THE CHALLENGES AND BENEFITS OF INSIDER RESEARCH WITHIN A PROFESSIONAL DOCTORAL STUDY – AN EXPLORATION OF EXPERIENCE AND REVIEW OF CURRENT LITERATURE

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## Abstract

This paper explores the challenges and benefits of conducting research within the researcher’s own educational institution. The paper will also review the current literature on this topic in addition to the experiences of the author whilst undertaking a professional doctorate within the author’s own institution. The aim of the professional doctorate incorporates making a significant contribution to the researcher’s own professional practice. This includes but is not limited to conducting a research study within the researcher’s own practice. The concomitant result is that the researcher is thus classed as an inside researcher. Throughout the paper, the ethical considerations and the personal and professional issues that can be associated with insider research are discussed.

The research on the professional doctorate comprised of the title Collapsing Hierarchies and Dissolving Dichotomies in Higher Education through Subject Specific Communities of Practice and explored the working relationships between two groups of staff at a North Eastern University. The study aimed to critically analyse the working relationships between academic and administrative staff at a post 1992 University in the North East of England. It was anticipated that the final recommendations would demonstrate strategies that, if adopted would enhance the working relationship between the two groups of staff. The aim of the study was not to prove the existence of a particular phenomenon, as there were no preconceived ideas about what the findings would be.

For the study, an interpretative paradigm was adopted, and semi structured interviews were conducted from a sample of staff. Within the study there needed to be an understanding of the position of the researcher and an understanding of the issues that may influence the findings within the study. These issues include, but are not limited to sensitivity towards colleagues, access to participants and bias in terms of analyzing the data. Whilst undertaking the research there were choices that had to be made in terms of the methodological issue of insider research. This paper is not proposing that these choices may suit all research studies, however it offers an insight into the experiences and choices the author was faced with throughout the research. The paper discusses the choices made in the light of research and explores the benefits and challenges of being an insider researcher.

In addition to the choices made in the study the paper will also review literature both from the study and research conducted after the study relating to insider research. The literature, in addition to the strategies used within the study are used to demonstrate how to minimize and, in some cases, alleviate the impact of being an insider researcher. The paper discusses the benefits of being an insider researcher and critiques studies involving insider research whereby the researcher

had to mitigate and minimize challenges throughout the research. The paper argues how the notion of an insider researcher can be of benefit to the study and how recent literature can support this view. This involves the ways in which the author approached this as an insider researcher throughout the study and comparing this to recent studies.

## Keywords: Insider Researcher, Professional Doctorate

**1 INTRODUCTION**

The main focus of the research for this paper derived from the researcher’s thesis and the subsequent analysis of literature surrounding the topic of insider research. This paper explores the challenges and benefits of conducting research within the researcher’s own educational institution. The paper will also review the current literature on this topic in addition to the experiences of the researcher whilst undertaking a professional doctorate within the researcher’s own institution. The aim of the professional doctorate incorporates making a significant contribution to the researcher’s own professional practice. This includes but is not limited to conducting a research study within the researcher’s own practice. To illustrate the context, the thesis was conducted in 2020 and explored the working relationships between the academic and administrative staff at a north Eastern University in England. The researcher was employed at the University at the time of the study and is still employed at the University, albeit in a different role from 2020.

The role of an inside researcher is an individual who has a lived familiarity with the researched group, in comparison to an outsider who has little, or no knowledge of the group being researched, prior to the research commencing. {1} The concomitant result is that the researcher is thus classed as an inside researcher. Throughout the paper, the ethical considerations and the personal and professional issues that can be associated with insider research are discussed.

The role of the insider researcher is usually an additional role to that occupied within the institution that is being researched. The definition of insider research is expanded further by Chavez [2] who discusses the notion of total insiders and partial insiders.  Total insider researchers are defined as those researchers who share multiple identities for example class, ethnicity or have profound experiences with the interviewees.  In comparison, a partial insider would only possess a single identity in common with the respondents or a few identities. As the researcher was employed by the University, where the location for the research was to take place and where the participants for the research study were employed, there was clear evidence of being a total insider researcher. The participants who were interviewed for the research were members of staff who the researcher interacted and work with on a daily basis, although no staff for whom the researcher had line management responsibility for were involved in the interview process. Due to the professional role of the researcher daily interactions occurred with the participants and this aligned with having profound experiences between the researcher and the participants of the study. The insider status of the researcher was emphasised further by having a significant number of years of service and by being a member of operational groups within the institution. Therefore, using this definition by Chavez, the researcher was a total insider due to the position that was held at the institution where the researcher worked and where the subsequent research was conducted.

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**2 METHODOLOGY**

The research was motivated by the researcher’s perception of the communication that was evident between the two groups of staff and in addition between staff members of different grades. Whilst the outcome of the study was not to prove the existence of a particular phenomenon, there was self-motivation due to the experiences the researcher had witnessed occurring over a significant number of years. However, it is vehemently stated that there were no preconceived ideas about what the findings may have revealed.

This research examined directed and reported experiences of the members of staff in the context of their working relationships. The research collected detailed experiences from the participants of their working relationships with other staff members. The aim of the research was to understand the individual cases and to focus on the meanings that the individuals bring to situations. [3] The realities are defined by the experiences of the participants as they engage with the world [4], thus the meaning is created by the individuals. The constructivist position is neither objective nor singular, as there are multiple realities defined by the experiences of the participants. Therefore, the ontological position of the study was constructivist as there are multiple realities constructed by individuals. From a methodological point of view the logic research was inductive in that the focus begins with particular cases and incrementally moves towards more general perspectives.

The epistemological position of the research can be seen to be interpretivist. Within this position the researcher used accounts and observations of others that provide indirect observations of the phenomena. Knowledge is developed through interpreting these observations. [3] It was essentially a study of the experiences of the two groups of staff and their views on the working relationships with each other. This notion is expanded further by the view that interpretivism allows researchers to view the world through the experiences of the participants. This in turn allowed the researcher who is following the interpretative paradigm to use these experiences and perceptions to interpret the understanding from the data that has been collected. [5]

In line with the interpretivist approach the adoption of semi structured interviews fits with such an approach. The use of a semi-structured interview as a research tool was influenced by the work of Brinkmann and Kvale [6] and highlights the ways in which a research interview is a conversation of daily life and knowledge is constructed between the participant and the interviewer.   The nature of focused open-ended questions, with the option of follow up questions as and when required also had synergy with the research design.  It allowed the participants to discuss and expand upon the topic being researched. In line with the interpretivist approach, this also resulted in obtaining multiple perspectives on the topics being researched. Once the method of semi-structured interviews had been deemed appropriate for the study, this underscored the study being qualitative in its nature.

Participants were chosen based on a stratified random sampling method that was systematically developed using the subgroups of academic and administrative and the employment grade of the staff. The benefit of using this approach ensured that the sample included representation across all stagg grades to explore if communication was connected to the grade of the member of staff.

**3 RESULTS**

The focus of this paper is to explore the benefits and limitations of insider researcher and thus the results will incorporate a discussion of the choices made by the researcher and also an overview of literature on insider research. Brannick and Coghlan [7; p60] suggest that we are all insiders of the sub-units of society. They expand upon this by arguing that reflective awareness is a process by which researchers express tacit knowledge and we “reframe is as theoretical knowledge and that because we are close to something or know it well, that we can research it”. This view can be used to explore the connection between the researcher and the participants. Brannick and Coghlan [7] believe that reflexivity can aid to justify the validity of insider research. Teusner [8] supports this view in that reflexivity and reflectivity are valuable to improve the validity of research conducted.

Hockey [9] states that being an insider researcher has the capacity to play a significant part in the whole research process.  Notwithstanding the significance of the role, there were several issues that needed to be taken into account to emphasise the validity of the research. Conversely, there can be significant advantages that an insider researcher can bring to the study.  Both of these areas warrant an in-depth discussion.

Drake and Heath [10] argue that being an inside researcher can be beneficial to a study. An inside researcher understands the setting where the participants are employed and are easily able to access the participants for interviews. This applied to this research by being employed at the same institution as the participants who were interviewed.

To examine the potential challenges of being an insider researcher is to consider each of these points in turn.

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### **Participant Selection**

Chavez [2] suggests that prior to the interviews taking place, the selection process of the participants could create bias.   Insider researchers may choose interviewees who they are familiar with or with whom they have a close working relationship and thus may provide responses that the researcher wishes to hear.  As detailed earlier in the methodology, this was minimised through the stratified random sampling method and whilst the researcher was a team leader for some staff, the decision was taken not to interview any of these members of staff to minimise any bias in the responses provided.  All of the interviewees were known to the researcher prior to the study commencing.

### **Proximity and Shared Knowledge**

An awareness of the proximity between the researcher and the interviewees is needed to minimise or hopefully eradicate any bias.  Drake and Heath [10] state that insider researchers may be seen as placing themselves at a disadvantage in their research due to working within the institution where the research is being conducted.   Contrary to this point, it can be argued that being part of the institution and interviewing individuals who are within the researcher’s area of practice can in fact be advantageous.

As the interviewees and the researcher are both employed at the same institution there exists shared knowledge and cultural understanding between the interviewee and the researcher.  Hodkinson [11] notes that this tends to lead to a more relaxed atmosphere in which to conduct the interview. It can be argued that due to the close proximity of the interviewees, access is easily granted, and data collection is less time consuming. [12] This is of benefit to the researcher due to being able to interview the respondents more easily and can make the process of collecting the data quicker.

The interviews in the study all took place within the University and due to being employed and knowing the staff this did make this part of the process smooth and a lot quicker than if the researcher was employed externally from the University.

Shah [13] suggests that insider researchers usually know their subjects and thus the familiarity could make interviews more in depth.   Platt [14] states that whilst this may at first glance appear to be a positive feature of the research it can result in the interview being more of an everyday conversation within which the researcher does not probe into the responses given. The respondents may or may not respond in depth due to the familiarity aspect and assume that the interviewer “knows” their response due to shared knowledge.  The interviewer Coghlan and Brannick [7] state, due to the prior knowledge and familiarity may make assumptions of the responses prior to the interview. The interviewer may not probe further whilst interviewing as would occur with an outsider researcher. The argument also emphasises that an insider researcher may be too close to the data and throughout the interview may make assumptions due to the sharing of knowledge they have with the respondent.   In line with the interpretivist approach of obtaining multiple viewpoints and the experiences of the participants, the researcher was aware of the importance in adopting strategies to minimise any influence upon the interview from the perspective of the interviewer.

It is vital within insider research that as much information is obtained from the participants from the data collection process as possible so that no information is “assumed” or “guessed” from previous conversations that have taken place between the interviewer and interviewees. [15] There is a need to ask naive or previously known answers to questions in order to guide the interviewees to answer the questions more fully. Hockey [9] emphasises that this also allows a certain distance to be maintained between the interviewer and interviewee and formalises the process of the interview.   Within the study, this issue was addressed within the opening questions that were very general relating to the role at the university that the participant had and the level of communication that they had with administrative or academic staff. As a result of knowing all of the participants, the researcher most likely could have answered these questions, however to minimise bias it was decided not to make any assumptions to the responses to the questions.  These opening questions prompted the interviewees to provide background information and guided the formalisation of the remainder of the interview.

Mercer [12] has conducted research as an inside researcher and during the interviews limited the contributions to the conversation to minimise bias.  This occasionally left pauses in the conversation and non-verbal cues were used such as smiling or nodding and this usually encouraged the respondents to complete their sentence.  This was a tactic that was followed within the study, and the researcher was conscious never to complete sentences for the interviewees, even if it was obvious what their full answer may be.

### **Familiarity**

An insider researcher possesses knowledge of the organisation being researched and due to this familiarity aspect; this may be valuable to the study. [8] Insider researchers generally know the politics of the institution, the hierarchy and how the particular institution works. They may be aware of the context and can perceive links between situations. Insider researchers have a significant amount of knowledge that would take an outsider a long time to achieve.  Indeed, the researcher had a significant period of service at the University and thus had acquired a considerable level of knowledge within this time.

### **Distortion of Results**

Zinn [16] argues that interviewees are more likely to present insider researchers with a distorted image in comparison to outside researchers.   Hockey [9] states that they are likely to respond to insider researchers to present the image that they feel they should portray or that which they believe is typical or expected of them.   The interviewees in the study knew who the researcher was and were aware of the role the researcher had within the faculty and thus may have filtered their responses to what they believe the researcher wished to hear. It is not possible, nor would it be bias free if there was control over how interviewees responded to questions, and this is true even as an outside researcher.  It was the researcher’s view that the role of the interviewer was to obtain honest answers from the interviews. This was achieved through careful and detailed questions. There was also the need to seek clarification with the responses given and ask probing questions of the interviewees.

 In addition, Chavez [2] states that due to the familiarity aspect of the researcher and the interviewee, it will be evident if the interviewee is responding in their “normal” way compared to their “performed” self. It is the belief of Shah [13] that although the interviewees may have better rapport with the interviewer due to the working relationships, people may not share certain information with an insider researcher for fear that they may be judged as they have to continue to work with the researcher after the research. In addition, the interviewee may believe they already know the interviewer’s opinions and so tailor their answers to fit in with this. For this study, although some colleagues knew about the research, the researcher never explicitly expressed their own opinion to others as to why the research was being conducted or indeed what the findings may illustrate. For the conducting of the interviews, the researcher did respond to any questions asked for clarification but never asked any leading questions or expressed their own views on the topic.

Teusner [8] discusses the notion of reflexivity for insider research whereby the relationship between the researcher and subject is explored by the researcher.  The process of reflexivity must begin with the researcher taking into consideration any preconceptions from previous professional experiences that they have about possible outcomes and perspectives of the study. [17]

Naturally, the researcher did have assumptions as to the responses that may be received from the participants, due to the experiences that had witnessed over their working career.  Indeed, if these assumptions and experiences did not exist the research would never have taken place. It was some of these prior thoughts that initially gave the researcher the desire to investigate the topic further and obtain the views and experiences of academic and administrative staff on this topic.   The researcher was wholly aware that the prior assumptions that they possessed could be viewed in a negative light by outsiders of the project and was totally aware that impartiality was vital throughout the entire research to try to eradicate this. These prior assumptions could not feature in the analysis as the study is inductive. By following the constructivism ontology there are no assumptions prior to the collection of the data.

### **Role Identity**

As an insider researcher, it is stated by Unluer [15] that the researcher possesses a dual identity.  Namely for this study as a member of administrative staff and also that of the researcher of the study.   Hanson [18] expands on this topic further by stating that a dual identity can pose a threat to the validity of the project, as there is a need for acceptance and trust with the interviewees.    Insider researchers have evidence of a certain degree of tension between their professional role within their organisation and that of the role as a researcher. To address this issue, the researcher did not reveal any findings from the interviews with staff members, with the exception of the supervisory team.  As Unluer [15] states this enables the trust from the interviewees in the responses that they provide. This was explained to all interviewees at the onset of the interviews.

The researcher is initially an insider due to their professional role within the organisation. This changes once you start researching your own community of practice as sometimes you can be viewed as an outsider by colleagues.   They may not see you as a colleague with whom they work but as a researcher asking questions about their views and opinions on a particular topic.

**CONCLUSIONS**

Th experience of an insider researcher is unique for each individual. This papers explores the experiences of the researcher to offer an insight into the challenges and benefits experiences within one doctoral study of being an insider researcher. The paper considers how the issues were alleviated and minimized and takes into account literature surrounding the topic of insider research.

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