Self as instrument - case studies in VET research

We have moved on fro the days of researchers as disassociated, white-coated inspectors. In many case study phases of VET research the researcher becomes the primary instrument of the study. There is a blur between the role of researcher and the participants. This is an incremental process as observation and interviews generate organisational space for the researcher and a network of growing dialectical relations. The researcher becomes a live and reactive instrument involved in continual decision making to balance objectives with opportunity, relational building with informational acquisition, and involvement with detachment. The interaction is mutually mediating as the researcher learns about the patterns of practice and the actors learn about the patterns of the research. Managing actors become even more conscious of identity and direction.

Preparation for this role involves self development from relevant literature reviews but relies strongly on a wide variety of personal experiences within organisations and mentoring by leading researchers. There is a need to infiltrate, negotiate with, and secure deep longitudinal case study access with organisations establishing trust and rapport (Patton 1990, p. 251). This process is described by Johnson (1996, p. 5) who indicates the incremental and holistic nature of the participant observer.

> *The task ….is to 'get inside' the group the researcher is studying. The researcher may see the first task of familiarising himself with its day to day realities. Ultimately the researcher hopes to present a picture, a model, an account that constantly expands in size and complexity as the researcher gains access to new information...*
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> *...different techniques are combined to throw light on a common problem. Besides viewing the problem from a number of angles, this triangulation' approach also facilitates the cross-checking or otherwise of tentative findings.*

Balancing the requirements of maintaining a positive non-threatening image to ensure research access (Harper 1994), with the research needs of extending the network and probing for contrary data is complex. The researcher has to create multiple identities to integrate seamlessly into diverse organisational situations, each with differing rules and norms (Merriam 1998, p. 95). It is not only necessary to blend in with multiple situations but to pursue different emphasis as the study progresses but to ‘ balance the dual demands’ (Le Compte & Preissele 1993, p. 204), moving from detached observer to active contributor, and from group member, to case-author seeking feedback, depending on the climate of each situation and the demands of the research process. There are significant cognitive difficulties in navigating the micro and macro cycles of passing from participant to observer, and rapidly changing language, self and identity in a schizoid way (Patton 1990, p. 260).

While the precision of other research instruments is determined through a series of professional choices, participant observation is a continual act of discrimination, where the research determines which aspects of practice are critical as ‘ nobody can attend to them all’ (Merriam 1998, p 95.). While gatekeepers who open organisational doors remain primary targets for relational maintenance, each organisational actor and

artefact may become a focus of attention, or key informant, depending on both research intent and the serendipity of situational interaction. In many case studies the researcher is eventually given the opportunity to operate alone in the field, contacting organisational members and making arrangements to locate preferred key informants and following specific individuals and groups rather the spreading the research focus more diffusely.

As the research progresses, the initial formal sites of research, within buildings and meetings in the day time, may increasingly change to off site discussions in cafes, restaurants and pubs in the evening. Similarly, initial emphasis on formal interviews, where previous skills and 'control 'of data collection can be exercised, incrementally may shift towards observational and conversational interactions.

Patton (1990, p. 226) indicates that participant observation is 'necessarily a combination of observing and making formal interviews'. However, Le Compte and Preissle (1993, p 165) would add that participant construct, confirmatory, and projective surveys also form part of the possible interactions, as well as data mining from archival records and demographic data banks, artefact collection and physical trace collection, collating the generation of artefacts and they subsequent use. Le Compte and Preissle (1993) perhaps find the most appropriate description for this phase of participant researcher in the deep case studies by describing such researchers as 'methodological omnivores'. Descriptions of samples and instruments are perhaps less valuable at this stage than the field context that created the evidence collection process.

Gender is a key issue that should be considered in the social ecology of case studies, and is usually the one constant characteristic in the chameleon like participant observer act (Patton 1990, p. 222).

The researcher 'as instrument' often drives the selection and interaction of interviews, the distribution of questionnaires, the recording of observations, the taking of pictures and the scanning of records. However, considerable informal material may be collected through field notes. As Le Compte and Preissle (1993, p. 227) indicate 'any record is better than no record at all'. These notes often consist of the most accurate record that can be taken as close to the time of action, as resources and the situational climate indicated was applicable. As Le Compte and Preissle (1993, p. 228) indicate, social situation dictates the size of format, the degree of public activity acceptable and time of recording. Field notes are often multiple in their character and consistently made a clear distinction between words of participants and paraphrasing, and between concrete observations and interpretations, using only one side of sheets, and separating context from conversation. Le Compte and Preissle (1993) quote several researchers in recommending intermittent observation and consolidation of notes.

Reflective journal notes can be made before the case study period begins, recording research process issues and emerging questions for subsequent stages. This promotes an incrementally evolving structure concerning *which* organisational actors are required to respond to *what* specific questions. Interactional protocols, specifically those for interviewing can be balanced between continually pursuing specific and enduring questions, while also changing and adding new and emerging lines of

inquiry. As a participant observer, emerging meaning informs particular questions, but the insight creates new questions in an iterative network of interaction.

The participant observer is continually wrestling with impression management (Fontana & Frey 1994). Recording conversations, attitudes and way of seeing the world is frustrated by the material traces of observations and records that produce conflicting or competing theories. What people say is often different from what do and what they think. This is particularly true in an environment where organisational actors are engaging with a new phenomenon, disturbing relations and re shaping relations,

> *….by highlighting existing deficiencies, or raising awkward issues which would take time to address. The culture of the organisation also did not reward those who identified problems, and encouraged them to be covered up instead. Rogers1994, p. 5-7*

The participant researcher has the opportunity to progressively slip inside the organisational actor guard, through repeated interactions and questions, while the organisational actors progressively exercises less impression management to the socialised participant observer. Douglas (1976, p. 91/92) indicates why prolonged research engagement is necessary to locate hidden meaning.

> *....the researcher can expect that in certain settings, the members (subjects) will misinform him, evade him, lie to him... This would be true in organised, ostensibly rationalised settings, like bureaucracies. And it is precisely those who are most knowledgeable about these kinds of problems, the managers and organisational entrepreneurs, who will do most to keep him from learning about the conflicts, contradictions, inconsistencies, gaps and uncertainties. The reason for this is simply that they are the ones responsible for making things rational, organised, scientific and legal.*

The great advantage of the longitudinal participant observer relationship is that it provides the opportunity for an iterative data collection process, and it provides the opportunity to mirror interpretations to the organisational actors by presenting them with findings and interpretations of their performance. This review of interaction enables organisational actors to reflect on the emerging interpretation for and conflicting perceptions and inconsistencies. Ethnographic work often provides a 'thicket of uninterpretable data' (Erickson 1986, p. 152) and while each interaction shifts the focus of the subsequent interaction, intermittently the researcher needs to reflect interpretation back to the organisational actors (Holstein & Gubrium 1994). This can be done informally though discussions about patterns and meaning with key informants at appropriate spaces, and through more formal vignettes concerning particular aspects of practice or concerning the shape of the case as a whole. Richardson (1994) argues that writing or presenting emerging relationships for case study subjects is a way of doing research, in the way that subsequent drafts of a thesis are not! Oral presentations can also be made to groups within the case study organisations, providing immediate feedback on the emerging conceptualisation of their own performances. Similarly vignettes and draft academic papers can also circulated to other researchers or mentors associated with the context and subject of the research. The irony that exists is that the more the researcher can identify and

understand emic perspectives, the greater the difficulty in achieving an etic perspective.

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