http://sleid.cqu.edu.au 3(2), pp. 66–78. October 2006

A team approach to researching Australian traveller education: Three perspectives on integrating theory, method and writing

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Abstract

The intersection of theory, method and writing is a contentious and crucial site in which educational researchers can and must reflect self-critically on the effectiveness and significance of their research endeavours. Both the need for, and the potential benefits of, conducting such reflection are magnified when a team of researchers is involved. This paper discusses the deployment of three different but complementary approaches—dialogism, co-operative community and performance space—to integrating theory, method and writing in an ongoing study of Australian Traveller education. A team approach to achieving and reflecting on that integration encourages crossfertilisation among the selected approaches, and contributes to their ongoing theorisation; it also constitutes a useful strategy for ongoing reflective practice and for promoting continuing professional learning in the authors' contemporary workplaces.

This article has been peer-reviewed and accepted for publication in *SLEID*, an international journal of scholarship and research that supports emerging scholars and the development of evidence-based practice in education.

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Introduction

In this paper the three authors, all members of a longstanding team researching the education of Australian occupational Travellers, reflect on their individual experiences in an evolving team approach to the methodological dimension of research. Specifically, three distinct perspectives are presented on the integration of theory, method and writing that is crucial to the success of a research enterprise, whether collaborative or otherwise. A team approach to achieving and reflecting on that integration makes the study conceptually richer and methodologically stronger.

After a description of the research team's project, the three perspectives are outlined: dialogism, co-operative community and performance space. In each case, the focus is on how the respective lenses function at three levels: theorising the field of Traveller education; designing and conducting research in Traveller education; and writing and publishing the research findings about Traveller education. The differences as much as the similarities among those perspectives

receive attention: the perspectives are complementary but not interchangeable. On the other hand, no single perspective is privileged over the others, and each makes a valid and valued contribution to understanding how occupational Travellers experience education. Similarly, it is important to note that other conceptual resources have been deployed in the team members' publications, such as actornetwork theory (Law & Callon, 1992; Lee & Brown, 1994) and border pedagogy (Giroux, 1990). The ones depicted here reflect the authors' current concerns. The paper concludes with some suggested links between the findings of this paper and a broader focus on the concept of reflective practices in the context of efforts to promote professional learning in contemporary workplaces.

Background to researching Australian traveller education

Since 1992, a team of researchers located at different campuses of Central Queensland University, including but not restricted to this paper's authors (one of whom has subsequently moved to the University of Southern Queensland), has investigated the influences on, the character of and the reception by its clients of educational provision for Australian occupational Travellers. Occupational Travellers are people whose livelihood requires them routinely to adopt a mobile lifestyle, and include circus performers, deep sea fisherpeople, defence force personnel, seasonal farm workers and show people. Between 1992 and 1996, the research focused on people who follow the eastern and central Australian circuits of the Showmen's Guild of Australasia, research that resulted in the publication of a book (Danaher, 1998), a Doctor of Philosophy thesis (Danaher, 2001) and several journal articles and conference papers, some with a Venezuelan colleague (see for example Danaher, 1995, 2000; Danaher & Danaher, 2000). In 1998, the team turned its attention to the education of Australian circus performers, research that to date has yielded a number of journal articles, book chapters and conference papers (see for example Anteliz & Danaher, 2000; Danaher, Moriarty, & Hallinan, 2000; Moriarty, 2004). In 2003, the team and an Irish colleague revisited the show people, whose children since 2000 had been studying with the Queensland School for Travelling Show Children; this follow-up study led to a research report (Moriarty, Danaher, Kenny, & Danaher, 2004) and to further journal articles and book chapters, some in collaboration with the school principal (see for example Anteliz, Danaher, & Danaher, 2004; Danaher, Moriarty, & Danaher, 2004; Fullerton, Danaher, Moriarty, & Danaher, 2004; Fullerton, Moriarty, Danaher, & Danaher, 2005).

The group's research methods to date have had a qualitative orientation, using audiotaped, semi-structured interviews with travelling children, their parents, their home tutors, their teachers, other members of the travelling communities and officers of Education Queensland. The researchers have practised a team approach to grounded theory (Corbin & Holt, 2005; Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1990; Sultana, 1991; Tuettemann, 1999), whereby findings of increasing generalisation are constantly checked against data collected "in the field" and lead to theory building. The team's refinement of this method has exploited the fact that team membership has remained relatively stable throughout the research project, by maximising possibilities for "validating" findings against the researchers' diverse research interests and paradigmatic frameworks. A more recent methodological development within the team has been consciously to conceive of themselves as a co-operative community (Johnson & Johnson, 1998), a point that is elaborated later in the paper.

This snapshot encapsulates the framework within which the following three accounts of integrating theory, method and writing are located. The research project thus has a dynamism and vitality that makes it larger than, but at the same time dependent on, any single team member's contribution. It is these twin features of the project—its extension beyond any single team member and its simultaneous dependence on team member interactions—that are explored in this paper. More broadly, this approach resonates with contemporary research into teams, including moderator teams working with focus groups (Prince & Davies, 2001). It articulates also with current scholarship in qualitative research, including the sociocultural impact of such research (Weiss & Fine, 2004), the notion of writing as a method of inquiry (Richardson & St Pierre, 2005), the links between writing the social contexts in which it takes place (Smith, 1999) and writing understood as dialogical theory building (Lather, 1986).

Dialogism

Theory

For the Russian philosopher of language Mikhail Bakhtin, the concept of dialogue underpinned his theories of language, literature and the self. For Bakhtin (1984), dialogue also had a much wider importance:

Dialogic relationships are a much broader phenomenon than mere rejoinders in a dialogue laid out compositionally in the text; they are an almost universal phenomenon, permeating all human speech and all relationships and manifestations of human life—in general, everything that has meaning and significance. (p. 40)

Bakhtin contrasted dialogue with "monologisation", the process by which dialogue is turned into "an empty form and a lifeless interaction" (Morson & Emerson, 1990, p. 57). A key difference between "dialogical" and "monological" texts is their degree of "voicedness": "dialogical" texts are "double-voiced", with writer and reader communicating directly with each other and hearing each other's voices, whereas "monological" texts allow only the writer's voice to be heard and are therefore "single-voiced". In other words, Bakhtinian dialogue (or dialogism, which is understood here as the principles underpinning and framing dialogue) is conceived as a set of multivocal processes.

A crucial point about dialogism is that it does not provide a view of human interactions as natural or neutral, but rather as situated and politicised. Stam (1989) presented a useful synthesis of Bakhtin's politicised understanding of language:

To speak of language, without speaking of power, in a Bakhtinian perspective is to speak meaninglessly, in a void. For Bakhtin, language is thus everywhere imbricated with asymmetries of power. Patriarchal domination and economic dependency make sincere interlocution impossible. There is no 'neutral' utterance; language is everywhere shot through with intentions and accents; it is material, multiaccentual, and historical, and is densely overlaid with the traces of its historical tangents. (Cited in Pearce, 1994, p. 11)

These two axes of dialogism—the "double-voicedness" and the politicisation of language—constitute a powerful lens for theorising Traveller education. A key assumption in this approach is that the mobile lifestyle of groups such as circus and

show people constructs them as "other" to, and hence less powerful than, people of fixed residence. Educational provision is predicated on students living in permanent locations, regardless of whether those locations are physically contiguous with or distant from teachers and classrooms. Given that Travellers deviate from this "norm" of fixed residence, they must communicate, effectively and convincingly, their specialised learning needs to educational authorities if they are to receive appropriate and equitable education unless. Dialogism provides a means of conceptualising why and how Travellers engage in this process of communication with educational providers. The process is "double-voiced" because the Travellers need to understand such matters as the providers' funding restrictions and priorities at the same time that the providers need to understand the rhythms and routines of learning "on the move" that frame and constrain their potential forms of educational provision. The process is politicised because of the understanding that dialogical participants are differentially positioned and valued, and therefore have more or less strength in the "speaking positions" that they occupy.

Method

Dialogism also provides the basis for an appropriate method in researching Traveller education. The principle of "double-voicedness" requires that researchers and research participants listen attentively to one another and interpret their utterances not "at face value" but instead with due consideration of context and motivation. At the same time, researchers need to recognise and carry out the ethical responsibilities arising from their position of relative power "over" research participants. This means that they must constantly check that the participants fully comprehend the purposes and intended outcomes of the research, that they feel comfortable with the research process and that they have some sense of ownership of that process. Dialogism is crucial to highlighting the politicised nature of research method and the ongoing reciprocal communication necessary to ensure its mutual benefit to participants and researchers. Dialogism is vital also in rendering explicit and open to interrogation stakeholders' convergent and divergent interests in a research project, hopefully leading to enhanced openness and understanding.

Writing

In addition to theory and method, dialogism constitutes an appropriate approach to writing about Traveller education research. The writing of this paper exemplifies that approach. The three authors are friends as well as colleagues, despite their location at two physically distant campuses of one university and more recently at an even more distant campus of another university. The authors have some similarities of outlook and personality, yet they also exhibit considerable diversity in educational specialisation and paradigm. The contemporary higher education sector encourages competition, yet the researchers have written many more collaborative than single-authored publications. The communications in writing this paper reflect both the authors' shared interest in Traveller education and their heterogeneous conceptual frameworks. In writing the paper, therefore, the authors need through dialogism to allow individual contributors' voices to be heard and valued equally, and also consciously to eschew a competitive style of working for one that is collegial and collaborative. This applies equally to the authors' aforementioned collaborative writing with the principal of the Queensland School for Travelling Show Children and with international researchers in Traveller education.

Thus dialogism is one perspective on researching Australian Traveller education that integrates theory, method and writing. Such integration occurs when the processes of the authors' interactions with the "field" of Traveller education, the research participants and their fellow researchers attend to the "double-voiced" and politicised dimensions of the language that is used. Inevitably this brief account of those processes has effaced many of the dilemmas and potential conflicts that we have encountered in moving towards that integration. This is an important point: dialogism is far more about "process" than "product", and in fact requires an ongoing attentiveness to new opportunities and possibilities rather than leads to closure and fulfilment. As Morson and Emerson (1990) pointed out, "Both dialogue and the potentials of dialogue are endless. No word can be taken back, but the final word has not yet been spoken and never will be spoken" (p. 52).

The significant contribution that dialogism makes to integrating theory, method and writing in the research project is that it provides particular conceptual and methodological resources for engaging with the crucial point that texts such as policy documents and interview transcripts are not politically innocent or neutral, but instead contain traces of broader discursive flows and tensions related to the educational marginalisation, resistance and transformation of occupational Travellers. These resources also equip the authors to identify and take up the ethical and political challenges and dilemmas confronting researchers in this field, including in the context of writing about the research findings. Furthermore, through its focus on multivocal processes, dialogism lends itself to the authors' team approach to researching and writing. At the same time, dialogism benefits from the emphasis on shared goals and interests leading to continuing and sustainable activity provided by co-operative community, and also from the contingent and situated understandings of actions and their effects presented by performance space.

Co-operative community

Johnson and Johnson (1998) presented what is arguably one of the most lucid and succinct summary descriptions of the essential principles underpinning successful co-operative communities, as defined by research evidence. The driving force behind this paper is an extension of the fifth principle described by the Johnsons: group processing, or reflection on practice. The authors have taken the time to examine some of the implications of their team approach to researching Australian Traveller education, focusing on their individual contributions and team interactions with reference to theory, method and writing.

At one level and in other contexts (for example, Moriarty, Hallinan, Danaher, & Danaher, 2000), the authors have used Johnson and Johnson's (1998) description of co-operative communities to analyse their team approach to research. The present paper represents an example of how the interactions that have occurred among the researchers have led to a more complex analysis and understanding of education in the circus context as reflected in this piece of writing. These interactions have been based on individual theoretical persuasions and the methods that have been used in the research.

Theory

One of the questions that was raised among team members in 1998 when they first began to look at the education of circus people related to how circuses as institutions had managed to survive for so long. It became evident that circus

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communities consisted of members whose lives were highly interdependent in a positive sense. Through talking with and observing many circus personnel, it was concluded that co-operative community theory described very aptly the relationships that existed among circus people and at least partly answered the question of survival. In summary, circus communities practised the five basic elements that Johnson and Johnson (1998) had found to be essential for effective co-operation: positive interdependence; individual accountability; promotion of one another's success; interpersonal and small group skills; and group processing, or reflection on practice. These were the same five principles that the research team had been using for some time to underpin the ways that its team members work together.

The next dilemma that the research team faced was the question of whether the application of the Johnsons' theory to circus community operations was too simplistic. Were the intersection of the existing theory, only fairly recently refined, and its application to the established operations of groups of circus people too good to be true? At the very least, it might have been expected that there would be a certain amount of qualification of the theory when it was applied to practice.

Two possible expansions on the case then emerged. One application related to examining how circuses responded to potential threats to their existence, such as when animal liberation became a serious concern, and the other application related to the intersection of theory, as represented through the individual theoretical persuasions of members of the research team. The animal liberation issue and the influence of dialogism were therefore key turning points in the analysis.

Possible threats to the continuation of the circus as a way of life and as a mode of entertainment have appeared over time. Circuses have often been family affairs, with successive generations remaining on the circuit. Even in Australia with its relatively short colonial and post-colonial history, a number of well-known family names have been associated with circuses. Different circuses might be considered to be in competition with one another because of their need to remain financially viable but it has been clear that, when external threats appear, they do not hesitate to help one another. These threats may be localised as, for example, when storm damage creates serious difficulties for a particular circus, or more global, such as in the case of animal liberation.

The educational implications associated with the wave of animal liberation across the country that has been prominent in the news at particular times may not be immediately apparent. While "new generation" circuses have been able to avoid the debates around the use of animals, those circuses that have always had animals as key features and attractions have had to go through periods of self-education to understand the debates and work towards solutions. Some resistance has appeared at times prior to circuses visiting towns and circus personnel have been in positions in which they have needed to educate local authorities about the facts of their case in order to be accepted. As a group trained in the art of performance but not specifically in education, they have had to become teachers and ambassadors. To do this they have been able to draw on other aspects of their lives within a cooperative community, such as when they have helped one another learn new skills or reflect on performances, and then apply what they have learned to the next performance. This is an aspect of circus operations in which broad interpretations of education in its sociological and political dimensions, juxtaposed with identity, meaning and power, are potentially most evident.

An analysis of circus life based entirely on co-operative community theory could be seen as complacent and compliant. The focus becomes more political when the analysis moves from the ways in which circus personnel are educated to the conditions under which it becomes necessary for circuses to educate potential audiences regarding the treatment of animals. It is also at this point that representations of circus identity are made to the "outside" world. It is necessary for circuses to take on the responsibility to convince concerned groups that animals used in the circus receive the best of care and are not kept simply to be exploited. The extent to which circuses can convince key groups of this point of view can have a direct effect on the influence that those groups have on the public.

To what extent issues such as animal liberation affect the identity of individual circus personnel and the meaning that their way of life has for them as a result is impossible to say without further research, although several hypotheses can be proposed. The success that representatives of the circus have in educating and convincing outside groups regarding the fair treatment of animals may have a direct impact on the degree to which other circus personnel are affected.

Circuses also need to show audiences at first hand the ways in which they handle the animals. When this happens, the simple entertainment that has always been associated with circus performances may then be seen as more complex and political. Regardless of what perceptions exist in the community with regard to the ways that circus animals are treated, therefore, those perceptions align with power that supports the continuation or struggle of the traditional circus. It is at this point in the analysis of data and the bringing together of complementary theoretical positions that the methods used by the Traveller education research team, particularly in the earlier stages of its work with circuses, had an impact on the refinement of theory and the writing process.

Method

When circuses travel, their itinerary conforms less to a pattern than is the case with travelling agricultural shows, whose arrival at particular towns for the local show is at the same time each year. When the research team focused on the education of children from the agricultural show circuits, therefore, it was possible to plan well ahead. A number of team members would travel to show sites together, conduct interviews over a few days and then travel back to the university together. Most participants were interviewed separately by individual research team members.

Circuses are less predictable, in that they do not generally follow the same itinerary at the same time each year. How many and which research team members are available to travel to particular sites during the year is determined much closer to the time of travel than with shows. An important consideration is to find out what days the circus tent will be raised and lowered and what days the circus will be on the road, as interviews are better arranged around these times. The first visit to the circus by two of our team members received a very warm welcome. Arrangements were made for the team members to conduct interviews jointly with individuals, small groups and a larger focus group at the circus.

It was more by chance, therefore, that some of the parameters were set for the interviews. After interviews had concluded each day, there was no necessity to share information, as had been the case when interviews had been conducted by separate interviewers, and plans and discussions could reach a higher level sooner. Having the common experience of interviewing participants together brought a new dimension to our team research, which continued to be underpinned by the

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Johnsons' (1998) principles of co-operative community. Lively discussions were held outside interview times. It was with great excitement that it was discovered that what kept the circus going for so long appeared to be a sense of co-operative community.

Writing

It was perhaps the "easy fit" application of co-operative learning theory to an analysis of the ways that circuses operate, together with consideration of the more political aspects of circus life, that led to the conclusion that dialogism could provide an extra theoretical dimension that was clearly needed. With different team members able to offer contributions to the developing theory and understanding, brought about through discussion and joint publication, the team continues to underpin its work together with all aspects of co-operative community theory, positive interdependence, individual accountability and reflection still being particularly strong influences. The incorporation of the theoretical notion of performance space similarly represents another aspect of an individual contribution by a team member to the developing understanding of how circuses have continued for so long.

Performance space

Theory

Performance space can be conceptualised as an ongoing attempt to study the formation and practice of identity positions within a range of sites. This approach highlights the forces that shape the way that subject positions are played out and the constraints and freedom of movement expressed in the ongoing performance of these roles and sites. A range of theorists associated with the contemporary cultural studies movement, including Jacques Derrida (1978), Judith Butler (1990), Pierre Bourdieu (1977) and Michel Foucault (1977, 1978), have informed this approach.

One key principle informing Derrida's (1978) key notion of deconstruction is the idea of the iterability of language: the capacity of words to move beyond their original context of production and to be repeated through many different contexts. The meaning of such words is contingent and shaped by the context in which they are used, suggesting that the link between word and signified meaning is constantly shifting and that an ultimate, fixed meaning must always be deferred. For Butler (1990), this principle of iteration is a key to her sense of the performative dimension of language: the way in which words and signs can be appropriated and inflected within certain contexts in a playful and parodic manner. Travelling fairs, shows and entertainments such as the circus are distinctive spaces wherein such play is evident, challenging identity roles and socially inscribed positions in various ways.

Bourdieu (1977) traces field positions through dimensions such as the distribution of forms of capital and value, the emergence of a habitus or set of dispositions linked to roles within that field and the tension between relatively dominated and dominant positions and autonomous and heteronomous forces. The last of these dimensions seems particularly relevant to Traveller education. Autonomous forces are those that seem to be particular to a field and removed from outside forces, while heteronomous forces refer to those pressures from outside the field that impinge on its operations.

On the one hand, Travellers seem to embody the principle of heteronomy, moving from outside into a community, and, as such, being constructed either in terms of threat (as in the case of certain Traveller communities such as the Gypsies) or as exotic and exciting (as in the case of show and circus groups). On the other hand, Travellers are conscious of protecting their own autonomy, and are therefore suspicious of what, from their perspective, seem to be heteronomous forces such as formal and institutionalised education programs.

The very mobility of Traveller education, in terms of its multiple perspectives and its tendencies to transformation (Danaher, 2001), makes it a particularly rich source for the theoretical lens of performance space. It is instructive to see the variety of roles that Travellers play, both within their own community (for example, the complex job-sharing among circus communities) and in respect of outside communities. In particular contexts a Traveller may play the role of engaging with other communities (including of course the research community within which this project and this paper are produced). This engagement tends to be on the basis of a common ground of shared interests that shape the interaction of both the Traveller and other players. There will be other contexts in which a Traveller will feel disposed to play a different role, protecting the autonomy of her/his community from forces that are perceived to threaten its borders.

It is the interchangeability and complex negotiation of roles within different performance spaces that would seem to yield important results. From a Foucauldian perspective (Foucault, 1977, 1978), an ethics of self is being negotiated on behalf of the Traveller who is named as such (the circus performer or Gypsy) and the traveller whose position is often represented as stable, such as the university researcher or educational authority. Such research, then, can have the practical consequence of challenging a presumed binary opposition between stable institutional authority and marginal, travelling community, instead emphasising how each group moves and plays out its roles across a range of discursive, institutional and cultural spaces, each negotiating an interest with engaging the other within such space, while protecting its own territory at the same time.

Method

In highlighting the role of context, the performance approach emphasises that any method applied to Traveller education research—and the findings emerging from such a method—is—and are—necessarily situated (that is, contextualised) and partial (not able to reveal any fixed and stable meanings and truths about the Travelling community). This emphasis leads to a reflexive dimension of the research process—a consideration of the conditions of possibility under which the research was conducted and within which parameters the responses were made. Such a reflexive dimension informs an engagement with the many and varied sources of information: interview transcripts, participant observation on the showgrounds or in the show school, official papers and existing literature on the educational experiences of Travelling communities. Indeed, the performance space approach impinges at the micro-level of collection and transcription, influencing decisions about whether to include phatic features of the responses, repetitions, "ums" and "ahs", and so forth. Such linguistic slippages might be apprehended as part of the performance within a site such as an interview, as the participants make various moves in constructing and negotiating their identities in relation to such an experience.

One aspect of the situated and partial claims associated with the performance space approach to theory and method is that, in line with the two other theoretical positions articulated in this paper, it lends itself to dialogue across different disciplinary spaces and the forging of an opportunity for a co-operative community among the researchers. Bourdieu's (1977) work on fields helps to indicate the positions and power plays within the academic field that can manifest themselves in a competitive approach that rejects the possibility of a constructive dialogue in favour of a "territorial policing of borders" that seeks to deny access to outsiders. Indeed, in relation to Bourdieu's own work, it has been interesting to see how academics from different fields—sociology, history, philosophy, cultural studies—compete from what they posit as *the* true and proper reading. We contend that the possibilities of a co-operative approach to research mean being prepared to engage the conditions of possibility for a dialogue with other disciplinary perspectives, recognising that there is always more to be said.

Writing

Significant in this context has been the search for scriptural spaces in which our own performances as Traveller education researchers might be played out. These performances are partial in the sense that our involvement in them is interested and informed by our own respective and shared research partialities. This sense of self has then disposed us to reflect on the experiences of Travellers and travelling more generally. Engaging a scriptural site involves travelling across its space, such that the text (and context) are always in motion, open to different possibilities and perspectives. What is involved is an ongoing act of scriptural displacement, as the interview data are displaced into the body of an academic article, the various dialogues among the researchers are displaced into the article drafting and one article is displaced into the next in a generative manner. Just as the focus of research is Travelling communities, the locus of the writing is also travelling, constantly moving on into other spaces.

Conclusion

Towards the end of a recent article entitled "The quest for meaning in educational research", the Israeli educational researcher Deborah Court (2004) posed and answered a crucial question in relation to her reflections on her relationships with participants in her research projects:

What does this mean in terms of educational research? At its most basic level, perhaps only that each of us remember to raise our heads above the waters of pressure, stress, competition, ego and habit, to ask ourselves how we are utilizing our own unique situation and set of talents to contribute in some way to knowledge, understanding and communication....Meaning is personal, but personal meaning is realized through connection with other travelers on the road. (n.p.)

As "travelers on the road" of researching Australian Traveller education, the authors of this paper have asked themselves what the three perspectives outlined in the paper have been able to contribute to enhancing their "knowledge, understanding and communication" of and with one another and other stakeholders in the research. The answer to this significant question lies in the paper's focus on the intersection between the three perspectives and the integration of theory, method and writing explicated above. That is, a crucial "litmus test" of the relevance and utility of that intersection is that it makes possible new lenses for

interrogating the taken for granted assumptions about how mobile communities should and do receive educational provision and how appropriately engaged research into that provision should be conducted and reported.

The foregoing account of the three perspectives—dialogism, co-operative community and performance space—demonstrates the benefits and strengths of this team approach to researching Australian Traveller education. These benefits and strengths derive from the encouragement of cross-fertilisation among the perspectives and from the resulting contribution to the ongoing theorisation of those perspectives. These benefits and strengths are also important outcomes of the integration of theory, method and writing, because they confirm and enact the researchers' commitment to using that integration to extend and enhance "knowledge, understanding and communication" (Court, 2004, n.p.)—among Australian Travellers and among themselves.

More widely, these findings suggest three key lessons for a focus on reflective practices and efforts to promote professional learning in contemporary workplaces. The first is the particular contours of such workplaces for academics: theory, method and writing have specific purpose and power, and are appropriated in multiple and sometimes unpredictable ways, in universities. The second is that, while reflection on practice is an explicit element of co-operative communities, it is a crucial component as well of dialogism and performance space—and also of other approaches to integrating theory, method and writing. The third is that the role of teamwork in that integration resonates with teamwork in other sites of work as the potential and in many cases the actual framework for facilitating and sustaining the professional learning without which such sites become dysfunctional and moribund.

Acknowledgments

The authors are grateful to all the research participants from the Australian circus and show communities, the Brisbane School of Distance Education and the Queensland School for Travelling Show Children. The support and encouragement of former fellow team members—Mr Peter Hallinan, Mr Ian Kindt, Mr Colin Rose, Dr Rob Thompson and Mr Doug Wyer—are greatly appreciated. We have also valued our collaborations with international and national colleagues, particularly Ms Helen Currie, Dr Robyn Henderson, Dr Elizabeth Jordan, Dr Máirín Kenny and Ms Cathy Kiddle. Financial assistance in conducting the research was provided by the former Research Centre for Open and Distance Learning and the Faculty of Education and Creative Arts at Central Queensland University. The final version of the article was enhanced by the constructive feedback of two anonymous referees, who also kindly suggested some additional references. At *Studies in Learning*, Evaluation, Innovation and Development, Dr Geoff Danaher, the journal editor, has been facilitative and helpful and Dr Patrick Alan Danaher and Dr André Grace, guest editors of the theme issue in which the article appears, have been welcoming and hospitable.

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