

# Chronicle of a teacher researcher

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The following 'story' began its life during a course entitled 'Creative Writing for Academics' run by Kip Jones at Bournemouth University. One challenge, among the many he gave us over the weekend, was to write a story in 500 words based on a photo he provided. I tried, but it didn't flow. What did begin to flow however was the story of my experience of doing doctoral research as a practitioner researcher in which I used the principles of Exploratory Practice (Allwright, 2005; Hanks, 2015a, 2015b) as both my approach to classroom pedagogy with a group of EAP (English for Academic Purposes) learners and as my doctoral research methodology. In (just over) 500 words, I have attempted to capture in a very different 'non-academic' style some of the personalities in the class, the interactions, the ups and downs, contradictions, ambiguities, tensions, and emotional work going on throughout the course. The style I have used sets some of these contradictions and contrasts quite starkly against each other, and so I follow this with a short, more 'academic' reflection at the end.

*17 international postgraduate students. A 10 week course. 17 sets of dreams, ambitions, hopes, expectations, and a teacher. A teacher who wants them to explore their own language learning puzzles. A teacher who needs data. A teacher who thinks quality of life is more important than exam results. A teacher who wants them to understand 'why' things are as they are.*

*Eshrag wants to go to Cambridge; she has the lowest level in the class. Annie doesn't really want to be here. It's hard, no one understands her. But her parents insisted and she loves them. Pete seems shy and sad. He doesn't know how to cook and is always hungry. Antonia misses her mother. They speak everyday. Monzer is playing games with the system. He and his wife don't want to go back home. Bert wants to speak 'fluent and idiomatic' English. Who will give him the secret to success? All 17 students want to get IELTS 5.5 in every skill. All want to do an MA. All think this class is the answer.*

*Such responsibility. Such diversity.*

*The beginning. Research explained. Consent forms signed. Students engaged, learning, laughing, working, exploring their puzzles, exploring their 'whys'. Teacher is tense – researcher or teacher? Research or pedagogy?*

*It's week 6. Boris says 'it's really awesome, I am into it'. Antonia and Bena say 'it's an excellent experience'.*

*Monzer says he's not moving forward. The teacher ignores the class and talks to Monzer ... for 17 whole minutes. He doesn't recant. It's a waste of time. He doesn't want to do the puzzle work.*

*The class rebel en masse. 'This is not helping us', 'it's wasting our time', 'we're not learning'. 'We want IELTS'. 'We need IELTS'.*

*The teacher goes into meltdown. How to salvage this? How to regain her professional integrity, her PhD, the quality of classroom life? Twist it, change it, practise mild deception. IELTS is the mantra – 'This is good for IELTS' she says (and it gives her some data), 'this will help your IELTS score' (and it keeps the project on track). Never say 'research'; try not to say 'puzzle work'; just say 'IELTS'.*

*Week 8 and the IELTS results roll in. Annie is distraught. Her speaking is still 4.5. Antonia gets 6.0 for speaking. Her writing falls to 5.0. She's not happy. Orlan spends the class on his phone. Visa issues. Leo spends the class on his phone. Checking his IELTS results. Boris gets a 6.0 overall. He gets a minimum of 5.5 in every skill. Teacher elated. Boris withdraws from the course. The score's not good enough for his parents. Monzer is distracted by a pending court case. Eshrag breaks her leg at the train station. She has childcare issues. She misses classes. Kan is happy. He stays behind after class. He likes the puzzle work. He likes the classes. He likes England. He likes English.*

*Poster making. Team work is great. Team work is hard. Poster making is fun. Poster making is a waste of time. Jake flips. He is angry. He starts shouting. This is not helping his English. He wants to do it at home. Teacher says that's fine. Next class Jake is absent. He's in the Learning Centre making his poster. Working on his own. Missing class.*

*The final week. Reports on the puzzle work are in. 'They helped improve our writing skills' say the students. Poster presentations done. 'They helped improve our speaking skills' say the students. Is that it? Are those my findings? Teacher is concerned. Teacher is exhausted. Teacher says 'never again'.*

The above story is just that, a creative interpretation from my perspective of the experience of attempting to hold together during a ten-week course the expectations of the students and their learning needs with my own research agenda. The response I record here to the end of the course is very much from a researcher point of view, and does not imply either a rejection of Exploratory Practice (EP) or my own continuing commitment to practise it. On the contrary, distance (and a lot of data analysis) has given me fresh understandings of how I can continue to work within its principles. However, the narrative does, I believe, raise various issues, and I briefly address some of these below. I begin with some

of the ethical questions it suggests, linking those to the practical need for perceived relevance. I conclude with a more conceptual issue related to the nature of 'quality of life', the first principle of EP.

In choosing to work within the principles of EP, I believed I was pursuing both a democratic and socially equitable way of working (Mockler, 2014), giving the learners themselves the opportunity to set the agenda and inquire into the issues that were important for them (Hanks, 2015a), and subjugating my own research agenda to their ongoing and expressed needs. However, even within a framework such as the EP principles, which are ostensibly an equitable and ethical way of distributing power within the classroom, ethical tensions still exist as demonstrated through the above story. Yes, these were undoubtedly compounded by the fact that I was using EP not only as an approach to pedagogy, but also as my doctoral research methodology, and yet it does raise questions about what is 'best' for students, who decides that, and the power that the teacher can unwittingly yield even when practising something like EP. To what extent was I imposing EP as a means to an end for my own purposes, even though I held an unwavering belief throughout in its potential to facilitate deep learning and engagement in the students, and had worked with the EP principles for some years? These are ethical questions and are central to the EP principles of ensuring that all have the opportunity to develop (Principles 3-5). Perhaps one way of judging how well I dealt with these ethical tensions, is to consider whether the learners did feel they had developed their own thinking, abilities and understandings.

In this regard, I think the story suggests that the learners did find their own ways to make their voices heard and assert their idea of what is 'best'. The multiple references to IELTS in the middle of the story reflect the need for the learners to perceive the EP work as relevant to their immediate needs and my own attempts (although not detailed in this story) to help them see that the EP work could be both relevant and academically helpful. Their final remarks suggest that the majority did perceive a benefit to their language learning.

Related to the idea of perceived relevance is that of the first principle of EP which is to 'focus on quality of life as the fundamental issue' (Allwright & Hanks, 2009: 260). The 'rebellion' of week 6 distinctly diminished our (temporal) experience of quality of life in the classroom, in terms of it making our 'time together both pleasant and productive' (Allwright, 2003: 114). I felt as if we were

violating the first principle, and the decisions I made as to how to take the class forward from that point reflected to a large degree my desire to reinstate some tangible sense of quality of life in the classroom. However, this desire, coupled with the reality I was facing in class, for me raises the question as to what extent quality of life is defined by that which is pleasant, enjoyable and productive in the present and to what extent it may also be seen as a longer term goal, in which periods of tension and conflict might trigger a greater search for understanding (Principle 2) and ultimately then, an enhanced quality of life.

## References

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## Biodata

Susan has recently completed her doctoral studies at the University of Manchester. Her thesis focused on the understandings (analysed and interpreted using an Aristotelian framework) generated by learners as they engaged in inquiry into their own language learning lives through the principles of Exploratory Practice. She is now working as a research associate.

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