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Is There Madness in the Method? Researching Flexibility in the Education of Adults

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Is There Madness in the Method?
Researching Flexibility in the Education of Adults

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Abstract: *This paper explores the process of formulating research questions for an ongoing empirical study of conceptions of flexibility and lifelong learning in the context of further education in the UK. The process is represented in three parallel versions: an algorithmic tale, a tale of improvisations and a reflexive tale.*

Introduction

In the study of education, and the education of adults more specifically, both the focus for research and the approaches to it have been the subject of much debate in recent times. In particular, the perspectives associated with post-structuralism and postmodernism have raised issues of language, discourse and text, which impact upon the object of research, data collection and analysis. Associated with this has emerged the questioning of universal reason (Pinar, 1997) and the identification of the values and desires embedded and embodied in research practices. This has both opened up different research terrains and put in question certain traditions of study.

It is not our intention in this paper to chart these debates, nor to articulate a definitive stance on them. In a sense, the very diversification of research practices points to the difficulty of attempts at tidy resolution - there is no single right quest (goal) or way to quest (process) or question. What we attempt in this paper is to explore the methodological issues in relation to a specific research project, an ongoing empirical research project examining questions of flexibility and lifelong learning in the context of further education in the United Kingdom.

Polkinghorne (1997, p.12) argues that "instead of a performance choreographed according to logically ordered algorithmic methodical steps, the research process consists of often tacit strategic improvisations in the service of a guiding purpose." The positioning of method and methodology as in some way guarantors of "truth" is already powerful in its shaping of what "counts" as research. Our algorithmic tale thus represents a series of logical steps in the development of research questions, framed within a methodology that attempts a recon-

ciliation between conceptual and strategic research. Similarly powerful are those narrative accounts which, in foregrounding the inherent untidiness of research practices, suggest a closer proximity to lived experience. There is an implicit claim to authenticity in our "tale of improvisations," although a post-structuralist perspective identifies this as yet another kind of textual practice.

In our "reflexive tale" we consider the ways in which we construct the world we write about in the process of writing and reading this text. The outcome of reflexive research is reflexive knowledge; statements that provide some insight into the workings of the social world *and* insight into how that knowledge came into existence. "By bringing subject and object back into the same space (indeed, even the same sentence), authors give their audiences the opportunity to evaluate them as "situated actors" (i.e., active participants in the process of meaning creation)" (Hertz, 1997, p viii).

Yet we cannot stop there, for the story of this research does not have a single narrator. The three writers of this text are part of an inter-disciplinary "team" working on this project, each with their own histories, embeddedness and embodiments – what Usher (1996) refers to as the "con-text" of research. Each of us has a different story to tell, a framing for this research project, a tapestry of tales, each with biases that cannot "be eliminated by first admitting them and then placing ourselves under methodological control" (Usher, 1996, p.45). This text is performance in two senses. It performs through providing insights into the methodological issues within one particular study of lifelong learning. It also performs through being a particular form of text and in the use of a certain range of textual strategies. In the process we put in question any

claim to authority by pointing away from the factuality of our claims, even as authority returns to haunt us in our claim not to authoritatively claim. It is also about method, while having a method of its own – with all its pre-texts, sub-texts, con-texts and inter-textual traces (Usher, 1996) – and a set or representational practices – in part laid down by the conference organisers, the "invisible voyeurs" of this text (Lincoln, 1997).

An Algorithmic Tale

Background

The research project in question examines the different meanings given to notions of flexibility in the context of further education in the UK. Flexibility has become a key metaphor in a wide range of contemporary discourses around life, work and learning. Nation states, organisations, individual workers, learners and citizens are urged to respond flexibly in order to achieve economic, social or personal goals. Posing questions about the assumptions on which policy goals are based, and about the nature of those goals, Edwards (1997, pp. 108-9) concludes that flexibility "has become central to the governance of changes in the provision of learning opportunities for adults, almost a unifying principle in the restructuring of practices… discourses of flexibility establish flexibility as central to their regime of truth."

Lifelong learning is closely implicated within discourses of flexibility, both as a condition of, and a contributor to, changes in the wider social and economic context. The role of further education, operating at the interface between education and the world of work, is critical to the current policy agendas of flexibility and lifelong learning. Thus, in a review of strategic research in further education Raffe (1996, p. 24) suggests that "the pursuit of flexibility may provide a focus for research in the 1990s and beyond as much as the pursuit of equality provided a focus in the 1960s"

Aims

The aims of the research are to:
- pilot a research methodology;
- develop a conceptual analysis of flexibility grounded in an empirical study of the institutional practices within a further education setting.

Methodology

A conceptual framework was generated from a literature review in which notions of flexibility are located in the socio-economic context of global labour markets. This review also examined the impact of these notions of flexibility on educational organisation and pedagogy. A case study approach was designed to investigate concepts like "quality assurance," "the multi-skilled worker," "the enterprising self," and the "learning organisation" in the context of two Further Education Colleges, one in a rural setting and the other located in the inner city. These concepts are often associated with futuristic constructions of a "new work order" for which there is little empirical evidence (Gee, et al, 1996). The purpose of the case study is therefore to ask how these concepts are given meaning in, and shape understanding of, the "real world" practices of further education as these are represented in strategic plans, mission statements, college prospectuses and records of student progress, as well as in the self understandings of workers and learners.

Drawing on the conceptual framework, the following questions have been organised under four headings, and are to be addressed through documentary analysis:
- *social/economic*: Which schools of thought underpin discourses of flexibility in policy documents?
- *political/ideological*: How are these concepts constructed in the texts of policy documents, mission statements, prospectuses…?
- *organisational*: In what ways do memos, job descriptions, minutes of management meetings etc suggest practices that support flexibility in learning? Who is involved in the planning process and who might be excluded?
- *pedagogical*: What kinds of flexible learning opportunities are evident in prospectuses, timetables and monitoring and assessment documentation?

For a series of interviews with individual employees and students at all levels throughout the two colleges, the questions are organised within a framework that divides discourses of flexibility into three areas of interest:
1) *Context:* The wider context is defined in terms of work, and questions focus on personal experiences of work, perceptions of change in work-

ing lives and the relationship between work and lifelong learning.

2) *Organisation*: Questions about the college organisation focus on flexibility in relation to location, time, funding and institutional change.

3) *Processes:* Posing questions about the processes of flexible learning, the focus is on experiences and perceptions of different modes of learning including the uses of technology.

Central to all three areas of interest are the people who position themselves and are positioned in relation to discourses of flexibility. Analysis of interview transcripts therefore includes an engagement with the ways in which meanings are constructed by both interviewer and interviewee in the research process.

Outcomes

Participants in the early stages of this research have welcomed an opportunity to talk about their work and learning in terms that are not constrained by the generally prescriptive or mechanistic criteria employed for the purposes of appraisal, assessment or quality control. Building on this foundation, the research will be used to inform an ongoing debate about concepts of flexibility and the ways in which these are invoked to support particular institutional strategies and educational goals. As part of the research design, seminars are being organised within the pilot institutions for feeding back, and pushing further, the issues raised by the research. This will contribute towards a more critical and reflexive stance among managers, staff and students, raising awareness of the multiple meanings, possibilities and challenges raised by the notion of flexibility.

A Tale of Strategic Improvisations

The *background* section of the foregoing account represents a compromise between the author's (RE's) particular interest in conceptual enquiry and the funding body's orientation towards strategic and policy research. Funding was eventually agreed "to pilot a research methodology" in which features of both conceptual and strategic research are retained. Successive drafts of the research proposal record a process in which RE's original focus on the production of meanings becomes embedded in a more conventional discourse of sociological research. References to "the problematic nature of meaning" and to the production of "symbolic rather than rep-

resentational texts" are displaced by references to quantitative data, triangulation and validity.

Daniel (1993) argues that the questions asked in strategic research should go beyond the immediate concerns of the sponsor's brief, and be more widely disseminated than are either the outputs of basic, (disciplinary, scientific) research published for an academic audience, or the client-customer report of applied (problem-solving) research. This argument supports an approach to strategic questions that begins with an exploration of their underpinning theoretical concepts and generates texts that are useful, not because they point to better ways of doing things, but because they offer alternative ways of conceptualising and understanding what is already being done. This in turn opens up the possibility of finding more creative ways of imagining what might be done. The methodology that I (JC) presented to colleagues when I began work on this project included quantitative data collection, qualitative interviews and documentary research. Rather than posing any explicit challenge to the discourse of social scientific method, I confined my suggestions for quantitative research to a list of the kinds of data that might be collected, such as management information, records of enrolment and so on. I did not address the question of why such data might be useful or relevant to the study but chose instead to expand on those aspects of the research that were closer to my own prior interest in language and the construction of meaning.

In the algorithmic account of our methodology, the "conceptual framework" is represented as a product which was completed before we began to design the case studies. In fact, the drafting and re-drafting of this framework, or background paper, (Clarke et al, 2000) has been going on throughout the first year, alongside the development of the methodology. In the early drafts, our conceptual framework was organised under the four headings identified above in relation to documentary analysis. As our writing and thinking progressed, however, it became clear that the category of "political/ideological" would not serve as a separate heading since politics and ideology underpin all the theoretical debates as well as the practices and articulations we wished to explore in the interviews. In our written texts we have located further education in a context in which the economy and the labour market are privileged above other aspects of personal and social life. Our interview questions are

framed by this context but can be interrogated for the silences and repressions that might be surfaced through a feminist and/or deconstructive reading.

We have conducted tape-recorded interviews with students, managers, and support staff (both manual and professional) in the two "case study" colleges. The transcripts from these interviews provides us with a wealth of data to which we address the broad question: what does this contribute to articulations of flexibility? To this end we are approaching data analysis from different epistemological perspectives, asking what people are talking about and also asking how they both construct and are positioned by the things they say. The transcripts provide us with referential accounts from which the "content" can be extracted and organised into topics and themes. But we are also treating them as texts, which can be examined for the work they do in constructing subjects and objects and positioning these in particular relationships within a discourse.

A Reflexive Tale

By reflexivity we refer to the self-consciousness of our stance towards the research we engage with. It requires a continuous and intensive interrogation of "what I know" and "how I know it"; an awareness of the slipperiness of language, knowledge and authority, and of the role of researchers in constructing the objects of their research. The text in which we have described this research project offers two narratives which both suggest some semblance of unity. The reflexive tale introduces the possibility of critique and incredulity towards both, posing the questions: "Whose voice?" "Which audience?" and "What authority?"

In looking at our algorithmic tale we see a decontextualised account, purporting to exist in a world detached from the exigencies of funding bodies, institutional and departmental priorities, or the histories and dispositions of the research team members. Its claim to authority derives from an appeal to the conventions of academic research proposals, including a description of background, aims, methodology and outcomes. This may be sufficient (and indeed this was the case) to convince an academic institution to fund a pilot study, but is unlikely to "cut any ice" at a conference of academic researchers. Hence the improvisations included in our second tale begin to lift a veil on this idealised account, revealing some of the compromises and

contingencies which accompanied the working up of the project proposal and methodology. We learn that the smooth progression from conceptual framework to methodology was far from linear; represented here as an iterative process involving frequent backtracking and revising. It is also here that we learn more about the contribution and the academic location of two of the project team, and a hint of the negotiations which accompanied the collegial working through of ideas on the shape and direction of the project. We may find this tale of improvisations more "persuasive" or "credible" than the algorithmic tale. It is an insider's story, similar to those you might hear recounted by academic researchers in the bar after this session. It is pitched towards a particular audience; it speaks to our experience as a group of academic researchers; it acknowledges the messiness of research practice. The tone of the first account may sound more "authoritative," whilst in this particular context the second may sound more "plausible," and hence achieve greater authority. Each might be described as a pragmatically designed discourse, employing specific textual strategies in attempting to achieve particular goals.

This process of unpicking the ways in which we represent our own practices is used to indicate some of the moves which become necessary in adopting a reflexive stance towards the texts we collect and the texts we create. However, reflexivity is more than critique, since it also requires the appearance of the authors themselves as participants in the process of meaning making. We are not detached observers, but caught up in relationships and the effects of power; governed by the structures and conventions of this conference; by professional and social codes; by the norms of research activities patrolled by funding bodies. As we study the effects of discourses of flexibility on colleges of Further Education in the UK, we are ourselves subject to these same discourses within our own institution. As we improvise our research proposal in the quest for funding, we demonstrate our own flexibility and reveal our identities as enterprising professionals. Positioned within a post-structuralist theoretical stance we must come to terms with our own roles as researchers; not as authoritative generators of knowledge, but as tentatively suggesting the possibility for more contingent and insecure ways of knowing. In doing this we take some comfort in the claim that "… a postmodernist perspective does allow us to

know "something" without claiming to know everything. Having a partial, local, historical (situated) knowledge is still knowing" (Richardson, 1994, 518).

Ending a Story?

"There's method in the madness," represents an attempt to locate rational control in apparently irrational acts. We have reversed this maxim for the title of this paper to underline the problematic role of rationality within methodological practices. We are probably "mad" to do so. But the representational practices which constitute research – the research proposal, the texts we collect and analyse, the texts we write – demand closer attention, as they point to those aspects of research that erase its epistemological authority in the very act of claiming it, a position that is doubled in the very act of denial in which we are engaged here. "This way lies madness," "some might say" (Oasis, 1995).

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