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A collaborative dialogue – Research in Dutch language education

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ABSTRACT: In order to address a perceived gap between academic knowledge and education, The Dutch National Advisory Board on Education has suggested that there is a need for more communication between research and practice. For me the gap is more than simply a matter of lack of communication, than a result of the model of Research, Development and Diffusion implicitly privileged by the Board. This model is characterised by an objectivistic epistemology, a supposedly neutral ethics, and a view that knowledge is something that should be transmitted to the teaching profession, not something that teachers might actively construct themselves.

In my research I work with an interpretative epistemology, which is still not always accepted in the Netherlands. I opt for the "transformation of understandings" instead of "transmission of knowledge". I opt for an explicit ethical research perspective, which takes into account the perspectives of practitioners, as well as the need for academic work to be socially relevant and beneficial. Before all else, my research starts with the problems experienced by teachers, by the questions which they have to pose. I see educational innovation as a process of professional development, stimulated by collaborative dialogue between (amongst others) teachers, students and researchers.

In this paper I focus on a research project with six teachers of Dutch language and literature. I show how the research project supported teachers in solving their problems, and – crucially – facilitating their learning. The project was not, however, completely successful in gaining critical insight in teachers' positions and reaching some deeper understanding of educational innovation, and in my concluding reflections I raise questions about how these dimensions might be addressed.

KEYWORDS: Competences, empowerment of teachers, innovation, learning-to-learn, philosophy of science, practice-related research, professional development, theory and practice, writing.

INTRODUCTION

> *"This academic way – it has been an eye-opener for me. I would like to learn to carry out such research. I think I should be able to do that, without the support by the researcher"* (Teacher J).

These remarks show that Teacher J has formed a new view of educational research. After initially being somewhat sceptical about the value of research, J. became an enthusiastic collaborator in the project in which I worked with him. Based upon his experiences of the project, he not only began to feel comfortable with certain types of

research, but he formed the opinion that research should be done by teachers themselves.

The research project in which J became involved had its origins in educational innovation in the Netherlands. In this paper I firstly describe and analyse the most important aspects of this educational innovation. Then I deal with key aspects of the debate on educational research as it is being enacted in the Netherlands, when I will present my own perspective on the nature of educational inquiry.

In the next section I sketch the collaborative action research project with six teachers of Dutch language and literature (in which J was involved). Then, in a concluding section, I draw out some of the implications of this research project for understanding the relation between research and education.

EDUCATIONAL TRENDS IN THE NETHERLANDS

Dutch upper secondary education has recently been undergoing an important innovation, at least in educational rhetoric, which has been labelled a "learning-to-learn paradigm" (Bonset & Rijlaarsdam, 2004). This paradigm is characterised by concepts like "learning strategies", "meta-cognition", "competences", "life-long learning", "new learning", "constructive learning", "reflective learning", "learning by inquiry" and "workplace learning".

This paradigm is based upon several interrelated assumptions:

- that knowledge rather quickly becomes outdated or even obsolete;
- that education must keep up with the rapid development of knowledge and technological innovations;
- that education should equip students for "life-long" learning;
- that the capacity to filter and select information, problem-solving skills, flexibility and communicative skills are more important than factual knowledge.

There is a similar trend in teacher education which emphasises educational *practice* as both the starting point and objective of teacher education. "Theory" or "knowledge" is only valuable insofar as it useful for immediate action. Also, in teacher education the focus should be on "competencies" and on "workplace learning".

Van de Ven & Oolbekkink (in press) challenge the assumptions sketched above. They put forward the view that the argument about rapidly changing knowledge implies a definition of knowledge as "instrumental knowledge", a positivistic knowledge which is strongly connected to the natural sciences, technology, and the industrial and medical sphere (cf. Habermas, 1972; Luneberg, Ponte & Van de Ven, 2007). But other interpretive forms of knowledge that have traditionally characterised other disciplines, such as language, literature, art, ethics, philosophy, and the social sciences, simply do not change in this same rapid way. They argue that for teacher education it is not only a short-term perspective that focuses on immediate action, which should be relevant, but that teacher educators should create the conditions for their students to develop a deeper

understanding of education, teaching, learning and the social context in which these take place.

There is nonetheless a rather strong instrumental perspective on education in teaching and teacher education and in policy and public debates in the Netherlands. There is a dominant, technocratic meta-discourse on education (Englund, 1996; Van de Ven 2005) emphasising the importance of serving economic needs, and using industrial metaphors like input and output, investment and effectiveness. An important characteristic of such a meta-discourse is that its "ways of seeing" become "ways of being": the technocratic perspective becomes institutionalised; it becomes obvious in rules, regulations, legislation and in the way schools are organised. It leads to self-evident educational standards. In this technocratic meta-discourse other aims of education disappear almost without trace. These include personal growth, emancipation, transmission of cultural heritage and before all the ideal of *Bildung*, which can be described as:

> to develop and bring out the full potential of a human being, based on his/her nature, but stimulated and structured by education (nurture). This dynamic concept encompasses the product or relative state reached by a human being as well as the process of becoming educated/becoming one's own self. During this process the mental, cultural and practical capacities as much as the personal and social competencies are being developed and continuously widened in a holistic way (Vollmer, 2006, p. 7)[1].

In the dominant technocratic meta-discourse, social competencies are developed, but in a narrow, "utility and profit" sense (everything is geared towards enabling individuals to be productive and contribute to economic growth). The same instrumental perspective shapes educational research.

PERSPECTIVES ON EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH

For decades the Netherlands has had a legal and financial infrastructure that is strongly based on the so-called tradition of Research, Development and Diffusion (RDD). Researchers at the universities produce objective knowledge that is amenable to generalisation. It is the role of teacher education and the educational advisory centres to translate this knowledge into applicable products and procedures for transferring these to teachers. Teachers are expected to apply these products and procedures in practice. There is a growing awareness, however, that this linear approach is not always effective – as has already been put forward years ago in many international publications (for example, Hultman [1987] and Calderhead [1998]). There is a gap between research and education, between "Theory" and "Practice".

The Dutch National Advisory Board on Education (Onderwijsraad, 2003) has acknowledged this gap and wants to solve the problem by improving the communication between research and practice. It proposes the development of knowledge communities at schools, which should function as an intermediary between academic knowledge and education. It is telling that this proposal uses terms like "applied research", a concept which is strongly linked to the RDD way of thinking.

[1] It is therefore very interesting to perceive how this Bildung ideal is one of the most important points of departure for the language education policy or the Council of Europe (Coste et al, 2007).

My somewhat brief and tentative analysis of the Dutch discussion on education and research is based upon the assumption that "ways of seeing" imply "ways of being", that research, education, knowledge are socially constructed (cf. Rorty, 1982, p. 166). The Dutch infrastructure represents a certain perspective on the relationship between education and research, but a perspective that might be subject to critical scrutiny and thus open to change. My second assumption is that research traditions are to be perceived as triadic phenomena, in which methodology, epistemology and ethics (the "how", the "what" and the "why" of research) are systemically related (cf. Lincoln & Guba, 1994). Seen from this point of view the RDD strategy is – like Dutch education – dominated by an instrumental, or rather a technocratic perspective, in which research results are transmitted to education, demanding teachers to apply what research has supposedly proven to be "true". This approach is based on a positivistic epistemological view which postulates that science generates objective knowledge of general application and that practitioners subsequently should master and apply this knowledge. This "knowledge" is also "neutral"; science refrains from normative and ethical pronouncements. It aims at controlling the environment people live in, as well as predicting and controlling human behaviour.

The natural sciences get closest to this methodological ideal and thus serve as a model of "real" science, which supposes that reality can be explained in terms of causality and general laws. For a variety of reasons, this model has become dominant in the Western world. Because it is supposedly applicable to all other forms of knowledge and all academic disciplines, including social sciences, this way of seeing and thinking has had a decisive impact on the way knowledge-construction and the dissemination of knowledge are organised institutionally (see Carr, 1995). This positivist ideology and its faith in the possibility of manipulating reality can be discerned in the RDD model, which supposes that "scientific" knowledge can be applied to all social situations (Lindholm, 1985; Kincheloe, 1991). Zeichner & Noffke (2001, p. 298) capture this presumption in the following way: "Rather than regard practice itself as a form of systematic knowing, the practitioner's role…is merely to consume the research produced by others".

Of course this model is not undisputed. Before all in the domains of the natural sciences, a lot of doubt has been expressed and other, more constructivist perspectives have been explored. But "common sense" (as it is constructed by politicians and the media) dictates that this positivistic perspective on research remains dominant. It has become a "way of being".

Although the Dutch National Advisory Board on Education is undoubtedly right to say that a gap exists between research and education, I question whether more effective communication will solve this problem. The board defines "communication" implicitly as "transmission of knowledge" and focuses solely on how better communication might take place for this transmission to occur. However, along with research, communication is part of a triadic phenomenon in which the "how" is systemically connected to "what" and "why". In other words, form, content and function are interrelated. Content can only be interpreted within the framework of a relationship between communication partners – the ethical dimension influences the epistemic. Better communication between teachers and researchers is a worthy ideal,

but only if such communication recognises the interrelatedness of epistemic and ethical dimensions.

The ethical dimension is largely hidden in the positivistic RDD model. Researchers are the owners of important "objective" knowledge, which has to be applied by teachers. Teachers are at best the objects of research, not the creators of important knowledge about their own professional practice. Teachers are expected to carry out what others think is valid and useful. Teachers' perspectives are not relevant. Teachers are disempowered. Even the rhetoric of "knowledge communities" hardly goes beyond the RDD-strategy. It emphasises communication between researchers and teachers, but it still assumes a linear transfer of general knowledge to a specific application via applied research. Scientific knowledge is still seen as more "valid" than teacher's knowledge (cf. De Vries & Pieters , 2007).

PRACTICE-BASED RESEARCH: SOME POINTS OF DEPARTURE

There are alternative scientific traditions. Schwandt (1994, p. 118) refers to "a loosely coupled family of methodological and philosophical persuasions", which can be named "constructivist, constructivism, interpretivist, interpretivism". These labels do not sharply define different traditions, but can be considered to be "sensitizing concepts.... they merely suggest directions along which to look rather than provide descriptions of what to see". What this family has in common is that they "share the goal of understanding the complex world of lived experience from the point of view of those who live in it". A core characteristic of this family is an interpretive perspective on knowledge. Scientific inquiry is understood less as a search for a general truth, than for meaning as it is constructed by people from their experiences.

In the Netherlands these other research traditions are gaining growing acceptance as alternatives to the dominant positivistic one, especially in forms of qualitative research. Ten Dam en Volman (2001), however, illustrates the still rather weak position of this kind of research, especially in Dutch fundraising policy. Yet it is from these alternative traditions that I derive my own points of departure for carrying out educational research. Personally I want to believe in the social relevance of my work as an academic, which means acknowledging the ethics that inhere within any scientific inquiry. In this respect, I am prepared to accept that I have no right to apply for funding if I cannot illustrate the social relevance and benefit of the project at hand. In acknowledging the need for social relevance, I am also acknowledging the perspective that teachers can provide on any educational inquiry. They are themselves active players – creating meaning for themselves and their students – and I want to support them in their efforts to grapple with the challenges they face in their professional lives.

At my institute for teacher education we try to carry out what we label "practice-based" research. This is in contradistinction to the concept of "applied research". "Practice-based" research starts by formulating the relationship between research and teaching. Rather than being dichotomous activities, our approach perceives research and teaching as closely related and to a large extent similar processes. We see practice-based research as a method of obtaining critical insight into a problem experienced by teachers, and as providing a means to solve that problem, enabling teachers and researchers to learn from the experience for future action. The method used should be

systematic, and critical insight should be obtained by using different perspectives, different ways of seeing; and by using different theoretical perspectives (see Luneberg, Ponte & Van de Ven, 2007).

I am emphasising this latter dimension, because a pitfall in working with problems experienced by teachers is their scepticism of theory, a scepticism emanating from their experiences of RDD research. But we cannot do without theory. Research not only implies opting for a certain methodology and adopting an ethical standpoint. The third dimension is that of the "episteme", the conceptual framework. By engaging in research, teachers seek to bring about change, and the change that occurs not only relates to their way of doing things – their interactions with students, the way they teach – but can result in changes in their sense of their professional role (cf. Kemmis, 2005). Such change involves a learning process that brings their pre-existing knowledge and beliefs into question. That is to say, it involves a theoretical dimension. This is quite different from the dominant trend, which seems to devalue the role of theory, denying any possibility of radically rethinking the purpose of education and one's professional commitment.

In such a learning process the interaction between "expert" and "novice" (Bruner, 1984) can be of considerable importance. Expertise can be brought to the inquiry by the teachers, by the researchers, and – crucially – by theory. Practice needs theory, as theory needs practice. Theory can make "the familiar strange"; it facilitates problem analysis and problem solving. Phelps (1991) argues that practice needs theory so that it does not deteriorate into a closed system of routines. Reflecting on experience alone is not enough to arm such a closed system against routine, boredom and despair. Reflection needs an injection of theory:

> Theory galvanizes and disrupts the system, changing its very questions, undermining long-held beliefs, introducing ambiguities, revealing complexities, setting new tasks, forcing risks (Phelps, 1991, p. 883).

But Phelps (1991) pointed out that practice also has a great deal to offer theory. Practice functions as a laboratory where theory is subjected to experiments, in which objectives, forms of work, learning activities, attitudes and evaluations are put under the microscope. Theory is interpreted in the practical laboratory, and then it is tested, refined, adapted and criticised.

It is also important that practice lives up to the moral promises of theory, as theory only means anything when it is put into practice. In Phelps' words: "practice is more than knowledge: practice humanises theory" (1991, p. 883). Phelps points out that in a sense practical wisdom must be resistant to theory, in order to avert the risk of a theoretical diktat:

> Practical wisdom reminds us that theoretical systems are never exhaustive or adequate to phenomena, and thus it undercuts their totalizing tendencies. This is the humbling discipline that practice has to offer theory, in return for its freedom (1991, p. 884).

With these words Phelps emphatically puts the hierarchical relationship between theory and practice, with its division of labour, behind her. It is not surprising, therefore, that practice-based research has also been stimulated by ideas about empowerment of teachers and teacher educators, as a counterbalance to an

"increasing teacher-deskilling process by educational managers" (Kincheloe, 1991, p. 12). Giving teachers a say over their work, especially through developing knowledge geared to the purposeful transformation of practice situations, has proved to be an important tool to break through the traditional division of labour.

To sum up, in essence, practice-related research is a:

> reflexive and dialectical process of critique: a process which does not eschew "theory" in order to improve "practice" but which preserves the dialectical unity of theory and practice by understanding them as mutually constitutive elements in a dynamic developing and integrated whole (Carr, 1995, p. 103).

In the next section I present a research project that tried to realise such a dialectical unity of theory/research and practice/teaching.

RESEARCH WITH TEACHERS IN DUTCH LANGUAGE EDUCATION

Changes in Dutch upper secondary education

In 1998 the developments summarised in the second section of this paper led to the formulation of three innovations for upper secondary (non-vocational, general and pre-university) education:

1. The upper forms, the so-called "Second Cycle", had to function more effectively as a bridge to higher education. This included the legislation of more school subjects and forms of streaming.
2. The concept of the "Study House" formulated a pedagogic approach emphasising "learning-to-learn".
3. New prescriptions were formulated, in the form of examination requirements, for every school subject. For the school subject Dutch language, this included among other things that instruction in writing[2] should involve instruction in documented writing of referential text. Narrative and expressive texts were no longer accepted in the examination. The emphasis was to be on three types of "functional" texts: "exposition", "argumentation" and "consideration". Furthermore, more attention had to be paid to the writing process, which leads to the planning, discussion and revision of texts, an approach to writing instruction that is compatible with the aim of learning-to-learn.

The last two developments have been experienced by teachers as the most challenging. The focus on writing referential texts represents the growing dominance of a utilitarian paradigm in Dutch secondary, mother tongue education (Sawyer & Van de Ven, 2007). But not all teachers agree with this development (Bonset & De Kruijk, 2002).

The project "Active and Self-Directed Learning"

[2] Here I only deal with writing. The co-operating teachers experienced their most important problems in their writing education.

Already in the 1990s, schools were asking support from the Graduate School of Teacher Education at the Nijmegen Radboud University (ILS). After being trained in "learning-to-learn" methods as they might be applied to their students, teachers became especially interested in how to implement such an approach within their own school subjects. This led to an action research project, "Active and Self-Directed Learning for Secondary School Subjects". The project was carried out between 2001 and 2004[3]. Three project aims were formulated in dialogue between three schools and researchers from ILS:

- to develop and test methods for active and self-directed learning, focusing on how students learn;
- to promote the professional development of teachers, that is, focusing teachers' learning;
- to acquire knowledge about the above.
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The following assumptions were formulated:

- New ways of teaching and learning must be connected to problems experienced by the teachers; they must be connected to the intentions the teachers themselves formulate for their own professional development.
- The teachers have to set the standards for the achievements by their students.
- Teachers learn in collaboration with colleagues who share the same problems and work in similar contexts.
- The efforts by teachers should rather quickly result in useful products.

This last point illustrates one of the main dilemmas of action research: the different time frames in which teachers and researchers operate. Research needs to be systematic, involving careful analysis of data, reflection and theoretical orientation. Research cannot be done in a single day or week. Education is always an activity under pressure of time. A teacher, experiencing teaching or learning problems, wants to solve those problems almost immediately, preferably before the next lesson.

The project was implemented as several sub-projects involving teams of researcher(s) and teachers per school subject. Each sub-project was designed to conform to a cycle for co-operative professional development (Imants, 2003).

The cycle starts from teacher experiences, and then proceeds to the sharing and discussing of these, formulating problems to solve, developing solutions, trying out these, analysing and evaluating the solutions, taking decisions about their general applicability (applying them in new educational settings, adapting them to new situations or abandoning them and developing new solutions). Each step is supposed to be a joint activity: mutual discussion, information sharing, observation of lessons, sampling data relating to students' achievement, reporting results, and so on. These features mean that the cycle can be characterised as a learning-from-experience cycle. It becomes research-based learning by systematic collection and analysis of data on students' learning, as well as analysis of the teacher's own actions, including

[3] At present I am involved in a continuing project.

triangulated, inter-subjective interpretation of the data by means of discussion and exchanges with colleagues.

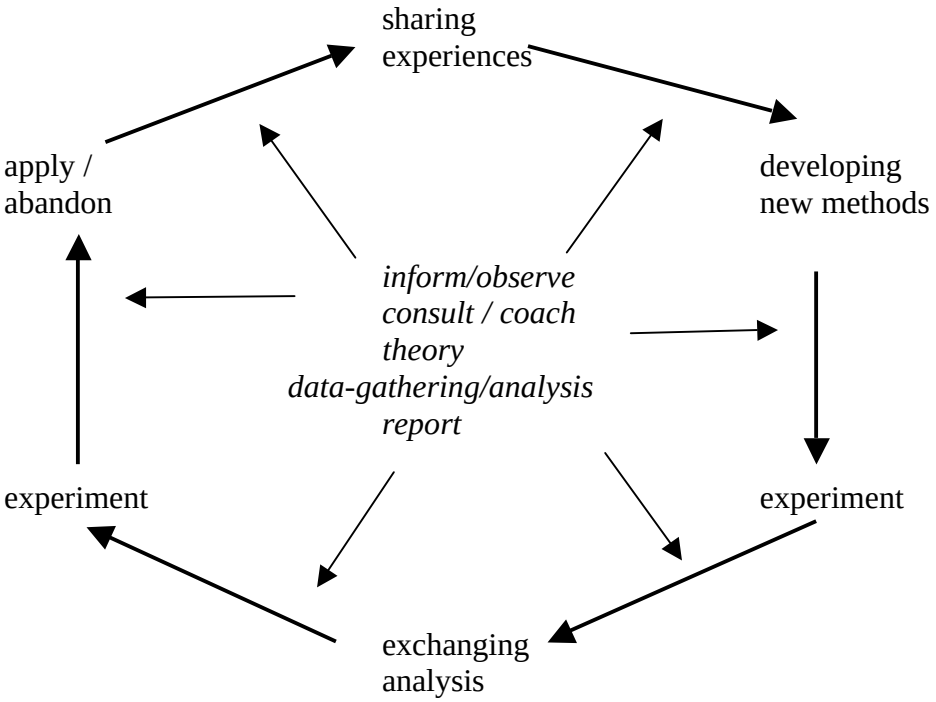

Figure 1: Amants' cycle for co-operative professional development

The data analysis has been based upon a grounded theory approach (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). The main aim was to reach joint understanding of the problem at hand, possible solutions and the learning by students, as well as by the co-operating teachers and researcher. The project focussed on their making-meaning, in the process of engaging in interpretive researching. According to Price (2001, p. 48), such an interpretive approach is "suited to the goals of reflection and to understand complex issues of teaching and change". The cycle of professional development can be realised more than once. The planning of the project was bound to a strict starting point and also a clear endpoint was planned. More concrete planning of activities was done incrementally. I can reconstruct the project activities during the period 2001-2004 as two phases, each realising a total cycle. The first one aimed at getting the teachers' problem clearer, the second one focused on problem-solving by new forms of learning and inquiry.

Phase 1: Problem exploration 2001-2002

The team for Dutch language and literature consisted of six teachers from three different schools for secondary education[4]. They have been prepared for participation – at least a little – by their schools. I functioned as the researcher from ILS. Two

[4] My entrance to this group has been rather easy. Five of these six teachers did know me as one of their teachers in their academic studies. This immediately caused some trust, which has been important, I think.

research assistants[5] completed the team. The main research questions in this first phase became:

1 What problems do teachers experience with active and self-directed learning?
2 Which of these problems should be addressed?
3 What is the nature of the problems?
4 What are the criteria for possible didactic solutions?

We started by holding group discussions, sharing joint experiences of educational problems, mainly with respect to writing education. We discovered that core concepts like "learning-to-learn" and "process-oriented writing" were not clear. So we started studying some publications on learning to learn and on writing and process-oriented writing (for example, Hillocks [1995], Hoel [2000] and Van de Ven [1996]). We discovered that even in such publications, the concepts were anything but clear. We decided to formulate our own working theories, while accepting the new directions (learning-to-learn, process-oriented writing) as points of departure.

In addition to such study and discussion, we talked about our own ways of trying to cope with problems, when the teachers expressed their eagerness to try out solutions. But they agreed that their attempts should be scrutinized, in order to know why some attempts – at least partially – worked, and why others did not. This analysis led to a better understanding of the problem at hand.

In my researcher's role I made an inventory of the students' points of view. Together with the teachers, I gave the students some assignments, asking them to reflect on how they would carry them out. I also made a series of interviews, and talked with students about their learning, their writing and their texts. This activity contributed to the teachers' understanding of the problem at hand.

With the research assistants I recorded the group discussions with the teachers, and the interviews with the students. We had some interviews with the teachers about the project and above all about their learning. We sampled student's texts and logs.

The analysis of these data was done by researcher and research assistant separately, after which activity we used forms of researchers' triangulation, and respondent validation by the teachers[6]. The teachers, although they were at the beginning rather sceptical about having their discussion recorded, were pleased by the analysis, because this analysis supported their understanding.

Because my sketch of the project is intended to illustrate my more general perspectives on educational research, I will not go into too much research detail about the analysis and interpretation. This first phase of problem analysis led to some clear answers on the research questions:

[5] One of the research assistants wrote her master thesis within the project, focussing mainly at the professional development of the teachers (cf. Van Lankvelt & Van de Ven, 2005).
[6] The teachers were not facilitated to co-operate as co-researchers, to analysing data, and so on, although they became to prefer that way of co-operation.

1 The teachers formulated two problems concerning active and self-directed learning. First: What exactly is active and self-directed learning? Second: How might it be possible to implement such an approach within the different topics of the school subject Dutch? The teachers reached a collective understanding of self-directed learning, describing this with key words like reflection, attitude, metacognition, step-by-step plan, learning by doing and thinking about doing, and learning strategies. From this perspective on "learning-to-learn", they saw concrete connections with the teaching of writing – reflection, for example, is promoted through prewriting and revision activities, metacognition can be cultivated through the students' planning and conscious use of writing strategies.
2 The teachers wanted to address their problems in teaching writing, which they felt to be their most challenging area. They felt most at ease with a social-interactionist approach, which appears to be congruent with their perspectives on writing. This approach also fits with a learning-to-learn way of teaching and learning: "In a social interactionist approach, writing is seen as a social activity in which the writer, with the aim of being understood, continuously negotiates with the reader" (Hoel, 2000, p. 41)[7].
3 The teachers concluded that it appeared to be rather difficult to stimulate students to reflect on their writing; students hardly carried out prewriting activities (planning) and post-writing activities (asking feedback for revision and editing). For the students writing appeared to be a typical school activity. In constructing a text, they took an example of a text structure from their school book which matched the genre demanded by the assigment. They then searched the internet for information and arguments, which they put into the framework of the structure. In fact, writing became a matter of "filling in a form". Furthermore they experienced strong difficulties in differentiating between various genres.

These results led the team to some criteria for possible didactic solutions:

- Make students aware of writing as a process;
- Teach them that planning and reflection are important;
- Teach them to provide commentary and use the commentary of others;
- Improve their knowledge of genres such as argumentation and "consideration" (this generic term is not easily translated into English – it might be described as a text in which an author thinks "aloud", exploring different perspectives when "considering" a particular subject or topic. In some ways it is similar to the classic essay exemplified by Montaigne);
- All this should be done as collaborative learning. "Learning-to-learn" in the field of writing was seen as: helping students to carry out writing tasks in such a way that they know when and what kind of support to ask from their peers – or the teacher. Collaboration was supposed to stimulate reflection in the prewriting, as well as in the writing and post-writing phases, by presenting them with different perspectives: from their peers, their teachers, some theory;

[7] Translation by me. I made a short summary for "my" teachers.

Based upon these criteria the teachers developed new ways of teaching writing, which already tentatively were tried out in the first phase: teaching cannot wait till research formulates solutions. As indicated above, these attempts were also discussed, evaluated and changed during the first phase. But most attention to new methods for writing education was paid in the second phase.

Phase 2: Development and evaluation

The intention to adapt new ways of teaching by the individual teachers and their contexts led to three different approaches in the three different schools. At each school, two or three upper-form classes (25-30 students in each class) participated. The new lessons by each teacher were, if possible, observed by the researcher, research assistant or one of the other teachers; they were documented, discussed in the team, changed, tried out again, and so on. During the second phase the teachers of the three schools took over each other's methods in the second or third year. This was not planned from the beginning, but was based upon the positive results that were reported.

The team discussions drew on the teachers' direct experiences, but also on data sampled and analysed in the same way as in Phase 1. Data consisted of: observations and field notes of lessons and of peer activities; interviews and focus group interviews with (some of the) students; teacher interviews (by the research assistants); students' logs and texts; recorded team discussions with the teachers. The analysis was less open compared to the analysis in the first phase. It was guided by the criteria for didactic solutions from Phase 1, criteria which functioned as the research questions for the second phase, in addition to the overall research questions.

There are clear indications that the students' learning has been changed for the better. Many students declared that they had discovered the importance of planning. They reported to being more aware of writing as a process. They paid more attention to planning and reflection, as was observed by their teachers. They gained insight into differences between genres. They used each other's comments and profited in other ways from peer response.

The teachers evaluated the students' texts positively. According to the teachers, their students' texts showed more structure and planning, the students' voices were more evident in the texts (that is, the texts read like more than simply "filling in forms") and second drafts showed that the students had benefited from peer review.

The activities were not successful for all participating students, however. Some of them appeared to experience lots of problems, complaining, for example, that the tutors did not give them clear solutions to their problems, which meant that they "still had to think about it by themselves" (Student Paul, aged 17, in an interview).

My focus in this paper is on the relation between education and research, and so I am refraining from presenting the project in much detail. Nevertheless, in presenting the learning experienced by the teachers, I consider it necessary to give the co-operating teachers their own voice – an important aspect of this kind of research.

Teacher J thought the project successful. He reflected on his learning in this way:

> One aspect, however, is very important. I have learned to take distance of what I do and to critically examine it. As a result I acquire much more insight in what I do. And that is now essential….I can take more distance of students. I dare to give them more room. And I am able in observing from a distance to see more of what the students do. And I ask for more feedback from the students, and I get it.

Teacher M also thought the project a contribution to her professional development:

> Because I'm becoming increasingly experienced with the process-driven approach to writing. The project, I think, has definitely been a fruitful learning curve.

Teacher A had this to say:

> I have learned a lot, these four years. And particularly also by your [the researcher, PHV] valuable input and the input also of the other teachers. There was some mutual fertilization; I think this has been a particularly attractive way of working together.

To sum up, the teachers became more experienced in the social interactionist approach to writing. They expanded their understanding and their action repertoire about active and self-directed learning. They formulated, as important ingredients of the project, the mutual discussions and exchange, the possibility to engage in experimentation, and the opportunities for collective reflection. They experienced occasionally the importance of theory, the importance of systematically documenting student results and experiences as feedback to their own teaching and professional learning.

CONCLUSION, EVALUATION AND DISCUSSION

Conclusions

The overall aims of the project were:

1 To develop and test methods for active and self-directed learning;
2 To promote the professional development of teachers;
3 To acquire knowledge about the above.

The team of teachers and researchers concluded they had accomplished the first two aims of the project. As already indicated above, several methods were developed and used which proved to be successful. In the interviews and group discussions they also reported about their professional development in understanding and realising active and self-regulated learning in writing. Some evidence for their professional development can be construed from the way they chose to continue with initiatives even after the project was officially concluded. Teacher H, for example, remarked: "Therefore also the elements which are considered, the group writing, but also thinking skills, the tutoring, talking and writing, all that elements are present now in our education, permanently present."

At school A, the co-operating teachers, together with teachers from some other school subjects, have started a new project. In this project the new methods are more or less routine. The project focuses on implementing these and other writing and reading

"routines" as taught and learned in the school subject Dutch to other school subjects. The co-operating teachers want to establish a reading and writing centre at the school and to elaborate a "language across the curriculum" approach. At school B one of the teachers is preparing a book publication on some of these new methods. The teachers in school C are trying to encourage the implementation of some aspects of the new methods in other school subjects.

I can also draw some conclusions with respect to research aim 3: to acquire knowledge about the professional development by teachers (and, I should add, my own development as a researcher and teacher educator), especially in active and self-directed learning. The teachers emphasised that some activities appeared to be very important for facilitating and supporting learning:

> The *problem analysis* took a long time. On reflection, after the project was completed, this phase – often neglected by teachers who want immediate solutions, and by researchers who think that they already understand the problem they want to research – appeared to be rather important. Through listening to each other, the teachers discovered a joint interest. They shared some vital problems, but they also discovered that each of them had different solutions that reflected their somewhat different practices and contexts. The school subject thus appeared to them to be a social construction, open to different options and thus changeable. The group discussions, using different perspectives, "made the familiar strange". This was to a large extent also due to research activities like *recording and analysing* their discussions.
>
> *Documenting and analysing students' results and experiences* stimulated a more distanced perspective on the own education. This facilitated reflection and discussion, because for all these teachers the learning accomplished by their students appeared to be the most motivating factor for all their (extra) work in this project. This was also the case in school C, where student tutors happened to become involved in designing new forms of education.
>
> *Problem analysis, data analysis, discussion and reflection* brought about a recognition of the need for theory. Teachers wanted to know "more", to reach better understanding. They had real questions and searched theory for real answers; they became able to understand theoretical perspectives; they made "the strange familiar".
>
> *Team discussions* were characterised by *openness and mutual trust*. There was real co-operation, an intention to share problems and solutions, an intention to support each other. The teaching experience in the team varied from 1-20 years of teaching; nevertheless even the two rather young teachers were fully accepted. Also, the relationship between teachers and the researcher and research assistants was good. Differences in competence were appreciated. Being the researcher in this team, I had a larger theoretical input, but I also enjoyed taking over some lessons in order to experience solutions by myself. I supported tutors, had writing conferences with students, and so in some sense I functioned as a teacher assistant. I think this increased my credibility in this

> project team[8]. At the same time I was also considered to be the expert; the teachers reported that they felt supported in their experiments because there was a researcher from the university backing them.

According to the teachers, two activities were most important for their learning: the mutual dialogue and the possibility of experimenting. The *dialogue* – connected to openness and trust – facilitated their understanding of their own actions, motives and cognitions. Articulating and expressing their thoughts and doubts stimulated mutual communication, but also joint conceptualisation. *Experimenting*, accepting the possibility of making mistakes, getting feedback, and so on, produced strong learning. Teachers experience a daily fear of making mistakes and of being blamed, not so much by students, but by colleagues, school leadership and parents. They experience blame frequently by the public and by government authorities. The backing by a university "authority" appeared to be far more important than I had expected.

Teachers got some *time* to co-operate. Teacher A stated: "You need time to learn, time to try out, and you need a good dialogue about the experimentation." The project supported the teachers in this respect; they got some hours a week to participate. Teachers in the Netherlands experience a heavy working load. A full-time job consists of 26 lessons a week, in classes with 25-30 or sometimes even more students. Evaluating students' work takes many an hour each week. The concern for survival is dominant. In another project, one of the co-operating teachers said: "It is rather bewildering to discover the importance of reflection – but it is even more bewildering to discover that you have to go home and take some hours free time in order to get the opportunity to reflect."

Last but not least: *reporting*. I wrote several articles together with (some of) these teachers. We presented the project to teacher and researcher conferences, together. Sometimes the teachers reported without any contribution by me. Teacher H: "To write a report, well, it is necessary for us for the very innovation. And I need that in the busy everyday working load. Otherwise I would have other priorities. This is not to blame you [the researcher, PHV], not at all, but now I consider this a bit an obligation…. nevertheless it is a healthy work basis". Teacher J: "By writing about your own education you again have to reflect critically on your own education by asking yourself: Do I really perceive in my lessons what I am writing in this text?"

As already indicated, teachers want to continue. Teacher M said:

> I can't exactly remember how it happened, to become involved in the project. But it had something to do with my desire to do things differently. I just want to continue developing, I don't want to remain stagnant and just keep doing the same thing day in day out, or...and also because it's so difficult to conceive just by yourself to do things differently. It's always best to work as part of a team. That way, you learn from each other. And you can swap, you can exchange ideas. You have a sounding board.

Evaluation

This project can be evaluated from a variety of perspectives. I have already referred to the learning by students and teachers. I have also referred to some important

[8] See also note 4

dimensions of the professional developments of teachers. Of course I cannot generalise from these results. The epistemological stance I take means that I refrain from making generalisations on the basis of my experiences in this project, as though what the teachers and I accomplished together can automatically be applied to other educational settings, although teachers, schools, researchers and policy often assume that this is the ultimate aim of research. Yet it is still interesting to note the way the teachers became aware of new ways of thinking about research, and perhaps others can draw lessons from this experience. As Teacher J remarked: "This academic way – it has been an eye-opener for me. I would like to learn to carry out such a research. I think I should be able to do that, without the support by the researcher."

Various dimensions of the project mentioned above (the role of dialogue, experimenting, facilitating, reporting) may be relevant to the professional learning of teachers in other situations, but it is impossible to say how their contexts might affect the way they take up these factors. I think it is important to understand the successes which the teachers and I experienced in relation to the theories with which we were operating – theories about learning, about language, about the role of language in learning. In this way teachers and researchers in other settings may be able to engage in the work we did together, taking up our insights about the nature of interaction and the role that language plays in conceptualisation as contributing to their own understandings of language and learning. This is quite different from the expectation that they can simply transpose our practices to their professional contexts without any further reflection.

There are, however, yet another set of considerations in the way I evaluate this project. I refer to criteria for validity in practitioner research formulated by Anderson and Herr (1999, p. 16) which challenge the traditional criteria for determining research validity. I present their criteria, immediately indicating if, and to what extent, the project matched them.

- *Outcome validity: the extent to which actions occur which lead to a resolution of the problem that led to the study*. The teachers clearly gained better insights into their problems, as well as opening up possible ways of coping with these problems.
- *Process validity: the extent to which problems are framed and solved in a manner that permits ongoing learning of the individual or the system*. The teachers are continuing with their project by initiating new activities independently of the academics in the research team.
- *Democratic validity: the extent to which research is done in collaboration with all parties who have a stake in the problem under investigation.* Teachers reported mutual openness and trust. They presented their own solutions to each other, and questions that they were continuing to ask. At schools A and C in particular, the students also became consciously involved in the project and were stimulated to reflect on problems and solutions. They appeared to be good sources for teachers to gain understanding of learning problems. The preparedness of all participants to accept differences in the competencies between teachers and researchers, as well as differences in the contributions which individual teachers were capable of making, is also noteworthy. This answer to this criterion is perhaps closely bound up with the next criterion.

- *Dialogic validity: the extent in which the research is monitored through a form of peer review.* The project "Dutch" has been reported to and discussed by participants of the other sub-projects – teachers and researchers.
- *Catalytic validity: the extent to which the research process reorients, focuses and energises participants toward knowing reality in order to transform it.* For me this criterion is the most problematic one. It was evident that the participating teachers changed their classroom practices. Teacher J was able to formulate his philosophy of education more clearly: "By improving my education I am improving my students, so that they might better participate in society – they might be able to hold their ground." Teacher H came to articulate her disagreement with official examination policy, namely the way it diminished the significance of writing personal, expressive and narratives texts, which she considered to be important for personal growth. But my own feeling is that there should have been more critical reflection of this kind.

Discussion

I want to elaborate on what I mean by "more" by making a general statement about my perspectives on education and research.

I label the co-operation between teaching and research, or rather between teachers and researchers as a "collaborative dialogue". Swain (1995) defines this dialogue as: "the joint construction of language – or knowledge about language – by two or more individuals" (Swain, 1995, p. 1). Educational research should aim at teachers understanding the discourse of research, and the meta-discourse on research and education. It should aim at researchers understanding the teachers' discourse. Learning a language means not only learning new words. "The word in language is half someone else's. It becomes 'one's own' only when the speaker populates it with his own intention, his own accent, when he appropriates the word, adapting it to his own semantic and expressive intention" (Bahktin, 1981, pp. 293-294). This holds true for teachers and researchers. And perhaps by learning each other's discourse they might develop a joint, new discourse in which teaching and research are no longer two activities carried out by two individuals/groups, in a strict division of labour, emanating from and still representing social and hierarchical differences. I want to refer to the conditions needed for this kind of dialogue: teachers and students need some time in order to reflect, to engage in dialogue. Educational innovation demands learning by teachers, but learning demands a powerful learning situation.

The project which I have described can be seen as an example of practice-based research aimed at obtaining critical insight into a problem experienced in the real world and then on finding a solution to that problem. We have then tried to learn from this experience for future action. I am moderately satisfied with the solutions we found to our problems. But I am not satisfied with the quality of the "critical insights" we obtained. Education and research must be understood in terms of their "how", "what" and "why": methodology, epistemology and ethics. Teachers and researchers have to share their beliefs, or rather develop together new insights into the "what", "how" and "why" of research and education. Such a joint development demands a dialogue that crucially engages with the "whys". I think a weaker aspect of my project concerned the "democratic validity". This is not to say that people did not give each

other the floor, listening and exchanging ideas. But the many discussions in this project were hardly occasions when participants could express their personal perspectives on research and education and open these up to scrutiny. As a researcher and teacher educator, I have some personal beliefs about research and teacher education, but I hardly made these explicit in the course of participating the project. Perhaps I feared to be too normative, or I feared to run the risk of not connecting to the teachers' questions. Nevertheless, I intend to be clearer about my position when I participate in new projects.

As a teacher educator and researcher, I want to discuss the pros and cons of the increasingly utilitarian orientation to education today. The focus on referential texts in the school subject Dutch, the focus on competencies, learning-to-learn, workplace learning and so on – for me this is a rather questionable development. Any attempt to bridge the gap between theory and practice should be applauded. But at the same time we should be concerned about the lack of theoretical orientation in such initiatives, of what I like to call "intellectual competence", a competence connected to the ideal of *Bildung*, and anchored in classical humanities. According to Jenssen (1987), for example, the humanities focussed on the development of four competencies: critical distance, creativity, communicative capacity and historical awareness. These four competencies taken together can lead, moreover, to a fifth competence: the capacity to detect coherence, to understand developments from a more comprehensive perspective and to clarify the relations between micro- and macro-developments. In the project at hand we hardly discussed the "whys" of a more utilitarian paradigm in Dutch language teaching. We hardly discussed the teachers' initial scepticism toward research and theory. We were too much focussed, I think, on practical and perhaps mental capacities. We hardly dealt with cultural ones, and we did not engage with the question of how to develop "the full potential of a human being".

Educational research should be driven by a vision of knowledge, a vision of education. Teachers (and perhaps students in upper secondary as well) should explore the assumptions behind ongoing trends and thereby get a better understanding of their learning, their school subject, their profession and teaching context. Teachers should not only discover that they need time to reflect, they also should discover why "schools are not good places for teachers to learn" (Newkirk, 1992, p. IX). They should discover why in the RDD approach teachers are seen as no more than implementers of scientific knowledge; why they are denied the opportunity to construct their own knowledge, or why their own knowledge is deemed to be unimportant. In other words, educational research, involving the professional development of teachers, should also aspire to operate at a meta-level, should aim at understanding not only daily, classroom problems but more fundamental aspects of teachers' practice. Education, educational research and the professional development of teachers always entail ethical dimensions. This in turn demands that we locate our research within a historical-sociological perspective. Knowledge is, from this perspective, never neutral, and education is similarly always value-laden. A historical-sociological perspective can clarify how and why (and whose) ideas about education and society emerge, change and become dominant. This includes also how our self-evident understanding of education and society is built up and changes. This kind of understanding may contribute to teachers' empowerment.

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