Practitioner Research from a Critical Systems Perspective

Stan Hardman
Udo Richard Averweg

Abstract

This paper draws together the themes of the reflective practitioner, the learning organisation, critical systems thinking, communities of practice and the contract between the university and the community to advocate for a greater awareness of the potential of practitioner-research as a form of personally driven relevant professional development and the construction of socially robust and scientifically authentic knowledge.

Keywords: Critical awareness, Practitioner-research, Professional practitioner, Reflection and practice

Introduction

Robson's description of a practitioner researcher as 'someone who holds down a job in some particular area and is at the same time, involved in carrying out systematic enquiry which is of relevance to the job' (Robson 2002: 534) provides a foundation to this paper in which we intend to contextually enrich and conceptually inform his statement. To do this, reference is made to the works of Schön, Senge, Jackson, Schecter, Flood and Jackson, Wenger and Gibbons who have all made distinctive contributions to the thinking embedded in this paper. In so doing we recognise, Mintzberg (2004:10) who suggests that if you 'put together a good deal of craft with a certain amount of art and some science, and you end up with a job that is all about practice. There is no 'one best way' to manage; it all depends on the situation'.

In drawing these strands together the groundwork is set for an approach to learning within organisations by managing professionals within them to engage in self-managing structured learning processes which are academically defensible in relation to the improvement and integration of personal and organisational learning. These processes will include the clarification of problem situations, the selection of appropriate methodology, ethical soundness and contextual knowledge creation – a form of emergent leadership practice.

Our paper is structured as follows: Background to the research for the learning needs of the professional practitioner are introduced. An outline of the practice of the professional practitioner is then given. Reflection and practice in practitioner-research are discussed. Some reflections on practitioner-based inquiry research are then presented. Finally a conclusion is given.

Background to Research

The work of Donald Schön (Schön 1987) is seminal in emphasising the particular learning needs of the professional practitioner. This researcher prioritises the process of reflective practice through which the practitioner selects the appropriate theoretical constructs from his university academic studies to interpret and make sense of the practical application space in his professional context. Thereafter the practitioner can determine appropriate action on the assumption of practice – practice informed by theory and theory informed by practice. The emphasis is placed on the importance of a constructivist approach to knowledge in which the importance of the knowledge base residing within the individual, and his ability to utilise, extend and where appropriate re-learn is paramount.

The notions of reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action were central to Schön's (Schön 1983) work. Reflection requires space in the present and the promise of space in the future (Smith 1994: 150). Reflective practice is therefore enacted. Practitioners usually need to combine reflection and practice when addressing practice issues in organisational settings. According to Price (2004: 47), the purpose of reflection is threefold:

- To understand one's self, one's motives, perceptions, attitudes, values and feelings. Practitioners understand themselves and in so doing become more open to understand the different perceptions of others;
- Reflective practice is based on the notion that everyone constructs meanings for and explanations about events (and some of these may be misguided); and
- To reflect on the possible consequences of one's actions.

Schön (1983) brought 'reflection' to the centre of an understanding of what professionals do. In the epistemology of practice, 'the knowledge inherent in practice is to be understood as artful doing' (Schön 1983). Given the purpose of reflection and the characteristics of reflective practice, it is argued that they can be seen as an approach to encourage practitioner learning and practice development in an organisational setting.

Peter Senge's work (Senge 1990) is useful in constructing an understanding of practitioner knowledge through his pertinent advocacy of the learning organisation in which participants in the organisation play a significant role in shaping the future of the organisation through their participation in learning processes. In his later work, particularly with Sharmer (Senge *et al*. 2004), he draws out the importance of learning consciousness, especially through theory U.

Jackson connceptualised the construct of Critical Systems Practice (Jackson 2000; 2003) which provides a repertoire of methodologies and a framework for selection relating to particular interpretations of organisational challenges. This provides the practitioner researcher with a broad framework in which to interpret, refine and approach the design and application of research enquiries.

What is the Critical Systems Thinking (CST) perspective regarding practitioner research? There is no one simple answer and different perspectives can be found in the literature. Different writers have evolved different understandings and continue to develop their ideas in communication with other researchers (Midgley 1996). We contend that CST can be seen as an evolving 'debate' around a set of themes that are considered important by a significant number of systems practitioners.

Some (early) ideas about CST, a research perspective, embrace a set of fundamental commitments. Schecter (1991) and Flood & Jackson (1991) identify three such commitments:

- Critical awareness: This examines and re-examines taken-for-granted assumptions along with the conditions which have given rise to them;
- Emancipation: This ensures that the research is focused on 'improvement' (defined temporarily and locally) and by taking issues of power into account; and
- Methodological pluralism: This is using a variety of research methods in a theoretically coherent manner, noting their strengths and weaknesses to address a corresponding variety of issues.

Midgley (1996) notes that while these may be an oversimplification of the range of issues considered important by critical systems thinkers, they are still useful for indicating the general interests pursued by proponents of this perspective. Morgan (1997) points out that there is a need to develop and refine the strategies and tools of research appropriate to different paradigms and develop appropriate criteria for determining the quality of the research conducted.

In dealing with the commitment to *critical awareness* (which is the focus of our paper), Jackson (as cited in Midgley 1996) identify three interlinked forms of critical awareness:

- understanding the strengths and weaknesses and the theoretical underpinnings of available systems methods, techniques and methodologies. This involves critical thinking *about* methodology;
- understanding both the context of application and the possible consequences of using various methodologies once the context has been defined. This involves the critical *use* of methodology; and
- closely examining the assumptions and values entering into existing systems designs or any proposals for a systems design. This supports the commitment to emancipation. Jackson (as cited in Midgley 1996) suggests that CST is *dedicated to human emancipation* and seeks to achieve for all individuals the maximum development of their

potential. This is to be achieved by raising the quality of life and work in the organisations in which they participate.

The work of Wenger (Wenger 1998; Wenger *et al.* 2002) provides another rich source of ideas to inform the understanding of practitioner-research. The importance of this work is that it focuses on the growing recognition of participant self-selection into knowledge communities of relevance to them and in which they can shape a personal learning agenda in order to meet their own and often emergent inquiry.

There is a growing body of knowledge that acknowledges the need for a redefinition, through partnership, of the role that universities need to play in research. Gibbons (2005) speaks of a new social contract in which he prioritises the need for the creation of socially robust knowledge based on an emergent discourse of engagement between universities and industry. He places emphasis on the contextualisation of knowledge, the need for networks and above all, transaction spaces and trading zones where the discourse of the academy and the discourse of practice are inventive in permeable boundary crossing. This paper emphasises the importance of this new social contract between a university (such as the University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN)) and its communities of practice, which transcend the old.

Practice of the Professional Practitioner

This research acknowledges that there are many practitioners based and employed in organisational settings and their practitioner-based inquiry forms of learning are often not published in journals. This practitioner publishing 'shortcoming' does not encourage learning, which is relevant to real-life practice in organisations.

Thus, conceptually this paper reports on the methodological approach developed within the UKZN Leadership Centre, to inform the curriculum and process of engagement with a student body of Masters students – many in their mid-careers. It explores the process of moving from technical and professional competency to management and leadership influence; and contextually documents some reflections of a practitioner-based inquiry

research conducted by a Masters degree student from the UKZN Leadership Centre in a selected organisational setting of eThekwini Municipality.

Reflection and Practice in Practitioner-research

Practitioners often apply theories and exemplars to their own experiences and situations in organisational settings. What exactly is practitioner-research? Practitioner-research can be identified as 'a systematic form of enquiry that is collective, collaborative, self-reflective, critical and undertaken by the participants of the inquiry' (McCutcheon & Jung 1990). In a practitioner-research culture, individual inquiry is encouraged. The underlying question on the mind of a practitioner researcher is: Given the continuing technical change in an organisation, how can the researcher improve what is happening in a selected environment?

Schön's seminal book, *The Reflective Practitioner* (1983), challenges practitioners to reconsider the role of technical knowledge in developing professional excellence. Given that the second author has a technical information and communications technology (ICT) background, is employed as an ICT Research Analyst at eThekwini Municipality in Durban, South Africa, is a *professional* member of the Computer Society of South Africa (CSSA), he actively participates in contents and contribution to academic conferences and journals, it is contended that he is 'qualified' to undertake practitioner-based inquiry that is relevant to real-life practice and for improving what is happening in the selected organisational setting of eThekwini Municipality.

Methodologies (e.g. action research (AR), case study, mixed methods) used in research provide a systematic approach to study the issues or problems in an organisational setting. AR, case study and mixed methods all emphasise the importance of the context and explicitly support the concept of practitioner research. The subject or area of study and the selected methodology are largely defined by the needs of the organisational work environment where the practitioner researcher is subject to a variety of personal, interpersonal and organisational influences (Costley & Armsby 2007: 132). Robson (2000) suggests that practitioners require a high level of flexibility in their choice of methods (e.g. primary or secondary data and

analysis) and tools to help ensure credibility and dependability in the complex and context-bound research situation.

Research and development undertaken for practice-led research projects are located within a real-life social and work-based organisational community and give tangible meaning rather than in a hypothetical or devised scenario (Costley & Armsby 2007: 132). In this case the focus is real-life research and a reflection on real-life practical and pragmatic activities, which makes work meaningful to practitioner researchers. Gray (2004) suggests that this meaningfulness and the implicit understanding of the organisational context are starting points for practitioner researchers to theorise and become more reflective in their practice to enable an outcome (e.g. an improvement to what is happening in a selected environment of an organisational setting) to emerge. It entails the practitioner to build new understandings in the situation that is unfolding. Schön (1983: 68) suggests that the 'practitioner … reflects on the phenomenon before him, and on the prior understandings which have been implicit in his behaviour' (Schön 1983: 68).

Practice-led research projects usually involve a meshing of practical and intellectual capabilities that rely on the context of the community of practice in which the research practitioner is engaged (Costley & Armsby 2007: 132). It is within each research practitioner's context that a pragmatic analysis and a synthesis of empirical and theoretical knowledge that a justification for the selected research methodology or approach should be made. In order to address the real-life problem in an organisational setting, the research design for practitioner-based inquiry is now discussed.

Some Reflections on Practitioner-based Inquiry Research

A detailed account of a practitioner's inquiry research (a UKZN Leadership Centre Masters degree student) is reflected in Averweg (2007).

During the inquiry, the researchers were mindful that practitioner-research should be self-reflective and critical. From the notion of reflection-in-action, the practitioner reflected 'on the phenomenon before him, and on the prior understanding, which have been implicit in his behaviour' (Schön 1983: 68). The researcher made use of a theoretical lens or perspective to guide the selected study. The researcher used theory

inductively (as in qualitative research) and deductively (as in quantitative research). This pragmatic approach was to ensure that the researcher drew from both qualitative and quantitative assumptions. This act of reflecting-on-action enabled the practitioner to spend time exploring why he acted as he did. In doing so, the practitioner developed a set of questions and ideas about his activities and professional practice.

The survey on which the researcher reported was practitioner-oriented knowledge. The researcher's survey design, process and results were presented as an exemplar of practitioner-oriented knowledge and should be seen in the context of informing the researcher's study. While the study was a practitioner-based inquiry, the researcher was mindful of 'the threats to the quality of … [the] data by being too close to … [the] research setting' (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill 2006: 99). This served as grounding of professional knowledge (as advocated by Schön). When the authors reflect thereon, the researcher was able to construct valid meanings from the research inquiry.

On reflecting-on-action, the researcher had to find a compromise between the ideals of good research and the numerous practical constraints that present themselves in real-life research settings (Terre Blanche & Durrheim 1999: 36). The researcher had to look to 'what' and 'how' to research the real-life problem. This implies that from the practitioner's professional experiences, meanings for the events and the consequences of the practitioner's actions were taken into account. There was a clear relationship between reflection in and on action. By the author reflecting thereon, there was an emphasis of learning through a practice episode experience. Furthermore this has resulted in this practitioner report documenting the reflection of a practitioner-based inquiry research.

From a critical systems perspective, the practitioner *had* to have an understanding of the strengths and weaknesses and theoretical underpinnings of the available systems methods otherwise his practitioner research may have been flawed. Furthermore the practitioner *had* to define the context of his study (in the eThekwini Municipality) and examine the assumptions he made (e.g. as a professional member of the CSSA) for future systems design. By doing so, we contend that the practitioner carried out a systematic inquiry which is academically defensible and which is relevant to the practitioner's job in eThekwini Municipality. This critical awareness can be seen as an

example of emergent leadership practice and which is embedded in the UKZN Leadership Centre.

In their work, Fox *et al.* (2007) explain 'being a practitioner researcher is not the same as being an academic researcher. The practitioner researcher approaches research and embeds research within practice in ways that an academic researcher cannot'. However, these researchers point out that practitioner research is often undervalued as of less importance than 'real research'. Thus the importance of this paper is in legitimating and prioritising practitioner research in universities.

Conclusion

It is in the interests of practitioner-based inquiry research to find ways of encouraging learning that is relevant to real-life practice and which does not require unduly tortuous and ideological debate about the merits of reflection. Practitioners are in essence, pragmatic. The wheel of learning consists of question, theory, test and reflection (Handy 1989).

Practitioner-generated research is the way a particular area's content (such as ICT) will commonly be produced and out of which theories about practice can be formulated. Such academic theories about practice can then serve as a way for future practitioners to learn and apply new knowledge to current and future practice. The authors base their comments on their participation in contents and contribution to academic conferences and journals and this practitioner-based inquiry reflection. These are two different research traditions and it is contended that each field can learn from the other. When we reflect thereon, it is suggested that encouragement be given for more practitioner-based inquiry research.

From a UKZN Leadership Centre perspective this reflection integrates situated and responsible personal and organisational learning with innovation for improvement. It provides opportunity for the emergence of tacit knowledge. This is the ideal to which developing the practice of practitioner learning aspires. It underscores the need for universities in graduate professional development to embed practitioners in ways of thinking and ways of doing that they become apprenticed into the practice of practitioner-research.

Acknowledgement

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Stan Hardman
Leadership Centre
University of KwaZulu-Natal
hardmans@ukzn.ac.za

Udo Richard Averweg
Information Services
eThekwini Municipality and University of KwaZulu-Natal
averwegu@durban.gov.za