

Practitioner Research

Edited by Yasmin Dar, Ana Inés Salvi and Paula Rebolledo

In this regular feature or 'space' in the newsletter we invite teachers, academics and students alike to get involved in research into their own practice and to share their experiences, reflections and views on research they have done in their own classrooms.

In this issue, we feature a report of an event organized by the Research SIG whose authors were the presenters themselves. The event was held on 7th July, 2012 in Leicester.

Exploratory Practice: Using Class Time to Help Learners Develop as Practitioners of Learning

Dick Allwright (University of Lancaster); Yasmin Dar (University of Leicester); Simon Gieve (University of Leicester); Judith Hanks (University of Leeds); Ana Salvi (University of Warwick); Assia Slimani-Rolls (Regents College, London)

In this whole-day workshop we wanted to show everyone just how much enjoyment teachers and learners can have when they get involved in Exploratory Practice (EP). 'The majority of the audience at the workshop were new to the idea of EP and had come along to learn about its origins and the principles that underpin its practice. So the workshop was tailored to meet their particular needs'. (Yasmin)

It is our experience that in releasing practitioners from the pressure of performativity, EP offers a potential increase in motivation for teachers and learners alike. So we invited everyone to look at photographs (see two below) of teachers and learners (but mostly learners) at the EP 'Annual Event' in Rio de Janeiro in 2009, when 200 schoolchildren and 50 teachers presented their understandings of their learning and teaching lives to each other in a very exciting one-day conference.

Then Simon Gieve (University of Leicester) publicly interviewed Dick Allwright (Lancaster, retired) to establish more of the background thinking to Exploratory Practice, which is a fully inclusive approach to practitioner research. 'Fully inclusive' means it treats both teachers and learners as practitioners, of both learning and teaching. Adopting the role of practitioner researchers as their normal way of using classroom time, they use standard classroom pedagogic practices to develop their own understandings of their learning and teaching lives.



The EP 'Annual Event' in Rio de Janeiro, 2009

To take the background thinking further, Judith Hanks (Leeds University) then used her experience of trying out EP in an English for Academic Purposes (EAP) context to introduce the EP principles and to illustrate the practical challenges of starting off such work. She presented the questions that learners and teachers had puzzled about in her PhD study, such as 'Why can't I concentrate in class all the time?' or 'Why do students find it difficult to remember vocabulary?', and noted the enthusiasm with which learners and teachers in her context had taken up the ideas of EP. Shortly before the coffee break, Aline Santiago's story from her experience with a difficult class in a secondary school in Brazil was used to further illustrate the key principles and ideas behind EP. These two experiences establish the importance of the development of trust as a crucial element in EP work.



The EP 'Annual Event' in Rio de Janeiro, 2009

In order to give everyone a better idea of the potential practical implications of the EP principles we then heard three case studies of teachers who had adopted EP in three different pedagogic settings, and whose work illustrated the main issues. Assia Slimani-Rolls (Regent's College, London) illustrated the importance of EP's ideas on working together ('collegiality'), working with everybody ('inclusivity') and helping everybody get the most from it all ('mutual understanding') in her work with colleagues in a business school, using EP as a theoretical framework for the development of a Post-Graduate Certificate in Learning and Teaching in Higher Education with a focus on teaching international students. Ana Inés Salvi (Warwick University) dealt with the importance, in her experience in an EAP Pre-session course, of (a) working on 'life' rather than just on 'work' issues ('quality of life'); of (b) developing understandings rather than just trying to solve problems before you've understood them ('the role of understanding'); and (c) of avoiding un-necessary work ('minimising the burden'). Lastly, Yasmin Dar (University of Leicester) from her setting in a pre-session EAP context, spoke about her classroom based work which involves everyone as practitioners ('inclusivity') working together to 'develop their own understandings', all by using existing pedagogic practices as investigative tools (integration'). We were delighted to welcome Hero and Susan, two students from Yasmin's class, who presented their perspectives on the EP work they had done. EP emphasises learner participation, so it was particularly pleasing to hear the learners' side of the story.

During lunchtime we invited everyone to think about what was puzzling for them about their classroom lives, and then Yasmin Dar and Ana Inés Salvi led a session to help us think about how we might make EP happen in our own workplaces, to explore our (and our learners') puzzles further. 'It was interesting to go around the groups and learn from what puzzles colleagues and, when necessary, to help turn questions into 'puzzles' to be explored. Everyone contributed with deep insights into the working of EP'. (Ana)

After the final coffee break Judith Hanks asked us all to consider the challenges and opportunities for EP in our classrooms. She talked about how EP had been incorporated into two different types of pre-session EAP courses in the UK, and showed how the principles of relevance, collegiality and working for understanding had encouraged teachers and learners to set their own agendas for classroom investigations and had led to mutual development and greater understanding of issues in classroom language learning life.

Everyone in the workshop then worked together to consider how we might take investigations into our own questions about what puzzles us in our learning and

teaching lives further. We asked: 'What might get in the way of doing EP?' and worked in groups to think about what our responses to these challenges might be. At the end of this session, a member of the audience, Chu Po-Ying, who had successfully carried out EP as part of a PhD. dissertation project, was invited to tell us a bit more about her experience.

The day finished with a general question and answer session with the presenters, chaired by Simon Gieve, about going further with EP. There was great interest in the experiences of Hero and Susan (the two students who had kindly joined us), as well as thorough questioning of the Exploratory Practice framework and its history. Dick's article "Why don't learners learn what teachers teach?" was cited as a very early foundation of Exploratory Practice – perhaps one of the first examples of a 'puzzle'! Other questions ranged from the subjective nature of the data (e.g. case studies) and if conclusions drawn from EP research are generalizable or not, and the issue of criticality and EP.



Simon Gieve interviewing Dick Allwright



Left to Right: Ana Inés Salvi, Dick Allwright, Assia Slimani-Rolls, Judith Hanks and Yasmin Dar

