New theory... new practices?

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New Theory….New Practices?

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Abstract: This paper presents research which uses the methodological framework of Personal Construct Theory (Kelly, 1955) to investigate Adult Learning tutors’ thinking in a context in which national policy has explicitly redefined practice within the new theoretical paradigm of literacies as social practices. The data, gathered through reflective activities on a teacher education programme, suggests a slippery relationship between the espoused theory of policy and the implicit theories in use in practice. I begin to explore one way of reading dissonances in the data using post modern theories; I propose that the ‘social practice model’ of literacies education may be read as a ‘text’ in which practitioners are making meaning of new theory in a construal process which is highly discursive and power-laden. In conclusion, I consider some possible implications of this perspective for teacher education.

Purpose of study

The study explores practitioners’ understandings of the ‘social practice model’ of adult literacies education, which, in recent years, has become an orthodoxy of practice in Scotland. Derived from the New Literacies Studies (see for example: Barton, 1994; Street, 1995; Clark and Ivanic, 1997; Barton & Hamilton, 1998; Barton, Hamilton & Ivanic, 2000), the social practice perspective is primarily a theory of literacies in society, which emphasises the inherent power relationships affecting uses of literacies in a social context and illuminates the situated nature of literacies acquisition. Though not a theory of education, it has profound significance for adult literacies work. Despite the radical implications of this theoretical perspective and its apparent adoption in Scotland as ‘the social practice model’, doubt has been expressed about the evidence of fundamental changes to practice in a context in which new understandings of practice can be co-constructed (see Ackland & Wallace, 2006). This research, undertaken in my role as Curriculum and Research Leader of the Scottish TQAL Consortium, aimed to explore with programme participants their changing understandings of the new theoretical perspective; the data gathering processes combined research aims with professional development objectives.

The initial research questions were as follows:

• How are practitioners in Scotland interpreting the implications of a social practices perspective of literacies?
• How do these interpretations relate to other traditions of education?
• What are the ‘theories in use’ (Argyris and Schon, 1974) implied by narratives of practice.
• To what extent is social practices theory evident as a theory in use in practice?

The research is located in the context of a Teacher Education programme – TQAL1 – which was developed in response to the Scottish Government’s commitment to raise standards in the Adult Literacies sector. The Scottish Adult Literacy and Numeracy policy (Scottish Executive, 2001) explicitly promotes a social practices perspective of literacies. The TQAL programme was introduced to improve the quality of teaching and learning by embedding this theoretical perspective in practice and to contribute to the professionalisation of the field.

Developed and delivered by a consortium of higher and further education institutions2, the programme brings together practitioners from a range of educational contexts across Scotland. An explicit aim of the programme is to foster a community of practice in which new understandings of practice can be co-constructed (see Ackland & Wallace, 2006). This research, undertaken in my role as Curriculum and Research Leader of the Scottish TQAL Consortium, aimed to explore with programme participants their changing understandings of the new theoretical perspective; the data gathering processes combined research aims with professional development objectives.

1 Teaching Qualification: Adult Literacies
2 The Scottish TQAL Consortium consists of the Universities of Aberdeen, Dundee & Strathclyde, Cardonald and Forth Valley Further Education Colleges, and two representatives from the field. It is contracted by Scottish Government to develop and deliver the new TQAL qualification.
Methodology

There is a central methodological challenge in exploring implicit understandings and theories in professional practice (Usher and Bryant, 1989). What people say they do does not always accurately represent their thought processes and behaviours. In Scotland, most practitioners claim they are 'doing social practices'. Interpretations of what this means and the ways in which it determines pedagogy remain, on the whole, tacit. Tacit understandings are not easy to expose using standard approaches to research, such as questionnaires and interviews.

For this reason some educational research into practitioner thinking has turned to Personal Construct Theory (PCT) (Kelly, 1955), which provides a qualitative methodology and techniques to investigate and understand the ways in which individuals are constructing, from their experience, models of the world which influence their future behaviours. PCT asserts that, 'Behind each single act of judgement that a person makes lies his (sic) implicit theory about the realm of events within which he (sic) is making judgements' (Fransella and Bannister, 1977, p.2).

PCT methodology has been used in a range of contexts for research into the constructs underpinning professional practice (e.g. Day et al, 1990; Solas, 1992; Pope & Denicolo, 1993; Hillier, 1998). Its use for obtaining insights into practice is based on the assumption that the construct structures of professionals influence their perceptions and judgements and thereby shape their behaviours in practice. Fenstermacher (1979) predicted that the study of beliefs would become the focus of research into teacher effectiveness (in Pajares, 1992, p. 307) and others have highlighted the value, the necessity even, of exploration of implicit constructs for teacher education (Pintrich cited in Pajares, 1992, p.307). Denicolo and Pope (2001) describe a variety of ways of exploiting methods derived from PCT to facilitate the transformation of professional practice. Most are based on Kelly’s Repertory Grid Technique (Fransella & Bannister, 1977) - a method of structured dialogue which aims to elicit the implicit theory behind a person’s judgments about practice. At the core of this process is the requirement for respondents to articulate their distinctions between instances - or ‘elements’ - of practice. Presented with triads, they must explain how they perceive two elements to be similar and the third different. The characteristic shared by two elements becomes one pole of a construct, how the third differs forms the contrasting pole. By eliciting bipolar constructs, this technique goes beyond what a person affirms about practice and explores the delineating alternatives that they tacitly hold. In the patterning of elements and constructs, the grid technique attempts to map the personalised meaning each individual is making of concepts of practice.

The proposition that these methods could utilise the exploration of teachers’ constructs as reflection towards transformation was an important consideration in my use of this research methodology.

The terminology of Kelly’s theory appears to privilege the individual, yet the theory’s assumption about persons is of people in relationship with others (Kalekin-Fishman & Walker, 1996): ‘For Kelly, people are both fashioned within and fashioned of the complex interpersonal worlds they inhabit.’(ibid, p.13). Most often assumed to be constructivist in orientation, in its recognition of the socially situated nature of individual construing it shares with social constructivist theories (including New Literacies Studies) the assertion that meaning making is inherent in a nexus of social relationships. Although Kelly asserts that ‘persons differ from each other in their construction of events’ (Kelly, 1955, p.55), his theory also encompasses ‘commonality’ (ibid, p.90) in ways of construing. Repertory Grid technique can be used to explore how people are both similar and different in the way they make meaning of their experiences. In this research I was interested in the extent to which understandings of a ‘social practice model’ were similar and different across a group of diverse practitioners.

A fundamental tenet of Kelly’s theory is ‘constructive alternativism’ (ibid, p.72) - that there are always possible alternative interpretations. Meaning making is an open ended exploratory process in which there is no one truth but, as in a postmodern view, ‘the search for first causes or final explanations is always in abeyance’ (Stronach and MacLure, 1997, p.26). Some authors have explicitly explored the congruence of PCT with the core tenets of postmodernism. Botella (1995) relates Kelly’s theoretical assertions to Polkinghorne’s (1992) affirmative notion of a postmodern epistemology which includes 4 basic themes: foundationlessness (humans have no direct access to reality only the product of our constructions), fragmentariness (emphasis on the local and situated), constructivism (human knowledge is a construction built from cognitive processes and embodied interactions with the world of material objects, others and the self) and neopragmatism (focus on local and applied knowledge). Carl (1999) explores the intersections between PCT and post modern thought and concludes that

‘Postmodernism brings to Kelly an understanding that the construal process of people is highly discursive and power-laden, while Kelly provides a sub-
ject-specific and process-oriented framework that facilitates a re-working of the modernist subject.' (p.19)

These shifts in the way Kelly’s theory is regarded reflect my own shifts in the research process – from a focus on the individual understandings of a ‘social practice model’ of teaching and learning, to an examination of the similarities and differences in construing amongst a group of practitioners drawn from a variety of professional contexts, to an interest in the ‘discursive and power laden’ construal process.

Method

Methods derived from PCT, and in particular Repertory Grid Technique, were chosen then as a means of surfacing the conceptual constructs underlying adult learning tutors’ approaches to teaching and learning within the social practices paradigm. Unlike standard research methods, the repertory grid claims to elicit people’s ways of construing without influencing them with the researcher’s own preconceptions. This was an important consideration given my own place in the research, as TQAL Curriculum Leader and programme tutor.

In addition to the in depth repertory grid dialogues with 11 geographically dispersed and differently experienced practitioners, data was gathered through a variety of learning activities within the TQAL programme. These included: autobiographical writing; a group activity using a triadic technique to sort practice-related terminology; reflective discussion in the virtual learning environment (VLE); videos of practice edited for ‘critical moments’. I also undertook a reflexive grid process facilitated by an experienced repertory grid interviewer.

Following on from process and ‘eyeball’ analyses (Jankowicz, 2004, p.80), the grids were analysed using the online Webgrid (http://tiger.cpsc.ucalgary.ca/) software which subjects the data to factor analysis. A variety of representations of the grid data were then shared with research participants for further individual and group reflection. Extracts of the recorded dialogues were transcribed and the texts of these and other group activities are subject to both micro-linguistic analysis and transcontextual analysis (Rampton, 2007); transcontextual analysis looks for traces of official texts – such as curriculum guidelines - in practitioners’ reflections.

In the course of the transcription process, as I grappled with the challenge of turning talk into text, I began to experiment with ‘poetic transcription’ (Lapadat & Lindsay, 1999) as a means of being more overt about the process of construction inherent in transcription or indeed any representation of the data. My thinking about the research process took an increasingly postmodern turn in which reflexivity, language and discursive practices were foregrounded.

Findings

A number of dissonances emerged in my analyses of the data. Firstly, the range of constructs elicited in the Repertory Grids was unsurprising and terms used frequently in informal discussion in relation to the ‘social practice model’ – such as ‘learner-centred’ and ‘relevant’ - appeared in some form in each of the grids. One participant, reflecting on the collection of grids, was ‘unsurprised at the majority of the tables as they fit the current ‘preaching’ and definitions regarding the Scottish system’. The group’s initial reflections on the data concentrated on the apparent conformity.

The grid process elicits bipolar constructs. Paying more attention to the discriminations made by individuals through the contrasts given to the constructs of ‘learner-centred’ and ‘relevant’, differences in understandings of these constructs emerged. For example, ‘relevant’ is contrasted variously with: ‘directive’, ‘treating everybody the same’, ‘ignoring learners’ interests’, ‘decontextualised’. These contrasts imply different understandings and implications for teaching and learning. An analysis of the principal component of each grid presented a wide range of variation in what mattered most to individuals. A theory that a social practice model should focus on ‘harmony’ rather than ‘conflict’ in the teaching and learning situation and a theory that focuses on ‘empowerment’ are likely to lead to distinctively different approaches. The criticality implied by the ‘ideological’ view of the New Literacies Studies is not strongly represented in the data.

Taken overall, the constructs could be read as representing views of the effective teacher in ‘a social practice model’. When read this way, the data is comparable with other data from contexts which do not espouse a social practices theory of literacies, such as data from the school sector (Hattie, 2003) and from other Adult Learning contexts (Battell et al, 2004; Hamilton & Hillier, 2008). In all of these studies, effective teachers: recognize and respect difference, are sensitive to context, reflective and improvisational.

3 Not all this data is yet analysed; in particular the videos, which provide direct access to observation of practice in a variety of contexts, have not yet been subjected to analysis.
Despite the similarity with other sources of data, difference is a loud theme in the transcript data. The practitioners’ identity is asserted as different from school teachers and different from English practitioners, who are perceived to use a ‘deficit model’. This claim to distinction through ‘othering’ (MacLure, 2003, p.3) is discordant with the pervasive sense of feeling obligated to conform to the distinctive Scottish model:

you say these things because
that’s the message at the moment
its almost that y’know
the message
that’s the party line
that’s what you’ve got to do
you’ve got to be on message

In these shifts between similarity and difference an ‘opening’ (MacLure, 2003, p.81) emerged in the data, in which I began to question the discursive practices in the construing of a ‘social practice model’. Initially, I was looking for connections to social practices theory in practitioners’ constructs; from this position different ways of construing could be perceived as ‘treasonable sentiments’ (MacLure, 2003, p.102) betraying a wrong understanding of social practices theory. My reassurances that in the dialogues with practitioners I was not judging as right and wrong versions of ‘a social practices model’ were to some extent disingenuous. Certainly the expectation was that I would make such judgements: ‘How ultimately are you going to analyse whether a particular person’s view of social practices approach is the right one?’ (dialogue transcript). In a variety of ways, participants betrayed their anxiety that they would be ‘found out’. My powerful position, as the apparent arbiter of meanings could not be wished away. Instead, I began to attend to the power dynamics, to the way in which, in the construing of this thing ‘the social practice model’, ‘identity claims’ (Maclure, 2003, p.10) were asserted through the division of self and other, and legitimated by reference to authoritative texts.

In the disturbances in the data, I began to view the term ‘social practice model’ as a ‘floating signifier’ (Foucault, 1977, cited in Hjort, 2009, p.114) detached from what it appears to signify: ‘a phrase the most important meaning of which is that it does not mean anything’ (ibid). Sufficiently slippery, co-opted in support of prescriptive policy and diverse practice, the term acts as a point of struggle for the dynamic power relations in the field of education at this moment in time. One way of regarding the Scottish ‘social practice model’ is as a text, in which meanings are in constant play and language is used to ‘mark a territory in specific ways’ (Usher and Edwards, 2007, p.3).

**Implications**

The detachment of the signifier, ‘the social practice model’, from its direct reference to social practice theory has implications for our attempts to transform practice through teacher education. To quote Usher & Edwards (2007, p.156), ‘The key question becomes not what does it mean but how does it work’. The rhetoric of social practices was appropriated by policy for legitimation of change (Ackland, 2006); my reading of this data suggests that it has been further appropriated by practitioners for their legitimation.

It is therefore imperative that we recognize that what is considered ‘natural’ within the practitioner group may be a hegemonic strategy to appropriate legitimating rhetoric in support of their own established practices and socio-political interests.

And you don’t really need to have
a wonderful theoretical grasp of it
it’s just…
to me
it’s natural (dialogue transcription)

It is evident from this research process that PCT affords us methods for exploring the apparently ‘natural’ in ways which can expose the discursive process of constructions of practice. As a methodology, it is congruent with the theoretical perspective of social practices; both insist on the interrelationship between the individual and the social context.

Gee (2003) warned that the language of radical social theories may be recruited to differing political aims; he urged the New Literacy Studies to include the analysis and use of language to negotiate, advocate and resist the projects of diverse interest groups. It is imperative then that practitioners within this new paradigm should be conscious of their involvement in the discursive project. If the discourse is always doing work (Foucault, 1972), in teacher education we must examine the work it is doing.

**End note**

This is one reading of the data; as Janowicz (2004, p.103) reminds us, interpreting a person’s constructs ‘is construing their construing’. There can be no final conclusions, the process of sense-making is ongoing.
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