PRACTITIONER RESEARCH - IS IT WORTH THE EFFORT?

The CONJARA project provided me with a continuing process of tension between my theoretical understandings and the implementation of them in the day to day practice. This was compounded in the collaborative relationship which meant that I was constrained and restricted by the need to recognise and allow for the demands, ideas and priorities of others. I had to accept that although we could reach agreed upon goals, the demands of daily work could mean that a job such as fencing may need to take priority over a group discussion. I had to accept that community members could make decisions that would place pressure on all of us to meet financial goals and, although the staff were agreed that these pressures affected the quality of the training component and left the trainees unskilled in some areas, these goals may also be approved of by trainees who did not always want the same things for themselves as we did.

I felt pressure from the wide variety of roles that I was required to fill. I felt pressure from the research process. However the program needed that kind of close scrutiny. It would have been entirely unprofessional not to have been accountable, not to have to read the relevant reports, not to have to read the current literature, not to have to do research done by someone. So why not by me?

I am now more likely to implement some new insight if I have a process through which I can reflect and evaluate what it is that I am doing, rather than figure out from outside researchers. I am more likely to collect meaningful information if I have to write it down. I am more likely to recognise and test out my folk wisdom if I have to share it with others and hear their responses; and I am more likely to improve my practice and the situation if I continue to take the risk of participating in practitioner-based research.

Yes it is worth it. I will do it again ... and again!