

Teacher/Practitioner Research: Reflections on an Online Discussion

*** * * On the Internet * * ***

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Abstract

There is growing interest in educational research conducted by teachers and other practitioners in learning environments. There is also a growing willingness among educators to discuss such research in environments that are open and online. However, for some of those engaging with such forms of inquiry in such online spaces, puzzles remain. For example, for it to count as ‘research’, does teacher/practitioner ‘research’ have to be shared? Can this happen in non-academic ways, and why is this beneficial? In what ways is teacher/practitioner research valuable in itself as an activity? What forms of such research are open to teachers, how are they similar and how do they differ? What are the defining characteristics of one of these forms, ‘exploratory practice’, and what does it look like in practice? What kinds of support are required so that teacher/practitioner research is a more viable activity for both teachers and their learners?

These were some of the questions raised in a recent online discussion involving teachers and academics from all over the world. It provided dialogic learning opportunities and encouraged a sharing of insights from educators working from different perspectives but united in the common cause of supporting deeply ethical, empowering teacher/practitioner research. This article represents the moderators’ reflective summary of the discussion, produced with a view to disseminating current ideas on this topic and stimulating further debate.

Introduction

Debates in the field of English language teaching, whether face to face or in print (see, for example, the point and counterpoint discussions in the *ELT Journal*), are an important way of taking understandings of key and sometimes controversial issues further. One type of debate that busy professionals working in different parts of the world can contribute to more easily than others is the online discussion. These allow group members to email messages to the rest of the group. The messages then appear in a threaded Internet forum.

Online discussions capitalize on the extraordinary power of the Internet to bring people together across space and time. As a form of communication, they originated more than 25 years ago when members of the first 'digital generation', inspired to see in networked computing "an ideal society: decentralized, egalitarian, harmonious and free," developed WELL (Whole Earth 'lectronic Link) (Turner, 2006, p. 1). Since then, online discussion boards have mushroomed, supported by organisations such as Yahoo! Groups, which has been active since 1998.

This article explores the issues raised during one such online discussion hosted recently on a Yahoo! Groups platform by the IATEFL Research Special Interest Group (SIG). Moderated by the authors, the discussion was entitled: 'Supporting teacher research and encouraging exploratory practice'. At this juncture, we should point out that while the discussion began with teacher research (TR) and this is what many respondents referred to, subsequent discussion led us to prefer the term practitioner research (PR), and this is reflected in our title.

From a starting point of considering two articles (Dar, 2012; Smith, 2014) that had been published in the SIG's newsletter, *ELT Research*, the discussion which was freely accessible to both members of the SIG and non-members alike (<http://resig.weebly.com/online-discussions.html>) ran for two weeks from late May to early June 2015. This was just before the SIG's annual conference 'Teachers Research!' in Izmir, Turkey, where the moderators and authors of the articles were due to speak. One of these articles (Smith, 2014) included a description of how the annual teacher-researchers' conference in Turkey had started a few years earlier, while the other article (Dar, 2012) provided a clear example of an Exploratory Practice (EP) approach that busy teacher-researchers, such as those attending the conference in Izmir, can follow. There was thus a degree of synergy between the content of the discussion and the event.

This discussion was lively, generating over 20,000 words of debate; readers interested in the live discussion in its original form can access it by joining the Yahoo group through this link: <https://groups.yahoo.com/neo/groups/resig/info>. Our approach is to summarize and reflect on it, with a view to making the discussion in its numerous overlapping threads more accessible, disseminating current ideas on teacher research and stimulating further research and debate on this topic.

In reporting, we are sharing participants' voices and using their names with their permission. It was important to gain this permission, since ideas produced in the heat of the moment can change. We wrote individually to each contributor, indicating how we

would quote them and inviting them to contact us should they wish their contribution to be introduced in a slightly different way or anonymised.

We have organized our data according to themes that arose, in the form of questions that were raised. Online discussions can be unpredictable and some of these themes took us by surprise, for example, those that reflected tensions in the interpretation of different approaches to TR/PR, and conceptual differences as to the nature of TR itself, a theme we address first.

For teacher research to count as ‘research’, does it have to be shared?

One area generating extended discussion was what constituted TR. Martin McMorro, writing from New Zealand, posed the following potentially controversial question early on: “Does it only really count as research when it is shared (through presentations, workshops, articles)?”

In response, Mark Wyatt, from Portsmouth, drew attention to a talk by David Nunan, who:

*[H]ighlighted how he had **forgotten** (authors’ emphasis) to include ‘publication’ (used broadly to include sharing in various forms) as a criterion for research in his 1992 book: ‘Research methods for language teaching’.*

This prompted several contributors to argue that public ‘sharing’ is a vital ingredient of research, for example, Simon Borg, currently based in Slovenia, who wrote:

‘Research’ implies a public contribution to knowledge and not a private activity. This does not mean that private and personal inquiry is not valuable; it just means there is no need to call it ‘research’.

Similarly, Anne Burns, from Australia, expressed the view that:

TR needs to be publicised... Otherwise it remains private and personal, whereas one of the distinguishing features of research is that it adds to the body of knowledge people have about particular issues.

Judith Hanks, from Leeds, posed the question, though:

Who gets to say what ‘counts’ as research? Up until recently, it has been a privileged group (professional academics) who got to decide... I’d like to see teachers and learners have a stronger say in what ‘counts’... (an ongoing battle in itself) ... and if their views are accepted as equally important, then that inevitably has a bearing on the question ‘Does research have to be shared for it to count?’ – shared with whom? by whom? in what format? for what audience? to what end(s)?

Seizing on these questions, Richard Smith, from Warwick, suggested that ‘sharing’ may not be a fundamental criterion for research:

If it involves systematic inquiry and collection/analysis of data — not just reflection — then it’s research in my book, since it develops understanding, whether or not it’s later written up or otherwise shared.

Also reacting against the idea that research has to be published to ‘count’, Martin McMorro reported a key finding of his postgraduate dissertation (which he had

submitted nearly 25 years earlier after collecting primary data while teaching). Martin concluded:

I never published it in any way (except in my MA thesis, read by two or three purely for the purpose of assessment) so it's not any kind of research, after all! Though, since now I've told you all about it, has it belatedly become so?

Reflecting on this point, Mark Wyatt speculated that if someone “conducted a large-scale survey of MA students, eliciting their understandings of research, many would not include sharing or publication as part of the definition.”

Mark then went on to suggest there might be implications for the design of MA dissertation modules, with ‘sharing’ through oral presentations being something that could be encouraged.

Clearly, whether or not ‘sharing’ is a defining characteristic of research remains a contentious issue. Some contributors to the discussion argued that sharing is essential, and that anything not ‘shared’, like an MA dissertation, which is read only by the supervisory team, should not be called ‘research’ but something else, like ‘inquiry’. On the other hand, others argued that definitions of research need widening to encompass respectively either not sharing or alternative ways of sharing within the community of practice.

Does teacher research need to be shared in an academic way?

These exchanges thus raised the issue of what sharing research implied. Building on earlier comments regarding the nature of research, Richard Smith argued:

TR is not for academics but is by teachers, for teachers (and learners, too!). I feel an emphasis on publication as a defining attribute of (teacher-)research is misplaced, and pressure to publish can be off-putting to teachers. This emphasis on publication confuses product with process.

This drew the following response from Simon Borg:

I think it would be unfortunate if this discussion started to be about academics vs teachers. TR is a pedagogical activity and clearly the domain of teachers. Academic concerns – which many teachers initially have – can interfere with the process, and relevant background ideas need to be introduced to teachers in a manner that does not obscure a focus on teaching and learning.

Simon also offered the following clarification:

‘Making public’ does NOT necessarily mean formal written publication... We want to encourage teachers (where it is appropriate to do so) to engage in TR without putting them off with the added demands of a written ‘report’ or formal oral presentation.

These contributions struck a chord with Reem, a teacher from Oman, who reported on a locally-run course that encourages teachers to publish their findings and present them to colleagues and at local conferences. She supported the idea of “enabling teachers to share their findings in a less formal way,” arguing that “writing a report might add an

extra workload, so why not make it a learning experience, which they decide how to conduct themselves?"

It was also pointed out, though, by Koray Akyazi, working in a Turkish context, that teachers there "really look forward to presenting what they have discovered with others" at the annual conference. He further explained: "TR has also given many of us the confidence to do an MA in ELT. Although the aim of TR isn't for academic purposes, I would say it acted as a catalyst for further professional development."

Mark Wyatt suggested, too, that:

[F]or some novice researchers, there is definitely an impetus to publish through traditional means, writing something that will be published as a book chapter or a journal article, and we shouldn't underestimate how motivating a first publication of this sort can be.

To summarize, there was widespread acceptance of the view that the sharing of research need not be through traditional academic channels at all, although it was also recognized that the teacher-researcher might choose to develop in that direction.

Why is there a need to share teacher research?

There was some discussion about why it is necessary to share TR. A case for this was put forward by Anne Burns. She pointed out that unfortunately:

[T]eachers' accounts of their research are still very much in short supply in the ELT field and we need research perspectives and rich descriptions from the daily life of the classroom to complement the "grand theories" from the field. Only then can there be a more realistic balance between what is said to work and what actually does seem to work in different classrooms.

From the perspective of a researcher/teacher educator/materials writer from Plymouth, Deborah Bullock also made the point that teacher research is invaluable in offering glimpses into classrooms around the world: "There has been a lot of talk about the 'black box' of teaching. TR provides us with a window into that too often secret world."

There are benefits teachers can derive, too, from sharing their research, as Kenan Dikilitaş in Turkey highlighted. For example, they can find it a motivating experience in itself. Moreover, since sharing their research can "showcase a process for others to follow on their own," as he also argued, it can inspire their audiences to engage in research.

Furthermore, if teachers wish to share their research, but are unable to do so, this can remove the incentive to continue, as Olja Milosevic, writing from Belgrade, cautioned:

I am a teacher and for me it is important to "make public" my research no matter how small-scale it may seem. If I do not have in mind the moment of making it public, I tend to stop at some point. Sometimes, my big puzzle dissolves into nuisance that I stop to notice, and sometimes I find something more interesting to worry about. On the other hand, if I know that I will share my findings in some way ... well, that gives me the stamina to carry on with my research project.

Nevertheless, another contributor ('provocatively', and 'to keep the discussion going', as he now says) stirred up the argument by questioning the value of giving an international audience to TR carried out for essentially local purposes. Referring to edited collections of research reports and reflecting on his own experience of editing such collections, he suggested:

[M]any of the TR reports contained in such collections are not in themselves contributing to wider knowledge in 'the field', at least not explicitly – unless the editor of a collection can point out ways in which they are – since improvement of practice not contribution to the wider field was the intention in which the research was carried out.

In response, though, Mark Wyatt argued that "[O]nce it is in the public domain, only users of the TR can really tell us how valuable they found it." Mark then provided two examples from collections of TR, edited by Simon Borg and Kenan Dikilitaş, from Omani and Turkish contexts respectively, which had informed his own research.

In summary, the value of sharing TR was widely endorsed, both for the satisfaction it brings teachers and for the benefits it provides to the wider education and research communities.

How can teacher research be shared in other ways?

Various suggestions were put forward with a view to making TR 'more accessible'; that is, "to create alternative, feasible and productive ways in which teachers can share their inquiries," as Simon Borg put it. Richard Smith highlighted, for example:

There can be sharing via poster presentation as we've experimented with at our SIG events (Bullock & Smith, 2015) and are carrying on with at the conference next month in Turkey (<http://resig.weebly.com/teachers-research-18-19-june-2015.html>)

Koray Akyazi also recommended the poster presentation format, as it allows teacher-researchers greater interaction with their audiences. He further indicated: "[T]eachers could take advantage of E-portfolios or blogs as more immediate and easily accessible formats for their presentations."

Newsletters, posters, and talks at staff meetings were suggested by Anne Burns and David Mitchell (the latter from Taiwan), while Richard Smith highlighted a successful innovation (reported on in Smith, Connelly & Rebolledo, 2014): "[M]oving from oral presentation with poster to transcription to writing which was led by Paula Rebolledo with teachers in Chile."

Clearly, there is a wide range of exciting possibilities that might help teachers creatively engage in TR.

In which ways is teacher research valuable in itself as an activity?

There was also some discussion about the intrinsic value of TR for the practitioners engaged in it, as a way of supporting their own continuing professional development. Very early in the discussion, for example, Kenan Dikilitaş highlighted that the benefits from TR engagement:

[C]ome not only from the results of such research but from the process of posing questions, hypothesising, looking for evidence, synthesising all these, seeking for ways of innovating with existing beliefs, knowledge and practice.

Kenan thus suggests there is enormous potential for personal growth from engaging in TR. Engagement in research empowers, as Richard Smith emphasized: “TR has value as process, for empowerment of teachers (and – in recent manifestations of Exploratory Practice – learners) who thereby take knowledge construction into their own hands.”

For teachers engaging in such activity, there can be the recognition that TR provides a steady flow of learning experiences. According to Koray Akyazi:

From my experience with and in TR, I understand it as the chance for teachers to gain a deeper insight into what is happening in their own classes. The focus may be on students, such as what type of learning strategies they use, and how intervention may offer benefits in learning. However, the focus could also be on the teacher’s own pedagogical practices.

What forms of teacher/practitioner research are open to teachers?

This consideration of the intrinsic value of TR in supporting teacher development brings us to a related thread in the discussion, the avenues of inquiry open to teachers and their learners. Invoking learners leads us to reflect on the umbrella term used in our report of the discussion so far: ‘teacher research’ (TR). Inés K. de Miller, from Brazil explained her preference for using an alternative term, ‘practitioner research’ (PR), so:

I suggest Practitioner as an alternative to Teacher Research, as it allows the inclusion of learners working with teachers and other practitioners, such as educational psychologists, supervisors, coordinators, head teachers... this creates space for interdisciplinary reflection and investigation.

Similarly aware of a change in power dynamics the use of the term PR signifies, Sabine Mendes, also from Brazil, described thinking of research as practitioner-oriented as “a way of shifting or deconstructing naturalized roles.”

Both Inés and Sabine are part of an ‘exploratory practice’ (EP) group in Rio de Janeiro that, according to Inés, has engaged in “liberating and transformative” critical and professional reflection:

Each teacher decides how to work within EP according to his/her situation and his/her learners. Tacit personal professional beliefs are usually made explicit and normal pedagogic practice reflexively discussed to be better understood, not to be changed... teachers’ enhanced understanding of the method, the book or of themselves as professionals helps them become stronger practitioners. Sometimes they decide to change institutions. The same has happened with learners, who have often become more agentive, more questioning.

Such descriptions of EP struck a chord with contributors to the discussion more familiar with ‘action research’ (AR), for example, Martin McMorro, who reported:

I can see the value of an exploratory practice orientation in allowing teachers and learners to develop a critical understanding of their context and practices, using their existing practices as a means of gathering and interpreting evidence.

Martin questioned, though, whether there is a clear distinction between AR and EP, offering the following definition of AR from the literature:

[A] form of collective self-reflective enquiry undertaken by participants in social situations in order to improve the rationality and justice of their own social or educational practices, as well as their understanding of these practices and the situations in which these practices are carried out (Kemmis & McTaggart, 1990, p. 5).

Martin asked: "Isn't that exactly what's happening (as EP) in Rio?" Likewise, other proponents of AR contributing to the discussion emphasized goals similar to those expressed by exponents of EP. Anne Burns explained, for example:

My primary interest in promoting this thing called action "research" is to democratise research – it's never been clear to me why "ownership" of research is meant to be the province of academics... The opportunity to enter into something called "action research" seems to me to send a message to those who want to do research that it is something they can do too – and they are welcome to be part of it. So, any form of democratisation of an enquiring form of investigation in one's own context with teachers, learners and anyone else who wants to participate must surely be a good thing.

Given the evident commonalities between AR and EP, this brings us to the next stage of the discussion, regarding differences between them.

How are these forms of teacher/practitioner research seen to differ?

Early in the discussion, some contributors began to express differences between action research (AR) and exploratory practice (EP), and tried to unpick those differences. For example, Koray Akyazi addressed this issue while writing about the conflicting demands of research and teaching:

I teach around 25 hours a week, plus exam invigilation, so the amount of time I have besides lesson planning and marking papers is limited. How much of my own time should I devote to research, and how viable is it to take time away from 'teaching'? If it improves the quality of my teaching, or improves the quality of my life, then I feel yes, TR is a viable means of professional development. It seems that exploratory practice integrates research with pedagogy more so than action research, so TR in this flavour may be a more viable option for those teachers who like myself, are just expected to teach.

Yasmin Dar, from Leicester, developed this last point, noting:

Exploratory Practice integrates research with pedagogy in contrast to Action Research which has been generally criticized for leading to burnout at some stage and for not being sustainable. I think there is a problem when the term Action

Research is used as an umbrella term to cover both Exploratory Practice and Action Research.

Yasmin also explained that for her the similarities and differences between EP and AR had still been “a grey area” when she “first started to show an interest in doing classroom research”:

[B]oth models use the terms ‘puzzles’ and ‘working in collaboration with learners’ which can cause some teachers confusion. I think it would be fair to suggest that there are key underlying differences that need to be made more explicit to help teachers make an informed choice about whether to choose an EP or AR model for classroom research.

Anne Burns responded to this post by first acknowledging that “Action Research may lead to burnout for some, especially if teachers are not recognised, supported or affirmed in their schools for doing research.” However, she went on to say:

For other teachers I’ve worked with in Australia and elsewhere AR has been a major catalyst for introducing them to the world of research. As a result of experiencing AR and therefore understanding that research is doable and exciting, many have gone on to do further research, either in their teaching centres, undertaking more research with colleagues, or being involved in curriculum projects, or by enrolling in Masters or PhD programs where they can do more extensive studies. So, as Keith Richards (2003, p. 236) argued (and I tend to agree) “The most powerful form of research for the beginning researcher in TESOL is action research.”

Anne also emphasized the similarities between EP and AR:

[B]oth start with an issue, puzzle or dilemma that a teacher may want to investigate further, both can involve participants in the situation (the teacher, students, colleagues, parents, managers, etc.), and both collect some evidence or information... I’d say in fact it is really helpful to have both forms of investigating available to you as a teacher (as well as other starting points, reflective teaching, action learning and so on), and that teachers can choose the forms of investigation and the extent they feel they want to investigate.

Other contributors also minimized the differences between AR and EP, for example, Martin McMorrow, who wrote:

One potential difference is that AR tends to focus on problems, while EP focuses on puzzles. But this distinction isn’t as clear as it might initially seem. After all, a problem can be a puzzle and a puzzle can be a problem; or both; or neither.

Martin also dismissed the notion that AR and EP can be distinguished by the former being said to focus on bringing about change and the latter on developing understanding. Nevertheless, attempts by some contributors to articulate differences between the two approaches continued for a while. According to Inés K. de Miller:

[I]n AR, practitioners observe and try to understand the effects the change or innovation introduced to solve a problem or address a question. This is very close to what happens in experimental designs. Also, learners are not always involved as

agents of the investigation. Teachers or coordinators tend to observe learners' actions and opinions but don't necessarily involve them in their work, as co-investigators. In general, learner issues are not fore-fronted.

Anne Burns responded to such comments by initially confessing to feeling a bit dispirited by the tensions: "(I hesitate to call it a stand-off) between EP and AR." She continued, with regard to the puzzle/problem dichotomy and the notion of working for change/understanding:

I don't buy the argument that AR is about problem-solving – isn't it more about problematising, as I've written about on several occasions (and for me this is in the Freireian sense of seeing any issues in human social life as ones to raise consciousness about)? Nor [do I accept] that change is inevitably a product of AR – lots of teachers I've worked with have told me that things didn't change that much but they certainly understood their teaching, learners and own learning more.

Furthermore, with regard to a point made by Inés, Anne observed:

Why is AR seen as quasi-experimental? It could be I suppose if it answers the questions one wants it to answer about classroom "puzzles" (isn't AR eclectic in its use of investigative tools after all?), but isn't the point about AR to enable participants (in the sense of anyone who is a participant in that social environment) to look into, and reflect upon, understand and change (and aren't all these things possible?) things towards a "better world" for everyone?

Other responses focused on the source of negative comments about AR, with both Martin McMorro and Simon Borg questioning the arguments of the originator of EP, Dick Allwright. Martin argued, for example, that Allwright's (2001):

[O]verall criticism of AR is weakened by a reliance on a narrow and questionable definition of AR from David Nunan's general books (e.g., 1992) on research methods. This gives his criticisms a 'straw man argument' quality, since they show EP to advantage against a weak version of AR.

Similarly, Simon Borg argued:

Allwright and Bailey's (1991) initial work on promoting research for teachers was pretty much 'standard' research methods; Allwright later realised this was not feasible and developed EP as an alternative. So a contrast between EP and standard research is justified, but I too fail to see why EP needs to be set up in opposition to AR. True, some forms of AR (often promoted by people who don't know much about AR themselves!) do amount to little more than standard research methods, but that distorts what AR is about. AR is driven by puzzles, can involve learners as co-participants, and does contribute to better quality of life in classrooms (often as a result of the beneficial changes it leads to). We can offer teachers different 'flavours' on a continuum of professional inquiry without the need to debate which is better.

These last two points were critiqued by Judith Hanks. Rejecting the 'opposition or absorption' positions, she reflected on the familial relationships between AR and EP:

*When Anne mentioned *relationships* between EP and AR, that glimmered for me: – I think EP and AR can happily stand next to each other in the rambunctious ‘family’ of practitioner research – after all, there’s plenty of room... isn’t there?*

Judith also provided a list of sources (e.g., Allwright, 2003, 2005; Allwright & Hanks, 2009; Gieve & Miller, 2006) for those interested in reading beyond Allwright’s (2001) article which had helpfully begun: “[T]he work of teasing out the differences between AR, Reflective Practice and EP (each of which ‘does what it says on the tin’).”

This brings us to ask about the defining characteristics of EP, a term which, as noted by Mark Wyatt, seems to have given members of the EP group “an enhanced sense of shared identity.”

What are the defining characteristics of exploratory practice?

Explaining how EP emerged, Judith Hanks highlighted several defining characteristics of it:

*First, the importance of puzzling... I first started thinking about this way back in 1998 – I wondered what IS the difference between a problem and a puzzle? – yes, they both have solutions, so why are they different? My investigations then and a brief survey (most recently using Sketch Engine) showed that a ‘problem’ usually collocates with negative things, whereas a ‘puzzle’ includes potential for positive collocations... my conclusions were that actually the real difference comes out when we abandon the count-noun form, and talk about *being puzzled* or *puzzling about*... or asking ‘What puzzles you (me) about your (my) language teaching/learning experiences?’*

*This, I think, is central to the Exploratory Practice approach, and links to the argument that we put forward about ‘working for understanding’ *before* trying to find solutions. The attitude of open-minded, reflective and reflexive curiosity is crucial. That’s not to say that EP has sole rights to such things – they can surely be found in all sorts of practitioner research... and have their roots in much older thinking... but just to note that this is a defining characteristic of EP.*

Second, is the importance of incorporating research into practice – EP recommends using ‘normal pedagogic practices as investigative tools’ ... so the research does not sit on top of our every-day teaching (or learning) work, but rather is a part of it.

Third, is the notion in EP of including learners as practitioners (of learning) alongside teachers as practitioners (of teaching)... I think this is a wonderfully exciting notion, if challenging for some to accept.

EP is also guided by a very clear set of principles, and, for Mark Wyatt, the emergence of EP had led to a heightening of awareness:

For me, EP is the conscience of AR. How can one conduct AR that is not shaped by the principles of EP? It seems to me so vital (in the traditions within which we work) to focus on understanding, involve everyone, and work to improve the quality of life while researching in a sustainable way. Equipped with such principles, teachers can

work with enthusiasm, kindness and conviction to engage with learners to help them transform their worlds (but I think they can also call it AR if they want to).

To gain a deeper understanding of EP, we now consider an example, drawn from one of the two articles that had been a catalyst for the interactions.

What does exploratory practice look like in practice?

One of the articles under discussion was Yasmin Dar's (2012) account of investigating her own classroom through EP. Judith Hanks commented:

One of the things that I think Yasmin demonstrates beautifully in this article is the elegant simplicity of EP – she used the pedagogic activities that she would normally have been doing in her class as a way of exploring her puzzle...

Agreeing with this assessment, Mark Wyatt added: "I think it's a very good example of the kind of EP that busy teachers everywhere looking to do research that improves the lives of learners in their teaching contexts can follow."

Judith reflected further:

[I]n addition to her article, Yasmin also presented at the IATEFL ReSIG Exploratory Practice Event in July 2012... alongside some of her learners... For me, the combination of learners and their teacher presenting their understandings was an incredibly powerful moment with insightful comments from which we could all (researchers, teachers, etc.) learn.

Martin McMorro took up this point about learner participation: "I think any genuine participation on the part of learners in decision-making and management of classroom activities is a great improvement on what typically happens."

However, Martin also raised the issue that "even in the most participatory culture, the degree of involvement of individual participants is likely to vary." This led him to ask: "Do all the participants have an opt-out clause? And if so, how do they exercise it?"

Bringing the discussion back to definitions of EP, Mark Wyatt quoted Judith: "learners are encouraged not only to investigate questions that have puzzled their teachers, but also to formulate their own questions and investigate issues themselves" (Hanks, 2015, p. 118). Mark then posed the following question: "(Within this co-investigation) what level of learner involvement is required for a piece of research to 'count' as EP?"

Besides action research and exploratory practice, what other names are used to describe teacher/practitioner research and what are some of the issues with naming?

One consequence of the tensions between EP and AR alluded to earlier is that some teacher-educator researchers (e.g., Richard Smith and Mark Wyatt) have preferred to adopt a 'compromise' or 'eclectic' position, signaled by use of a compound term, 'exploratory action research', to describe the type of research conducted in some contexts. For example, reflecting on work conducted with teachers in Chile (Smith, Connelly, & Rebolledo, 2014), Richard explained they:

[W]ere encouraged to engage first in extensive exploration of problematic issues via means which would not interfere with their everyday teaching, and only later were they guided optionally to consider trying to 'solve' problems by implementing and evaluating new plans.

The term 'exploratory action research' emerged from this approach. Mark also reported drawing on it subsequently (in Wyatt & Pasamar Márquez, 2015) to describe AR that emphasizes EP principles.

Simon Borg indicated, though, that he considers this extra terminology excessive:

We already have: 'Professional inquiry', 'Classroom inquiry', 'Exploratory Practice', 'Teacher research', 'Classroom research', 'Action research', 'Self study', 'Practitioner research', and now 'Exploratory action research'? So why not: 'Exploratory teacher research', 'Exploratory classroom inquiry', etc.?

There is a serious point here; we ('academics') spend time debating what to call things when such matters I suspect are of little concern to teachers. What we all seem to share an interest in is supporting professional learning through some kind of reasonably rigorous yet necessarily flexible and pedagogically-oriented process of inquiry. Will adding even more labels to an already confusing list of options further this goal?

Richard Smith argued, however, that the dialogue should continue, even though this was:

[P]erhaps not ideal if one believes all the principles of Exploratory Practice have to be followed 'to the letter' or that EP is just another form of AR anyway and doesn't deserve separate recognition, or that there shouldn't be extra labels – but I'd say let's continue to make such perceptions explicit, with some danger to existing interests and possibility of offence but for the potential benefit of construction of new knowledge!

Judith Hanks' response to this issue of names and naming started with an extended metaphor:

I have a brother. In many ways he's very like me – we both have dark eyes, dark curly hair (going grey); when we were very young we were even taken for twins sometimes. As adults we share many values, a sense of humour, and our political outlook is similar. But if you were to call my brother 'Judith', he'd think you were a bit odd.

That seems to me to be important: the brief list of names that Simon gave a few days ago are not arbitrary labels. They tell us something important about what happens, what is the approach, the deeper philosophical underpinnings and defining characteristics as well as the surface level activities of each.

How else can differences between forms of teacher/practitioner research be understood?

Another way of uncovering differences between approaches to research is to use a series of continua. Martin Wedell, from Leeds, provided such a framework below, after arguing that: "TR cannot be defined in a one-size-fits-all manner, and thus our definitions will

always have to be sensitive to the contexts in which the research is being proposed/initiated.”

Table 1. Continua illustrating differences in teacher research

| | <i>Teacher research</i> ↔ | |
|---|---|---|
| <i>purposes</i> | to explore personal puzzles / own learning | to contribute to local-regional-national policy / curriculum /professional change |
| <i>focus</i> | a classroom issue/concern | a classroom- institutional-national issue/concern |
| <i>hoped-for benefit</i> | to (+/- directly) support classroom teaching/learning | to (+/- directly) enable change/development in ‘the field’ |
| <i>use of ‘findings’</i> | personal insight and/or informal local sharing | formal written or oral dissemination to peers/others |
| <i>likely teacher researchers</i> | mostly state school teachers | mostly university level teachers / academics |
| <i>message educational context sends its likely teacher researchers</i> | obedient followers with little interesting to say | proactive instigators / professional voices to be listened to |

Martin also argued:

[W]e need to acknowledge that contexts vary according to the rhetorical and actual expectations that their educational systems have of (English) teachers, the professional freedoms that (English) teachers are allowed, the varied degree of dedication to lifelong teacher-learning that individual teachers may have, and that these factors too need consideration, if we hope to make our definitions of TR meaningful to teachers.

Referring to this framework, Mark Wyatt asked:

If the “message the educational context sends its likely teacher researchers” is that they should be “obedient followers with little interesting to say,” to what extent will this impede their attempts to engage with EP? Are there issues they might need to be careful about? How might these issues be negotiated?

Martin’s framework also has value when we reflect on how ‘likely teacher researchers’, with different aims and purposes, might work harmoniously together.

How can teacher/practitioner research be done in partnership?

Referring to an argument by Anne Burns that “we need research perspectives and rich descriptions from the daily life of the classroom to complement the ‘grand theories’ from the field,” Alan Waters, from Lancaster, suggested the longitudinal and ‘up-close’ studies needed could also be provided by ‘outside’ researchers in partnership with teachers. However, he warned that investigations conducted by outsiders are:

[O]ften too brief to really understand the classroom ‘ecology’ and [informed by] too many preconceptions about what should be happening in classrooms... or done in a classroom setting but not really integrated into its normal ‘business’

In reply, while stressing her concern that “teachers’ voices about their research and insights from their own investigations are still too thin on the ground,” Anne agreed with Alan that “rich and fine-tuned studies” conducted by outsiders in partnership with teachers:

[R]eally contribute to a rich portrayal of classroom life and the kinds of realities that teachers and students experience.

Also responding to Alan’s post, Richard Smith reflected further on “potential collaboration between ‘outside’ researchers and classroom teachers in research projects which are ‘about’ and relevant to classroom realities.” He pointed out that university researchers are likely to:

[H]ave the time, skills, overview of the field and inclination to publish articles which contribute to the wider field but teacher-researchers perhaps generally do not, so joint project planning and authorship could be an option.

Joint authorship is one way of supporting TR, which was the broad focus of the other article the contributors discussed (Smith, 2014). This analysed Kenan Dikilitaş’ work in supporting TR on the foundation programme at a university in Turkey, providing a starting point for the discussion of related issues.

How can teacher research be supported so that it is more viable?

Concerned about the viability of TR in contexts such as Kenan’s, Deborah Bullock pointed out that teachers need to believe they ‘can’ do research, and that ‘it has value’. However, as she also highlighted, there are various challenges that threaten TR viability, including time limitations and teachers’ conceptualizations of research. This last concern was shared by Mark Wyatt:

If many teachers conceive of research as ‘objective’, large-scale hypothesis-testing in the ‘positivist’ tradition, as Borg’s (2013) questionnaire research suggests, then unfortunately these teachers might wonder if research is something they can practically do.

To illustrate this point, Koray Akyazi revealed that when he started engaging in research, which was then “an imposed form of professional development” (that later became more relaxed) at Kenan’s university in Turkey, he “still didn’t have a clear understanding of the benefits and impact it would later have.”

Reflecting on his own experiences as a critical friend to Kenan Dikilitaş (the teacher trainer) but mostly at a distance (Smith, 2014), Richard recollected:

In the first year or two the teachers' work was perhaps relatively 'positivistic'... They would find a topic, read about it, present the literature to others, engage in an experiment and try to measure the change. The presentations at the annual conference were quite formal in style. Kenan and some of the teachers have become more interested over time in relatively qualitative approaches, and in EP.

Reflecting on his own initial study, Koray affirmed it was “very positivistic,” and reported he had lacked confidence in conducting research at that time. Nevertheless, after subsequently negotiating this and other challenges, such as those imposed by a heavy teaching load, he had subsequently found engagement in TR “liberating,” he reported.

Kenan also agreed with Richard’s view. He indicated that “more and more teachers are changing towards the qualitative paradigm,” but conceded many still “feel more comfortable with numbers.”

In making such a transition himself towards more qualitative research, Koray Akyazi felt that the support he had received through weekly meetings that helped him engage with the literature, interpret data and write up was invaluable. Koray argued that “scaffolding support for teacher-researchers is crucial for any TR programme to succeed.”

There is a growing body of evidence of teacher-researcher growth in this context, as Mark Wyatt highlighted, referring to the annual publications produced after the conference (e.g., Dikilitaş, Smith, & Trotman, 2015), which reveal “increasingly more sophisticated research designs focused more closely on understanding and working with the learners’ needs.”

Mark also referred to research into the development of these teacher-researchers (e.g., Wyatt & Dikilitaş, 2015) in which it is “evident that some teacher-researchers in this context are aware of transformative ways in which they’ve grown, although they’re conscious they need to keep developing further.”

Inevitably, though, not everyone has changed, which has implications for support. Judith Hanks asked:

[I]s it only teachers who are already favourably disposed to getting involved in some form of continuing professional development that start doing TR? What happens to the quiet ones who apparently want to just come in, teach & go home (to a pile of marking, probably!)?

After acknowledging: “there were and are still those who see teaching as a static profession,” Kenan Dikilitaş reported he had responded by monitoring such teachers carefully and engaging in dialogue to try “to get them to think insightfully and create new ways of practice”; some had changed their stance towards research and now understood teaching more as “a dynamic profession.”

Besides face to face mentoring, support for teachers starting to engage with research can be provided in other ways. Unfortunately, though, according to Deborah Bullock:

[A] lot of what's out there, including online, is pitched too high, not only in terms of research knowledge, but also in terms of English language level, and unfortunately, that only serves to scare teachers off.

However, in response to a question from Terry Yearley, based in Japan, about how to get started in research, Richard Smith was able to recommend a few online resources, and books by Allwright and Hanks (2009) and Burns (2010). Furthermore, Andy Barfield, in Tokyo, provided a link (<http://ldworkingpapers.wix.com/ld-working-papers#%21chapters/c1ut6>) to an online anthology of working papers in learner development, including a chapter by Stewart, Croker and Hanks (2014). Andy also referred encouragingly to “participant-centred get-togethers (with teachers from different institutions and sectors of education).”

Such initiatives would seem to be one way of supporting TR in different geographical contexts where institutional support is lacking. This brings us to a further thread in the discussion, to do with the importance of teacher/practitioner-researchers supporting each other.

Why is it necessary for teacher/practitioner-researchers to present a unified front?

As was highlighted at several points in the discussion, for example, by Anne Burns: “[T]here are plenty of critics of teachers doing research out there!”

Some of this criticism has come from inside the profession, from academics who have taken on roles in international teachers’ associations. Mark Wyatt recalled this notorious quote, for example, from Scott Jarvis, then Chair of TESOL’s Research Interest Section (RIS) in 2001:

[W]hether action research really does (or even can) consistently lead to better teaching practices remains an open empirical question that has not yet been resolved and I (as well as many fellow members of the RIS) feel that all of the hype about action research in the TESOL organization is simply not warranted at present (Jarvis, 2001, cited in Borg, 2004, p. 6).

As Mark also highlighted, “There are forces dismissive of TR within universities.” Indeed, he recalled hearing a humanities professor dismiss all unfunded research, regardless of its educational benefits, as engaging in “a posh hobby.” Similarly, Richard Smith pointed out that the sterling work of academics such as Allwright, Borg, Burns, Cardenas, and Edge in bringing collections of teacher research into the public domain “isn’t particularly highly valued in academia.”

In the varied contexts in which teacher-researchers work too, institutional support could be greater, not just in the form of the reduced teaching loads that enable it, but also through the findings being recognised as valuable and the teacher-researchers being listened to. Koray Akyazi bemoaned “the lack of impact [TR] has on decisions made by the institution.”

In such a climate, as Simon Borg argued, it is better if we do not confuse teachers “about the (often exaggerated) differences between TR, AR, EP, etc.” If we exaggerate such differences, as David Mitchell added: “we run the risk of pushing some people away.”

As the discussion progressed, there were increasing calls for unity; Inés K. de Miller suggested: “[S]ticking together respectfully [could be our] new slogan.” Inés also suggested (in the spirit of EP): “we could invite teachers and learners we know to join a future discussion group,” recognizing that the contribution learners can make is often underestimated.

On a similar theme, Judith Hanks highlighted work in Japan and Brazil which included learners and teachers:

This reminds me of Andy’s post mentioning the interesting work with learners and teachers presenting at conferences in Japan (would you tell us more, Andy?), and of course the Annual EP Event in Rio de Janeiro, where learners (as young as 11, and as old as... 60? 70??) have been presenting their developing understandings alongside teachers and teacher educators for more than a decade.

Andy Barfield obliged by recounting comments from a recent conference in Tokyo where both students and teachers presented. He quoted a graduate student participant reflecting on teachers and students:

[C]reating a community with a spirit of “Learning Together” where both counterparts bring up interesting and questionable (that is open to inquiry) aspects of their learning and express their honest feelings and exchange ideas.

Andy also recalled a teacher at the same event reflecting that, while:

[C]onferences in Japan are usually full of teachers talking about what students want, what students need, what students are interested in... it was a breath of fresh air to get to hear so much from the students themselves.

Concluding Comments

As moderators of the online discussion and summarizers of it for this article, we now offer our reflections individually.

Mark Wyatt

‘Practitioner research,’ a term I will now use more thoughtfully in future after setting up and engaging with this online discussion, implies the notion of everyone learning respectfully together to mutually support each other and the broader community. The same implications also hold true for other kinds of practitioner activity such as contributing to a forum. Indeed, it has certainly been a learning experience co-moderating and then co-editing this online discussion. Some of the themes that emerged reflect points of contention in recent years, but engaging in dialogue about these differences seems to have reduced conflict and raised awareness. And this was all done through asynchronous communication with contributions coming from as far afield as Brazil, Turkey, Oman, Japan and New Zealand, to name just some of the locations, with some contributions coming from those travelling between continents.

Teachers starting to engage in TR/PR/AR/EP need plenty of support, and this discussion offered insights into what they need help with, why and how. Thoughtfully problematizing practice or puzzling about learning experiences with the help of naturally occurring data in a sustainable way to improve life experiences seems a

suitable goal for busy teachers and their learners (as in Dar, 2012). However, for practitioners to think about research in this way they may need the support of context-sensitive mentoring (as discussed in Smith, 2014).

Anne Burns

For me, the discussion provided an exhilarating opportunity to engage internationally with others working in the general area of what we are now calling practitioner research. Participants from many different locations were able to air theoretical and practical ideas that refresh recent debates on practitioner research as part of teacher professional development. The high level of interest and the frank and vigorous views expressed suggest that debating the processes and practices of practitioner research has achieved serious consideration in the field of teacher education, and even perhaps more broadly in discourses on research in ELT.

The discussion and the themes outlined in our paper suggest a number of areas that could be followed up. The issue of whether and how to report practitioner research is particularly important, and one that would benefit from more input from teachers about how best to publicise their research. The view that there is a range of possibilities that come under the umbrella of 'practitioner research' is also one worth exploring more from teachers' perspectives, given themes in the debate suggesting that 'action research' may be daunting to many teachers. The ideas around collaborations between academic and teacher participants is also an attractive area for further research; practical examples of how these have been successfully managed, and what contributes to their success would perhaps encourage more such initiatives. I hope to see more discussion of these issues and others touched on in this paper.

Judith Hanks

This energizing and thought-provoking debate afforded opportunities for exchanges of ideas about practitioner research from a huge range of people. Particularly appealing was the number of contributions from people who, like me, don't normally chip in: practitioner researchers working in different contexts and different countries felt moved to share their opinions, and this raised the level of debate. As a rare contributor to online debates, I found it nerve-racking (to publicly state opinions on the internet made my heart beat faster), yet also joyful; to find like-minded people willing to engage in serious discussion of issues that are central to our lives.

The collaborative nature of such talk was invigorating – a global network of practitioner researchers exchanging opinions, working out what we think 'on-air', and finding both commonalities and differences. The differences were too subtle for some, yet profound and meaningful for others. Running through the discussion, though, was a growing sense of mutual respect, and a real chance to learn more about each other and develop our thinking together. We were developing our ideas across continents, across oceans, and finding that we had friends in unexpected places. Themes were explored, questions asked, and avenues for inquiry opened up. I look forward to further discussions, for the potential impacts of these interactions are crucial for the development of our field.

Final thoughts

Since this online discussion was concluded last year, the insights generated have prompted various face to face discussions between members of the ReSIG Yahoo group (who number over 500) at events including IATEFL conferences. It has also informed exchanges during webinars and further online discussions so far in 2016, and is being referred to in print (e.g., Hanks, forthcoming). This all demonstrates the value of such forms of Internet-facilitated interaction in promoting “collaborative community and spiritual communion” (Turner, 2006, p. 2), as envisaged by the pioneers who developed the first online discussion boards.

The quality of the exchanges between contributors to the online discussion encouraged us to attempt to make these insightful dialogues more accessible to a new readership by developing the current article. Any deficiencies with the outcomes of this process are our responsibility alone. We are delighted that the article is being published in *TESL-EJ*, a deeply ethical, open access, online journal that has been at the forefront of attempts to make research in ELT more accessible since its first issue in 1994. In that first issue, there was an emphasis in the mission statement on embracing electronic communication and technologies, providing a truly international perspective and being relevant to teachers (Sussex, 1994). It is a further pleasure that the article is appearing in *TESL-EJ*'s 'On the Internet' section, edited by Vance Stevens, who has supported Internet-based lifelong learning for many years.

Returning to the ReSIG Yahoo group, discussions are continuing. Alan Waters led our Autumn 2015 discussion on Cambodian teachers' responses to child-centred instructional policies, while our Winter 2015/16 discussion had a Latin American theme. The moderators, Darío Luis Banegas from Argentina, Inés K. de Miller from Brazil and Paula Rebolledo from Chile, focused on TR/PR from that region. Then, in Spring 2016, Steve Mann from Warwick led a discussion on reflexivity in qualitative interviews. Our Summer 2016 discussion will feature Richard Smith from Warwick, Harry Kuchah Kuchah from Cameroon, Amol Padwad from India, Kenan Dikilitaş from Turkey and Anne Burns from Australia reflecting on their experiences around the world and online of developing networks of support for TR/PR. Our group is open to new members: <http://resig.weebly.com/online-discussions.html>. Welcome!

About the Authors

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