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“Why Exploratory Practice?” A report by:

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Introduction

Judith: On 6 May 2015, the Centre for Language Education Research (CLER), University of Leeds, hosted a one-day Seminar: *“Why Exploratory Practice?”*

There were 45+ participants from all over the world. Some were local to Leeds, others came from Birmingham, London, York, while others flew in from Belgium and Brazil. Participants adjusted their busy schedules to attend for an hour between lessons, or the whole day. There was a vibrant atmosphere as discussions ranged over recent developments in the Exploratory Practice (EP) group in Rio de Janeiro, as well as in EP in English for Academic Purposes (EAP), and EP as a form of Continuous Professional Development (CPD). The day ended with an open floor, in which questions such as how to convey the enjoyment we get from EP, while also remaining self-critical and self-aware, were discussed.

The following report exemplifies EP: different participants share their experiences for all to read and discuss. The day was also videoed, and clips will shortly be available on the Exploratory Practice Facebook page, and the University of Leeds website.

‘Posters from Rio de Janeiro: an inductive Exploratory Practice experience’

Inés: As representatives of the EP Group in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, we brought illustrative posters to the Seminar and invited participants to work inductively to infer what exploratory teachers and learners from different contexts in Rio do to enrich their

understandings of what happens in their classrooms.

Participants with different backgrounds worked in groups to imagine what might have happened in the contexts where the posters were produced. They tried to guess who was involved and why the activity was implemented. This discussion generated opportunities for participants to analyze how regular pedagogic activities are adapted as Potentially Exploitable Pedagogic Activities (PEPAs).

Interestingly, cultural perspectives were projected onto each poster and some participants needed more background information than others. Among the emerging questions were:

- How did the class move from the initial moments to the final poster?
- What language was spoken to produce this poster?
- Did this activity give the learners some control?
- Who made the poster(s): student teachers, pre-service or in-service (experienced) teachers?
- Or... was it pupils talking about their teachers?

Many participants were surprised to find that the posters were created by elementary school students, and not teachers at all.

By working to understand this material, participants could discuss definitions of EP and its underlying rationale, as developed in collaboration with Dick Allwright (Lancaster, UK) and the Rio de Janeiro EP Group. Such notions as 'Planning for understanding' and 'Quality of Classroom Life', which characterize the theoretical foundations of the EP framework, were introduced.

Clarissa: As the principles of EP are both the framework and the methodology for academic research, I, a research-practitioner from Rio, presented questions raised during the process of writing my PhD thesis.

I developed a Potentially Exploitable Reflective Activity (PERA) to understand my puzzle: Why is it so difficult to write about Exploratory Practice? Using the principles of Quality of Life for all, of mutual understanding and inclusivity, I asked teachers in the EP Group, Rio, to share their understandings of what EP meant for them. As EP involved their personal and their professional lives, many shared my difficulty, and also

faced issues of multiple-identity-construction in their relations with other practitioners, including learners. Trying to define 'lived experiences' in the classroom and in other contexts was complex; the relationship between concepts and their definitions was hard to understand. However, these attempts to explain the deep meaning(s) of EP meant developing shared understandings of our repertoires. This was fulfilling for both the Group and me.

Carolina: I investigated how the principles and the philosophical approach of EP contribute to my work as an Educational Psychologist in a private bilingual school in Rio.

An ethical, collaborative, respectful approach to teaching and learning can benefit not only teachers and students, but also families, educational psychologists, and outside agencies working with those referred to the Ed. Psychology Section. This ethos of respect is crucial as practitioners endeavor to build 'deeper understandings' of their practices and the quality of the interpersonal relationships built in school.

In two professional meetings involving the school educational psychologist (me) and the teachers of class 7 (11-12 year-olds), we co-constructed 'bullying and cyber bullying' as a puzzling theme. Subsequently, the teachers and I planned an Exploratory Dynamic together, based on the premises of EP. In the session I presented the Potentially Therapeutic Reflexive Activity (PTRA) that triggered the discussion. This was intended to arouse the curiosity of the students and encourage free association and narratives about their hardship in school.

It elicited a puzzle from the students: 'Why does the class struggle to be together?' After their discussion, students produced graphics which analysed their difficulties in socialising. All (teachers, learners and psychologist) gained greater insight into the struggles of school life.

Sabine: I brought excerpts from an on-going practitioner research project dedicated to the construction of a collaborative thesis. Based in Rio, it includes a PhD student, university professor, eight undergraduates, and a state school English teacher.

Starting with: "What is the difference between academic and common-sense

knowledge?” and: “Why do we write about research following the structure of chapters including a literature review, a methodology and an analysis, when we know that they do not guarantee a sound methodological process?”, we worked to understand our experiences with academic genre.

We designed five PEPAs and the original puzzles multiplied, eg “Why do people feel trapped by some academic situations?”. Working with this question, we created an on-line activity where students were invited to generate “Keep Calm and...” posters, completing the sentence with whatever bothered them in academic life:

- "Keep Calm and... he thinks he is a PhDivinity"
- "Keep Calm and... I have narrowed my monographic paper's theme so much that I don't even recognize it anymore"
- "Keep Calm and... my teachers are mistaking me for an assignment-writing machine".

EP offers a means to express subjective issues related to Quality of Life. These are normally invisible in academic texts and researchers appear detached from common-sense experience. Collaborative writing projects could help design a more inclusive narrative-based genre to report complex research processes.

Our work also suggests that puzzles are analytical per se. Presenting an analysis in the Why-question format, instead of the traditional theory-data model, could make it less definite/defining and more representative of an infinite process of co-constructing understandings relevant to the community involved.

‘Engagement is a two way process’

Assia: I presented a study of CPD working with academics from Business Studies in Higher Education who wished to understand their students’ lack of engagement with their teaching. Using the principles of enhancing Quality of Life, understanding, mutual development and inclusivity, the teachers began to realise why they saw their learners as passive. Although they described their teaching as interactive and enabling learners to contribute to the teaching events, their analysis of their classroom data highlighted discursal features, which showed that they did not, in effect, honour their students’ contributions. Instead, the teachers observed themselves

- monopolising classroom discourse
- prioritising their own agenda and time
- ignoring learners' responses and enquiries which deviated from their planned topics
- providing little opportunity for learners to tap into their background knowledge
- continuing to explain their points even when the learners had already shown clear evidence of knowledge

Following the analysis, the teachers realised that engagement is a two-way process. They also needed to engage with the students if they wished them to engage with their teaching.

'Exploratory Practice in EAP'

Judith: We presented our perspectives on the process of EP becoming part of our practice in EAP. We were particularly pleased to be able to share the platform, enabling the audience to hear ALL our voices.

We started by looking at the things we normally do in EAP, eg project work, oral presentations, and writing assignments. We wondered how to utilise 'normal pedagogic practices' from our EAP world as 'investigative tools'?

We then considered what puzzled us, and asked our students what puzzled them:

Jess: When one of my students ('Ted') puzzled about "Why do we learn bad words more easily?" I needed to take a risk: would he take it seriously, or was it just an excuse to say rude words in class? Taking that risk made me feel it was a more level playing field. Being honest with the students; admitting you don't know all the answers is something teachers are rarely able to do. But it was exciting for Ted to be able to choose his own question, and for me hearing his answers. The outcome was insightful work, with a desire to carry on studying, and a re-aligning of the teacher/student dynamic.

Bee: My puzzle was "Why can't Middle Eastern students spell?". I shared the question with my students, and gained some insights from their first responses. I talked to colleagues in EAP, went to a primary school to learn from them, and read books/articles. The students became interested in my puzzle too, and they talked, thought, compared ideas and came back with more insights. I then tried out different

materials and tasks which might help their spelling. Subsequently, my new puzzle developed: “Where does EP fit?” is it research, practice, or scholarship?

Judith: My initial puzzle was “Why don’t we do EP in EAP?”. Working together, we critically examined some challenges this raised, eg:

- gravitas?
- motivation?
- fear of losing control?

Handing over control to learners, taking them seriously, enabled their/our creativity, leading to greater motivation. Students ran up the stairs to join their EP class, even when they had missed earlier classes. I saw learners and teachers enjoying their mutual development; gaining greater understanding of what puzzled them, and others, and hence of the difficulties we all face.

Discussions

Dick: In this session, people who had some personal experience of EP sat at different tables and answered questions from newcomers about the ideas and practices that EP represents. To avoid that becoming a mini-lecture we also provided a short-list of potential topics for discussion. After thirty minutes we opened the floor with: “What is there to say?”

Discussions were wide-ranging and we include just two summaries here to give a ‘flavour’ of the questions raised.

Ana: I started by highlighting the importance of the EP principles in my own practice. This resonated with most. One person argued that parents would prefer a more instrumental education for their children. However, most of the group supported a view of education where practitioners have the space and autonomy to collaboratively develop their creativity and own understandings of issues relevant to them, in the classroom.

The second part of the discussion revolved around EP’s scope. Because EP is a synthesis of different theoretical frameworks, it seems difficult to pin down what it tries to be: a stance, a methodology, a philosophy, or an epistemology. Questions asked

were: Due to its broad scope might it lack academic credibility and be left academically isolated? Do all the different aspects need to be accepted as a whole?

Yasmin: The following points were raised: if we agree that EP is a mind-set, why should we share it? In response, we agreed that like-minded people need to have a platform to share ideas and support each other. Another key point was raised: how many EP projects have been implemented around the world? We suggested that sharing EP work on social media as well as publications such as ELTJ would reach a wider audience.

Conclusion

Judith: The Seminar was a day for coming together, for sharing and developing our ideas. Some people were ‘old hands’ who had been working with the EP framework for decades, while others were encountering EP for the first time. This made for lively discussions, as those who come from more traditional research-oriented backgrounds struggled with the notion of integrating research into pedagogy, while newcomers from a teaching-oriented background could understand the concepts and relate them to their own situations more quickly.

In the spirit of Exploratory Practice, this article is the work of many hands, working together and working also for mutual development. In all, we gained many insights through these rigorous and unflinching questioning processes. We hope you have enjoyed reading about it, and look forward to welcoming you to our next event.