LAN04280

The Ithaka Project: Investigating the development of intellectual character through practitioner research and professional learning[1]

Symposium presented at the international conference of the
Australian Association for Research in Education, Melbourne, Australia, November 30, 2004

What does curiosity mean in Year 2? How does critical thinking develop in Year 8, and is there overlap between what we mean by this in science and in history? What does "open mindedness" look like on Wednesday period 2?

These questions have guided the first phase of The Ithaka Project, a project supported at this stage by MLC Melbourne, Melbourne Grammar School and Wesley College within the context of professional learning programs. Using the ideas of Intellectual Character and thinking dispositions (Ritchhart, 2001) as a starting point, teachers have developed investigative projects to:

- Explore the meaning of the proposed "thinking dispositions" in relation to daily practice and classroom culture
- Develop a common language with which to reflect on teaching and learning
- Review and refine curriculum in terms of big picture goals as well as the detail of unit structure, and the relationship between assessment, learning and curriculum statements
- Link with professional recognition schemes and higher degrees

More than 40 teachers are involved, guided by a review panel representing schools and tertiary institutions. In addition to projects, there have been reading groups, theoretical discussions, a newsletter, and meetings throughout the year for the presentation and discussion of work in progress. The papers in this symposium will address aspects of the findings of the first year, from the perspectives of teacher leaders, researchers and critical friends.

Papers

Dr Julie Landvogt, education consultant and Fellow, University of Melbourne**:**
    The Ithaka Project: Where are we travelling?
Vivienne Powell, MLC and Anne Szjuda, Wesley College:
    Building team culture: Reflection in action
Dr Alan Bliss, MGS and Mark Coleman, MGS:
    Action research and curriculum review: Sounds good, but does it work?
Colleen Abbott, education consultant and James Brown, MGS**:**
    Subjects and objects in higher degrees: The view from within
Dr Julie Landvogt and Dr Sally Godinho, University of Melbourne
    From the outside towards the inside: Partnerships and pitfalls

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[1] It is normal practice to acknowledge the financial and other support given to research projects. In this case, it is important to note that the principals of the schools – MLC Kew, Melbourne Grammar School and Wesley College – have supported this project both financially and in terms of making space and facilities available. This demonstrates a commitment to the kind of professional learning that is not neat, that is embedded in practice, and that does not lend itself easily to "tick the box" outcomes. We appreciate their commitment to the kind of professional learning that does not lend itself easily to "tick the box" outcomes – but which we hope will lead to more lasting learning for both their own staff and the broader education community.

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The Ithaka Project:
Investigating the development of *Intellectual Character* through practitioner research and professional learning

An overview of aspects of the first year, through eight perspectives

Paper One: Introduction to symposium

The Ithaka Project: Where are we travelling?

Julie Landvogt
Fellow, Faculty of Education, University of Melbourne
Education consultant

Overview

Conference themes may or may not be reflected in the content of the papers presented. For us, it was the theme which brought us here.

> *Increasingly teachers and other educators are being encouraged by their employers to engage in research often under the banner of professional development and informed by policy aimed at reforming teaching practices.*
>
> *Yet education researchers positioned in contexts of practice have not always been highly valued by their university colleagues.*
>
> *What is the position of practitioner research in these circumstances?*
>
> *How are university researchers positioned in this relationship?*

In this symposium we describe the development of what has become a project linking professional development with action research. It is centred around investigation of a proposition about intelligence from Project Zero at Harvard, and in the first year of its development our project has involved three schools, teachers from P-12, two consultants and a university lecturer. Our probing of the theory has led us to discussion of individual students, curriculum, learning theory, the detail of pedagogy, big picture educational purposes, issues of school structure, assessment and reporting.

The papers today circle two common questions:
> ➤ **In what ways have we adopted the action research method and tools?**

> ➤ **What purposes have they served in our practice and thinking?**

Our responses to these questions reflect our different perspectives - as leaders of departments within schools, as curriculum leaders, as researchers both from academia and from the field. They also reflect both our shared and different purposes in working in this way: we have a common goal of improving teaching and learning in our schools, but there are differences in the importance of the Ithaka Project work within our workloads, and in the extent to which we have become involved in the theoretical and practical aspects of the project.

We begin with an overview of the theoretical challenge, and the practical context, which started us off. Four papers follow as joint presentations from some of the people involved in the Project; they chronicle both the process and the current findings in terms of ongoing thinking.

Beginnings (1)

As the conference theme suggests, many schools now incorporate elements of action research methodology into their professional development and professional appraisal programs (Eisner, 2002; Fullan, 2001; Schmoker, 2004). Many schools employ consultants – often people with university links and sometimes fulltime roles there - to assist in the structure of these projects, or to provide input about research findings for use by practitioners. Increasingly, such consultants are employed for more than a one-off role: but for the most part, they remain visiting experts and outsiders – knowing where the cups in the staffroom are, perhaps, but not having their own. And because they come for specific purposes – for meetings, for seminars, perhaps for an occasional classroom visit – the division remains between working contexts and kinds of knowledge. It is rare, I think, that the visits are reciprocal – that teachers visit the consultant in his or her work base. (There are reasons for this, of course, but that is part of the story..)

An essential factor which shapes this project is that it is supported and funded in the first instance by the schools, not by the tertiary sector or by external funding bodies. This influences what are seen as appropriate outcomes, but more importantly it shapes the ways of seeing. In each of the three schools, my role as leader of the project has allowed flexibility not possible in research where funding is made available in response to a planned research design: here we began with an underpinning theory, asked for interest in fleshing it out, and allowed both ensuing questions and methods of answering them to emerge from the departments and individuals who chose to become involved. This means that it is not possible to tabulate a precise Ithakan process; it is not possible at this stage to table results. The essence of the Ithakan ship is that it looks different in each port; we are beginning to speak a common language, but we are speaking today about a work in progress. The common base of all teachers' exploration of their practice, however, is to use action research methods as a way to explore the ideas of intellectual character proposed by Ritchhart (2001, 2002).

Beginnings (2)

The guiding theoretical questions for this project emerge from Ritchhart (2001, 2002). He explores contemporary ideas of effective intelligence, and argues:

- Ability is only part of performance
- There must be the will or inclination to use these abilities, and
- The sensitivity to know when particular abilities are appropriate.

Through exploration of the overlap between some current theories of effective thinking, he proposes the following thinking dispositions.

The disposition to be:
- Openminded
- Curious
- Metacognitive
- A truth seeker
- Strategic
- Skeptical

While it remains important to teach explicitly thinking skills, Ritchhart argues that there has been a problem with transfer: that in the messy world of real problems, we do not always adopt the skills we have learned. So it is important that teachers model these behaviours, but that also they must develop students' awareness of appropriate occasions for using thinking skills, and that there is more to be understood about the ways in which this sensitivity develops. He uses the term "intellectual character" or IC to emphasise an understanding of intelligence that is quite different from that based on fixed measures like IQ.

In order to explore these ideas in the context of both real classrooms and teachers' beliefs and knowledge about their work, the following questions have been central.

- How are the thinking dispositions manifested
  - In different disciplines?
  - At different stages of schooling?
  - In different contexts?
  - With different teachers?

- What are the stages in developing these behaviours?

- How are the components of IC to be seen within regular school practice?
  - How is development of dispositional behaviour to be observed?
  - How is it to be described?
  - How is it to be nurtured?

It was Eisner (1993) who articulated the complex purposes of research in schools.
> *We do research to understand. We try to understand in order to make our schools better places for both the children and the adults who share their lives there. (1993:10).*

It is with this conviction - with the emphasis it places on the complexity of learning and teaching for adults and for students - that we want to talk about some of the layers of our learning this year.

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The first pair of papers – Anne Szujda from Wesley College and Vivienne Powell from MLC – look from different perspectives at the role of team leader in implementing, encouraging and dealing with the challenges – of developing the habit of reflective practice.

The second pair – Alan Bliss and Mark Coleman from Melbourne Grammar School – describe and comment on the usefulness of action research methods in both in looking at teaching and learning, and in developing team cultures.

This is followed by Colleen Abbott and James Brown, who discuss the experience of researcher and researched in the context of a Masters thesis, and the symposium will conclude with different perspectives of the outside, from Sally Godinho from the University of Melbourne, and my own perspective as leader of the project and consultant working within each of the three schools.

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I Introduction Practitioner research is here to stay for language teaching research, if only because of its practitioner development potential, but we need to rethink it. We seem to have got some very important things very wrong.Â be solved by the development of better teaching techniques. Thirdly, this implies that we accept that language teaching and learning can therefore be reduced to a relatively unproblematic, asocial, matter of cause and effect relationships. Many people in our field would probably strenuously reject such behaviourist notions, but many people in our field nevertheless do seem generally to act as if this is what they actually believe.Â So my own professional experience in Rio was telling me how some of the ideas in that Epilogue might actually work out in practice. Table of Contents. Formulating your Research Problem: Simple Methods that Will Help. What is a research problem? How to identify a research problem? What is a statement of a research problem? Basic characteristics of research problem. Formulating your research problem with ease. Specific research objectives. Review the context of your research problem. Why explore the nature of your research problem? Determine variable relationships. What are the consequences of alternative approaches? Structuring your research problem. Tips for defining your research problem. The importance of revising. Do you have a good research problem? What should a formal version be like? Expert assistance: benefits of hiring professional writers. Learning about and with the world ___. Is the work of a life time, occurs within and outside of school. Global competence is a crucial __ in our understanding of the purpose of education in a changing world. Shift, change. Mobile students are usually divided into two groups; Free movers who travels on their own ___, and programme students who use __ programmes. Initative, exchange, plan.Â THE MINISTER of Education today announced that funding would no longer be available for schools of exceptional intellectual ability. "We feel that priority should be given to disadvantaged children, rather than those who are likely to_____. in any case; succeed, be successful.