

Insider and outsider collaboration: questioning realities and revealing mirages - the case of the National Training Programme in Oman

This paper has been co-constructed by an insider and an outsider and utilises material from a larger study conducted by the first named author, the insider. The purpose of this paper is to contribute to the work of Human Resource Development (HRD) academics who have highlighted the importance of 'talk' with HRD; illuminating how a focus on discourse can 'reveal' aspects of HRD which often remain hidden (for example: Evans 2014; Lawless et al. 2011; Stewart et al. 2014).

The paper also contributes to practitioner knowledge by illustrating how insiders and outsiders can work together, enabling the insider to question some taken-for-granted assumptions (Milano et al. 2015). We illustrate how an insider-outsider relationship enabled the insider to question the perceived 'reality' which emerged from initial template analysis. We discuss how further data generation and analysis, informed by a discourse approach, enabled the insider to question initial interpretations and in doing so reveal a more a complex 'mirage' emerging from the insider research. A 'mirage' which reflected the complexity within this particular research context while revealing possibilities for emancipatory change.

Research context

The paper draws from the professional practice of the lead author who is employed by the Ministry of Manpower (MoM) in Oman. This paper is one outcome from an ongoing stakeholder evaluation (Mark 2001) of the National Training Programme (NTP) in Oman and draws attention to how key informants from the MoM 'talk-about' the programme.

Oman, like other Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries has developed national policies aimed at improving the skills and knowledge of its unemployed citizens. This Omanisation scheme involves a series of policies and initiatives aimed at increasing the number of Omanis employed in different areas of the Omani private sector; with the explicit aim of replacing expatriates (Swales et al. 2012, Al-Lamki 2000). The NTP programme is considered a key aspect of the Omanisation vision and to date considerable expenditure and time has been spent on implementing the programme. Despite this, there has been limited evaluation of the programme. This paper contributes to this gap in practitioner knowledge and focuses on a powerful group of stakeholders, the MoM officials.

The first named author is an employee within the MoM and to this extent is an insider. In addition, the insider is currently undertaking Doctoral research within a UK university and wants this research to 'make a difference'. The second author is the Director of Study (DoS) and fully supports the ideal that research can, indeed should, make a difference to an academic and a practitioner community. Co-constructing this

paper has provided an opportunity for this ideal to be achieved. The DoS has provided a fresh perspective as the material generated has been subjected to other questions from this outsider perspective.

Methods and analytical focus

This paper draws on interview data generated by the insider. Seven MoM officials, with specific responsibility for the planning and regulation of the NTP programme, were asked to discuss the: drivers for the NTP, the challenges they had experienced and their suggestions for overcoming these challenges. Initial template analysis of the material enabled the insider to organise the material and 'talk-about' initial interpretations with the DoS.

A key advantage of insider research is an understanding of the research context, access to material and access to key informants. However, insiders are often accused of being too close and unable to question taken-for-granted assumptions (Alvesson 2003; Trowler 2012). Therefore, a second stage of data generation involved the insider presenting the 'story' of his initial analysis to the DoS. This resulted in a written and verbal presentation which provided the catalyst for this paper as we focus our attention on the 'talk'.

Questioning 'realities' and revealing 'mirages'

Discourse analysis focuses attention on 'talk'; how it is put together and what is gained by this construction. This highlights that language does not just describe things, it does things; and the things that it does has important implications '*individually (in terms of identity), socially (in terms of social construction) and politically (in terms of the distribution of power).*' (Trowler, 2001: 186). A discourse perspective highlights the possibilities of researching practice through studying the talk in use. Co-constructing this paper has provided the insider and the outsider with a 'space' to analyse the 'talk' and in doing so address the following questions:

- 1) What lessons can we share from our insider / outsider perspectives with regard to this partnership approach to constructing a paper?
- 2) What does discursive analysis contribute to insider research?
- 3) Can discourse analysis reveal the multiple 'realities' and the promise within the 'mirage'?

words: 779 excluding references.

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