THE CHALLENGES AND BENEFITS OF INSIDER RESEARCH WITHIN A PROFESSIONAL DOCTORAL STUDY

Dr Deborah Bell

University of Sunderland

Abstract

This paper explores the challenges and benefits of conducting research within the researcher’s own educational institution. The paper will review the 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. The definition 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 (Griffith, 1998). The unique position of the researcher can potentially make a difference on the overall results (Costley, Elliott and Gibbs 2010).

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. A basic premise of this research considered that even if the data obtained from the two groups of staff did not highlight any problems, proposed suggestions could always be made to make improvements to the working relationship between the academic and administrative members of staff if the staff desired to do so.

The external environment in which universities operate has vastly changed over the last 40 years and there is now a lot of survival pressure on universities in the UK. There has been a rise of neo-liberalist philosophy, which has brought about high levels of surveillance and top-down bureaucratic approaches to quality improvement. The notion of performativity of academic staff has been introduced (Ball, 2003) and in practical terms this relates to the publication of results, annual reviews and inspections. It is such measures that academic staff as Ball states are being continuously monitored and judged upon within their role. This level of surveillance and underpinning processes provide some insight into how dichotomies and hierarchies are constructed in the workplace in HEIs. These changes have resulted in according to Conway (2014) a need for an effective working relationship between academic and administrative staff.

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. For instance, an insider researcher can easily access the participants and there are not issues in terms of travel. However, as access is more easily available this can result in the interview becoming more informal and the data not being as rich as the same interviews conducted by an outside researcher (Hockey, 1993). 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 literature and through a process of self-reflection. The work of Griffith 1998 and Costley, Elliott and Gibbs 2010 will be examined along with other research in this area.

This paper aims to address the insider research issues considered both prior to the interviews and in the subsequent analysis. The unique position of an inside researcher needs to consider this methodological issue and this paper will aim to highlight how this was addressed within the author’s doctoral study.

**References**

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