Doing Practitioner Research Differently

Why do some practitioner researchers break with convention and find their own creative and unique paths through their research? Why are they prepared, sometimes, to take methodological risks when they are studying for a higher academic degree? What do they gain from doing practitioner research differently, and what are some of the challenges and dilemmas they face in doing so?

These are the key questions explored in this book. They are examined through an original investigation in which the authors worked with six practitioner researchers who found individual and innovative routes through their award-bearing research.

The book presents edited versions of the practitioners’ research reports and also explores the motivations which caused the practitioners to break away from conventional approaches. The investigation revealed that a variety of forces were at work. There were personal factors related to preferred thinking and artistic styles; professional factors related to purposes for doing research; and institutional factors related to the encouragement received and the models of research presented.

This book makes an original contribution to our undestanding of motivation and quality in practitioner research. It suggests that we may need to resist any form of dogma if practitioner research is to be effective. Instead, we may need to liberate individuals to make methodical choices that harmonise with their own purposes and predispositions—to free them to ‘do it their way’.

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This book has been made possible by the willingness of the ‘Darers’ group: Tish Crotty, Linda Ferguson, Ros Frost, Joe Geraci, Jacqui Potter and Liz Waterland, to share the research carried out for their Masters’ degrees with a wider audience. We appreciate the time and commitment they gave to this project, editing their own studies, reading one another’s studies, and meeting to discuss them. Initially, before we received funding, the group met in the late afternoons and early evenings after a full day’s work. Latterly, we have even met on Saturdays in order not to take time out from professional responsibilities.

We also thank the School of Education, Cambridge University for providing support for the project from the Research and Development Fund. This enabled supply cover to be provided to enable Darers to meet and also edit their own writing.

Further thanks are due to Ken Thomas and Kevin O’Connell for their willingness to share their innovative work in this book, allowing us to illustrate how other practitioner researchers can use, and have used, the examples and insights to support their own enquiries.

We are grateful, too, to the many other practitioner researchers—too numerous to mention by name—who have contributed to the ideas explored in this book; to Marion Blake for her help and feedback on the manuscript at draft stage; to Richard Winter also for feedback on the manuscript; to Christine Goad for her meticulous organisation and invaluable secretarial support; and to Thimble Press for permission to reproduce, in shortened form, Liz Waterland’s Not a Perfect Offering.

Marion Dadds
Susan Hart
Chapter 1

Background and introduction

What motivates some practitioner researchers to take an unconventional, innovative direction in their research; to employ their powers of creativity in surprising ways; to think and do differently from the mainstream research they have met? This many—sided question engaged us—Marion Dadds and Susan Hart—for more than three years in the project which forms the basis of this book. It caused us to re-examine many of the assumptions underlying the learning conditions that are offered to practitioners who want to know about, and apply, research to their daily professional work. And it caused us to understand more clearly some of the drives and problems which shape the research of practitioners who choose to frame their work in a radically different way from mainstream approaches.

We had been working as higher education tutors and researchers at the Cambridge University School of Education (formerly the Cambridge Institute) for many years. Marion started her career there in 1981, Susan in 1989. Our work focused on supporting the continuing professional development of teachers and other practitioners through award-bearing courses and research projects. We shared a common interest, through our teaching and research, in methodologies that help practitioners to study and develop their work. The research project we share in this book emerged from that common interest.

The project began one afternoon when we met on the stairs in our workplace. We stopped to talk about the practitioner research studies we were currently validating for the Masters’ degree on which we both taught. There were, we both felt, some challenging, innovative research studies being submitted for validation, which were worthy of sharing with a wider audience. We were not, at this stage, explicit about the particular qualities of these studies that led us to perceive them as ‘innovative’: we were simply responding at an intuitive level to features that set them apart from the kinds of work that we were used to supervising and assessing. Despite their engaging qualities, some of these studies had taxed the academy, as they transgressed more conventional notions of research, though most were
awarded high grades on the Masters’ assessment criteria. As we talked on, we were able to recall other such innovative studies we had encountered in the past.

As light turned to dusk and our legs grew weary from this stairway exchange, the idea grew for a publication that would make some of this research more widely available to other practitioner researchers. Our first idea was simply to edit a collection of studies that might provide example and inspiration for others to experiment with alternative modes of doing and reporting practitioner research. We had been concerned for some time that research methods teaching, and the Masters’ degree criteria, could be constraining for some practitioners, deterring them from pursuing more adventurous approaches to inquiry and reporting. A collection of studies providing examples of different innovative approaches which had been judged successful according to conventional research criteria would, perhaps, give others encouragement to be inventive, to search for their own more empowering ways of fostering the development of professional thinking and practice.

After approaching practitioner researchers past and present in the following weeks, as well as being unable to trace others, we drew a group of six together, all of whom were interested and willing to see their work shared more widely in a publication. Liz Waterland, Ros Frost and Tish Crotty were working in mainstream primary schools. Liz was a headteacher of a city infant school, Ros a teacher of five and six year olds in a large primary school, and Tish was working for Cambridgeshire Multicultural Education Service as a Language and Curriculum Support Teacher.1 Linda Ferguson was a class teacher in a school for children with severe and profound learning difficulties; Jacqui Potter was a physiotherapist educator, working on a course development team writing a new BSc Hons physiotherapy programme, and Joe Geraci was working as a substitute teacher at RAF Lakenheath, an American high school for Department of Defense dependants whose parents are attached to the US Air Force.

These practitioners’ Masters’ degree work started at different times, covering different courses, though each pursued, successfully, a Masters’ programme at Cambridge. Liz and Jacqui followed a two-year, part-time course in applied research in education, accredited by the University of East Anglia. Joe, Linda and Tish followed the new Modular Masters’ programme established when the Cambridge Institute became part of Cambridge University. Ros also followed the Modular Masters’ course, but one year later than the other three, by which time considerable changes to

1 Liz Waterland is also author of Read With Me: An Apprenticeship Approach to Reading (Thimble Press 1985).
2 Information about the assessment criteria and examining procedures used on different courses is provided in Chapter 9 (page 144).
the original course structure and to the graded assessment criteria had been introduced.²

What all the members of the group had in common was that, at some point in their research degree, they had made a decision to break with conventional ways of doing and reporting research, as they understood them. They reached out for their own unique ways of doing or writing up their research, in response to the perceived needs of their particular project and their own preferred thinking and representational styles. In this sense, they all found the courage to take a risk with their research. Thus we called the project, temporarily, ‘Daring to be different’, and the project members the ‘Darers’. The naming seemed to ‘stick’ to the point where it is difficult now to think of it in any other way.

When we met to discuss the proposed edited collection, it seemed a good idea to explore with the group if they themselves saw their work as ‘innovative’, and if so, in what respects. As we began to engage in this discussion, however, a broader conversation emerged. As well as discussing the innovative qualities of the research itself, we began to focus on what the processes and experiences of being an innovative researcher had been like for those in the group. As our conversations developed, it became increasingly evident that we should be seeking to understand more about the Darers’ experiences of being innovative researchers and that this should be expressed through their perspectives, voices and language rather than through our own.

A more complex project than that of dissemination was emerging. It was clear that we had something more profound and important to learn from the group about the experience of being an innovative researcher, something we had not previously understood in any significant way. Without our initially designing it to be so, a research-based project started evolving, in which we came face to face with issues and questions about the conditions in higher education that encourage, support, foster or inhibit quality innovative practitioner research. The project started to take a new, deeper direction. We became, spontaneously, enquirers into our own teaching and institutional practices, seeking, through collaborative research with the group, to understand better the minds, hearts and motivations of those who had developed the courage to ‘do differently’ within the academic context.

We discovered that, in their own ways, group members had each encountered tensions at some point in their learning between the models of research which seemed to dominate the resources offered to them by higher education, and the shape and direction they felt was right for their own research. Though most had found knowledge of established traditions helpful in certain ways, they felt a need to break from ‘official academic genres’ (Ely et al. 1997:11) in order to follow their own intellectual as well as emotional desires and styles in their research. They wanted, and needed,
to break new ground on their own terms, while working towards the criteria by which higher education would judge their work as worthy of a Masters’ degree. They succeeded in doing so and, in the process, they implicitly created their own criteria for what constitutes worthwhileness and quality in practitioner research. This book maps something of the territory they covered as they accepted the challenges of shaping their own desires and purposes into research that was, ultimately, considered valid by academia, even though, in some cases, it diverged radically from mainstream research.

What we mean by ‘innovation’ in this book thus relates to the particular experience, understandings and perceptions of the participants in this research, who were studying on a variety of courses within a particular institutional setting. We realise that what we and they perceived at the time as ‘innovative’ may not be so perceived by others, even though the studies stood out as innovative in our own context. Yet we believe that two of our questions that emerged from the project, ‘What motivates practitioners to take unconventional directions in their research?’ and ‘What conditions in higher education support creativity and methodological inventiveness?’ are worthy of consideration whatever the context of study and however ‘innovation’ is defined.

Developing a methodology

A collaborative methodology soon crystallised for exploring the processes and outcomes of this innovative work. Funding from our internal Research and Development fund enabled us to meet regularly, as a group, over a two-year period (1997–9). At each meeting, one study was the focus of discussion. In advance of the meeting, the researcher whose work was being discussed prepared his or her reflections on the experience of doing the research, outlining motivations, challenges, difficulties. A second colleague prepared a critical reader response to the work which included questions that had arisen in the reading. At the meeting, the researcher’s insights and experiences were shared and discussed. The reader response was then shared. Open discussion involving the full group followed. All these discussions were tape-recorded for later analysis. By the time the project was established, Joe Geraci had returned to the USA. We communicated with him via e-mail. As he could not be with us, he sent us a written account of his perspectives on, and experiences of, doing his research. During these stages, our own views as research tutors also became part of the database. Our methodology thus captured a range of perspectives on each individual’s study and on the personal and institutional issues that arose from it. The epistemological basis for the project was therefore predominantly collaborative.
After this stage of the project the two of us met to analyse this mass of data. Before every meeting we each carried out an issues analysis of the transcribed discussions being considered. In the meetings, we compared and contrasted our individual analyses in order to develop a richer, more collective picture. During our analytical conversations, key issues and themes started to emerge. We followed these backwards into previous transcripts and forwards into those still to be analysed. Thus, our issues and themes were emergent but were ultimately tracked across all the studies. This work provided the basis for the analytical narrative summaries which accompany each of the edited studies in Chapters 2 to 8. In these summaries we bring out the key features of innovation in the studies and the key issues emerging for the researchers from their experience of researching differently. All these summaries were shared with the group who offered critical feedback for the final drafts. All the practitioner researchers had the final say in how their own work was represented in both the narrative summaries and the editions of their research.

Concurrently, group members undertook an editing task on their own studies in order to preserve the key features while reducing the text to fit the requirements of the size of this book. Tish had done two distinctly different innovative research studies and it was ultimately decided to include both. Thus, we had seven edited studies and these are represented in Chapters 2 to 8.

When we had completed our analysis together and identified key themes, we took some time independently to think more theoretically about what had emerged. At this stage, we had no agreed strategy for doing this other than to go away and have a good think on our own.

Our ‘good thinks’ generated a remarkable similarity in the themes and hypotheses that emerged. When we next met we saw that we had, independently, clustered the themes into three major categories which we both saw as theoretically related. The outcome of this work is represented in Chapter 9, and gave us the theoretical basis for thinking about the practical implications of the project which we outline in Chapter 10.

The outcomes of this analytical stage were shared orally and diagrammatically with the group members for discussion and collaborative validation. Although the intention was methodologically sound, the outcome was, we both felt, strange. The group offered little in the way of response in contrast to the very lively and engaged previous meetings in which we had discussed the individual studies. We puzzled over this for some time and concluded that, perhaps, they had found it difficult to engage with the analysis and theory that had excited us simply because it was ours and not theirs. They had disengaged from the research process after the meetings in which we had analysed and discussed the individual studies. The rest of the research process had been ours. This explanation, if valid, offers a sound lesson in the nature of collaborative methodologies and
epistemologies: what one does not participate in creating, one may have difficulty ‘owning’. (Our meeting was also held on a late, hot July working day towards the end of an academic year. Herein might lie a second valid explanation. Indeed, when the same ideas were presented to the group later in written form, as an early draft of Chapter 9, they received enthusiastic endorsement.)

As a result of exploring the reasons why individuals had chosen to do what they did, different dimensions of innovation began to be identified. Some studies were innovative in their conceptualisation, some in the methods used to investigate them, some in the ways in which they have been written. Some were innovative in more than one way; some in all of these ways. For the purposes of this book, we have chosen to group them on the basis of a distinctive type of innovation shared by more than one study. Ros’s and Jacqui’s work, for example, was distinctive for its use of visualisation in the research process. Joe, Tish and Linda all adopted a conversational approach in their research in which the to-ing, fro-ing and changing of voice contributed to the development of ideas. Tish and Liz both adopted fictional forms to achieve their research purposes.3

We then moved on to the final stages of the project in which we explored the implications of the research for practice. We met with the group on two occasions to discuss what they felt the implications were from practitioners’ points of view. The discussions were transcribed and analysed and used as the basis for the first part of Chapter 10.

We also had a two-way conversation in which we questioned one another about how the project had changed our own thinking as tutors. We then discussed the implications of these shifts in thinking for our own practice in supporting practitioner research generally and in the context of Masters’ degrees particularly. Again, the conversation was transcribed, analysed and used as the basis for the second part of Chapter 10.

This, then, is the way we invented our methodological way through the project, designing the route to suit what we wanted to do and the ways in which we wanted to foreground the perspectives of the practitioner researchers in our analysis and theorising.

**Drawing on prior thinking**

This project, though small-scale, is nevertheless related to a wider field of practitioner research. In this work, therefore, we see ourselves as part of a growing research tradition which has crossed cultural and professional

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3 This is not to suggest that these categorisations capture all that was innovative about these practitioners’ work. A fuller analysis of the thinking that led to, and lay behind, individual studies is provided in Chapter 9.
boundaries over the years. The associated research methodologies in this field have spread world-wide and into a variety of professional and community contexts: schools (e.g. Hollingsworth 1997), healthcare (e.g. Nichols 1997, Titchen and Binnie 1993), social work (e.g. Childs, Franklin and Kemp 1997), family support (e.g. Winter 1996), the police force (e.g. Adlam 1998). Sometimes this research tradition is referred to as practitioner research, sometimes as action research, and in the field of education it is referred to specifically as teacher research, especially in America (Hollingsworth 1994). While there may be characteristic differences in these several research methodologies, they share in common a central commitment to the study of one’s own professional practice by the researcher himself or herself, with a view to improving that practice for the benefit of others (Dadds 1996).

Over the years of working together in this field, we have shared a common interest in alternative, creative approaches to practitioner research and research reporting. Marion Dadds supported an eclectic approach to research in her research teaching and was, herself, predominantly an action researcher with feminist leanings. She had, however, always been interested in practitioners’ enquiries that diverged from traditional action research, not least because she realised that the tidy action research cycle was never that tidy in the practices of research. To this end, she supported inventiveness when it emerged, though she did not consciously and deliberately promote it. In 1984, she was successful in persuading the academic board of the institution to validate the use of non-traditional, alternative research outcomes that diverged from the standard research report or essay format, in order to enable teachers to match their research texts more intelligently to the cultures of teaching and schools. She conducted a small-scale study on some of the issues related to this work (Dadds 1995), but did not then delve as deeply into the perspectives of the innovative researchers as the Darers’ project has subsequently allowed.

We had both observed that the more mainstream, traditional research approaches do not always suit the needs and available resources of practitioner researchers. Indeed, as a result of supporting practitioners in doing research on Masters’ courses over a number of years, Susan Hart had begun to wonder if, for the purposes of practitioners’ own enquiries, formal knowledge of research methodology could, in some cases, be deskilling rather than enabling. The message that some practitioners seemed to receive was that the expertise required for research is qualitatively different from the expertise acquired through practical experience of teaching. When carrying out their own enquiries, some would set aside their own sophisticated analytical and interpretive expertise, only to find themselves less able to think so effectively through the unfamiliar medium of ‘research methods’. Susan had begun to feel uncomfortable about her own contribution to research methods’ courses; to wonder if it would be more
helpful to strengthen practitioners’ own creative and critical thinking powers and to affirm these as legitimate and for some purposes sufficient resources for research (Hart 1995a).

Much action research and practitioner research continues to draw upon the methods and methodologies of traditional social science research. While this ‘methodological borrowing’ (Winter 1989) can be appropriate to some degree, we both felt that it is often not situationally appropriate for the professional contexts in which many practitioner researchers work, or for the kinds of research questions they choose to pursue. Examples of methodological inventiveness have emerged over the years (e.g. Convery 1993, Winter 1988, Hart 1995a, Hollingsworth 1994, Dadds 1994, Lomax 1994, Mellor 1999), but these have as yet led to few significant changes in practitioner research practices in higher education, although questions have continued to be raised about the nature of authentic methodologies for practitioner research (e.g. Day 1990, Elliott 1990).

At times, we have shared our despondency at the way in which we felt practitioner research was becoming increasingly controlled and narrowed by the constraints of higher education teaching and criteria. At other times, we have shared our unease, paradoxically, when practitioner researchers chose to go ‘out on a limb’, wondering if they would depart too radically from the academic criteria on their Masters’ course and fail to achieve the quality standards set by the institution. More importantly, we have also shared a common sense of inspiration when practitioner researchers have reached out for exciting, unorthodox ways of doing and reporting their research and, as a result, taxed the mind of the academy, demanding new thinking about what constitutes legitimate practitioner research at Masters’ level. This inspiration has given us a strong source of motivation for this project.

**Power and responsibility**

As the project developed, its importance for our work as higher education teachers became more and more apparent. Higher education colleagues, along with those in other legitimating bodies such as the Teacher Training Agency in the UK and funding bodies in general, are in a powerful position to influence the views of research which practitioner researchers develop; to portray notions of validity and appropriateness in relation to research which is designed to advance understanding and action in professional work; to influence how the research gets done, written, disseminated; to determine what practitioners learn about research, how and why. In this sense, it is a responsible position, one in which legitimating and funding bodies can shape the methods and methodologies of practitioner research for better or worse.
Given that such methodologies are designed primarily to improve the circumstances of those for whom the practitioner holds responsibility—children, patients, parents, communities—it matters how this work is supported and conceptualised, so that the most appropriate conditions are provided to enable practitioner researchers to give of their best in pursuit of improvement. Opening one’s professional practice to critical scrutiny demands courage, curiosity, fortitude and a willingness to accept that there are always opportunities for further development. It often means that the practitioner researcher renders himself or herself vulnerable to critique, from both self and others. Yet such open attitudes, we believe, signal one of the highest forms of professionalism. Such professionalism deserves fostering and respecting in climates of optimum growth.

The practitioner researchers who formed the project group are but a few. Yet they are part of a growing number working in a variety of contexts—funded, unfunded, award-bearing, non-award bearing—who are engaging in research in order to improve their professional practice. They are also part of a growing number who experience a need to break with the traditional conventions where these do not fit, in order to research with validity in a different way. What they have to say and share deserves our attention. What they have to offer to other practitioners who are seeking courage to research differently, seeking to find new ways into and through their research, is significant. What we have to learn from them about the personal and professional experience of researching innovatively is of practical and theoretical relevance to those who shape and legitimate practitioner research, as well as to those who conduct it. We hope that this book will enable others to understand some of that learning—along with the implications for practice—which the project has generated for us.

**Structure of the book**

We have structured the book to reflect the sequences of learning which we have experienced, while at the same time enabling different readers to relate to it flexibly in response to their own needs. Those wanting to have immediate access to the practitioner research studies can move through Chapters 2 to 8, omitting the narrative summaries at the end of each chapter of the researchers’ accounts of their experiences of doing their research differently. These narrative summaries could also be read together, independently of the studies to which they relate, by those interested in gaining an overview of issues of innovation arising from the project.

One practitioner research study is represented in each chapter. A full reading of each of Chapters 2 to 8 will give insight into each individual author’s experiences of conducting his or her research project, as well as the edited version of the research itself. Chapter 9 then goes on, as we have said, to highlight and discuss the themes and issues which emerged from our
cross-case analysis. This takes us into our theoretical discussion about the complementary and interrelated roles played by the practitioner researchers’ individual needs, interests and styles, the climate and values of the supporting institution or agency, and the demands of the research project itself. In Chapter 10, we share our thinking and that of the practitioner researchers about the implications which the study has raised for those choosing to engage in this kind of research, and for those who support it. Then, in a brief final chapter, we describe some specific developments in our work arising from the project. Here, we provide some examples of how other practitioner researchers have already used the Darers’ ideas and experiences as spring-boards for developing their own innovative approaches, and how we ourselves have already been drawing on those ideas and experiences in our teaching.

When the idea of this book was first put to the group, most responded with considerable enthusiasm because they felt it would have been a great help if such a book had been available to them at the time they were making decisions about taking an innovative route in their own research. The examples in Chapter 11 go some way towards evidencing the validity of that view, and consequently the value of the book as a useful resource for practitioner researchers. From our own perspective as tutors, the research has provided not only new insight but also a renewed sense of optimism about the importance of supporting innovative work. Innovation, we argue, can be a vital force for quality in practitioner research.
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