Abstract: This paper explores the learning that has emerged out of two separate participatory action research projects. Emphasis is placed on the need to balance multiple roles and expectations that are inherent in conducting participatory action research within community settings. While the tendency is to shift between roles or relinquish one role in favor of another, the demands of practice is to find a way to balance these tensions and to identify and develop the skill sets necessary to become a practitioner-researchers or research interventionist.

Introduction

A major assumption of Adult Education is that it is a “practitioner field” which is understood to mean that research and practice should be seamlessly interwoven in this discipline (Usher & Bryant, 1989). However, doing research as an activity in one’s field of practice creates several methodological issues that raise interesting research questions as well as challenges for the practitioner. Qualitative research often cautions that researchers are better off doing research in settings not familiar to them (Bogdan & Biklen, 2005). The assumption of ethnographic research is that the researcher, by being an outsider, is better able to make the ‘familiar unfamiliar.’ Through this, it is possible to describe and detail those micro interactions that might otherwise be taken for granted by those within the setting. However, these assumptions are called into question when the researchers are also engaged in practice rather than merely documenting the practice of outsiders. Such research does not fall into the neat realm of “insider research” either. Instead we raise the possibility after Schein (1987) of researcher as ‘clinician.’ Given this reality, how do adult education practitioners really bridge the practice to research gap, and to what extent is this possible? Alternately, what does it exactly mean to bridge the research to practice gap and in what ways are we able to do so?

This paper comes out of two different projects based on collaborative action research. We will focus on the problematic nature of doing research in one’s practice setting. There is a common understanding about research and practice as two separate activities with distinctly different aims. But as practitioner-researchers or research interventionist, we are placed in unique positions where we are required to weave research and practice as a seamless activity. We will describe what this means in the context of our professional practice and what we have learned from doing practitioner-research with specific examples from practice. Section I of the paper will bring out some of the contradictions of the dual engagement as a researcher and a participant through a first person narrative. The second section of this paper presents a model for conducting action inquiry among collaborative partners. The third section will identify a set of dilemmas and role conflicts within action research settings.
Project A

This project was designed as an effort to create a support network among six community agencies that would coordinate services for a group of at-risk, African-American, middle school girls in a Midwestern city. One of the major goals of the funded project was to create a collaborative model for coordinating services among the participating agencies. The original proposal did not identify a specific collaboration model from the practice literature. Rather, a grounded theory approach was taken in which a model would emerge out of the efforts by the agencies to coordinate their services in response to the health and wellness needs of the middle school girls.

Project B

This project was designed to facilitate the development of civic capacity for action among high school students through Public Achievement. Started by Harry Boyte in 1990, Public Achievement (henceforth referred to as PA) is defined as a self-directed collective action facilitated by adult coaches where students learn the skills of negotiation, one on one interviewing, public speaking and collective evaluation. In addition, PA requires students to learn concepts of power, self-interest and ‘public work’ (“lasting civic goods”) across differences. A group of faculty members and graduate students formed an action inquiry group to facilitate action research on this project.

Section I

As a member of the School of Continuing Education, I am often placed in a position where I work with community members on multiple partnership projects. I was six months into working on Project A, when I decided to undertake my dissertation research and develop a case study from this engagement. Once I started fieldwork, I experienced a fundamental conflict between conducting research and sharing findings in the context of a collaborative action research setting. From this perspective, I was in a position where I could help the group by sharing my research findings but doing this would not only violate confidentiality but also had the potential of blowing the group apart because some of my findings touched on hot button issues. However, the fact that this project was already framed as a participatory action research process allowed some of the issues I was identifying from my research to be brought to the whole group in a learning space. This was made possible because this participatory action research frame included monthly meetings in which the partners could engage in problem solving, negotiate issues, and reflect on what was being learned through the process of implementing the project. This information was recorded as part of the project reporting requirements through a tool developed by the partners call ACLs or identifying accomplishments, challenges, and learning. In this context, during one of the partners’ meetings, I explicitly stated that there were many issues that had come up in the interviews which I felt should be brought to the table but I could not do it since my hands were tied by confidentiality agreements. However, my statement opened a space to bring forth several things in the ensuing discussion that were not discussed in the group previously. This resulted identifying some of the underlying tensions in the project that I was identifying through my research activities.

Another example of shifting between researcher and practitioner mode occurred in one of the partners’ meetings during which I was so focused on being a researcher that I had to relinquish some of the practitioner tasks of intervening and facilitating. Reflecting on the
meeting later, I raised this issue with a co-participant who reminded me that I also had an interventionist role in this setting and should have raised this issue in the meeting. The particular example was in regard to some confusion over understanding the role of one of the partners. I had a certain understanding of her work based on my interviewing the person but I was not able to clarify this confusion in the partners’ meeting because I could not reveal the source of the knowledge. On hindsight, the practitioner task was to translate this knowledge in a way that would allow it to surface in the group in order to make the roles clear but I was not able to do it productively. This inability stemmed from the fact that I was confronted with a three pronged dilemma involving my participation. First, I was wearing a researcher hat and was responsible for maintaining research confidentiality. Second, I was wearing the interventionist hat and wanted to act on the information for the benefit of the group. Finally, I was wearing a practitioner hat that required the necessary skill set to act effectively in this context. A participant-researcher role required negotiating all these three tasks simultaneously.

Researching in one’s practice setting brought to the forefront the inherent tensions which was not just a matter of shifting from researcher to practitioner position. This kind of engagement required a balancing of tensions that emerged in my participation as a participant-researcher, which entailed a constant balancing act of stepping in and stepping out of the “researching” mode to the “practice” mode. More importantly, it meant that the three features identified in the previous paragraph needed to be carried out simultaneously on an on-going basis, which required a high level of facilitation skill.

**Section II**

The preceding discussion describes the context for what became a participatory action inquiry (research) process among the participating agencies. From the beginning, the agencies agreed to hold three-hour monthly meeting to coordinate their activities, review progress, address issues and challenges facing implementation, make needed changes, and continue to monitor their progress. These meetings were held consistently throughout the three years of the project and became the wellspring from which the model depicted in the figure below emerged. This model identifies set of interpersonal dynamics that characterized much of the partners’ collaborative efforts. It emerged out of discussions among the partners and has been affirmed by the members as an accurate depiction of the underlying issues that were present throughout the three-year reject.

At the center of the model are the monthly partnership meetings that focused on implementing the grant by addressing the stream of issues that came to the table. Four themes emerged from within these interactions as the members wrestled with their day-to-day implementation needs and challenges. These issues were not addressed directly, nor in a sequential manner. Rather, they were, for the
most part, unspoken issues that were being addressed through specific topics, needs, and activities that constituted the formal and/or informal agenda for the meetings.

Starting on the left hand side, framing understanding of the projects and the roles of the partners was one of the four thematic issues. The partners came to the table with their own organizational goals and missions, which framed their approach to the partnership. This initial framing of their own roles within the partnership and how they would work with the other agencies included a set of assumptions that each partner carried into their collaborative or coordinated work. These assumptions existed but they were never explored in any systematic and in-depth way. Over time, this framing theme became expressed as working in silos and the need or challenge to break out of the silos to better serve the students and their families.

Looking to the right hand side of the diagram, taking coordinated action was the primary theme or agenda item for most of the partners meetings. This theme involved the issue of whether the partners were meeting their goals and how to have the discussion without finger pointing and blaming. The notion of slippage became a metaphor that facilitated this discussion. It was possible to talk about slippage as a naturally occurring process that simply needed to be identified and addressed before things got out of hand. The challenge, however, was how to coordinate their activities and what constituted coordination. When is one partner being expected to do the other partner’s work? What if one partner assumed that one or another partners would assist but the organizational mission of partners limits, if not prohibits, giving that assistance? Over time, this theme of coordinating action involved deeper issues of trust, responsibility, and accountability. These issues could not be adequately discussed without simultaneously addressing issues of unspoken assumptions and exploring divergent ways of framing their role and contribution of partners’ collective work.

A third theme was sharing responsibility and accountability. Like coordinating action, this theme was a major topic of many partnership meetings as the months passed by. The partners eventually evolved a format for conducting meetings and taking minutes that allowed them to identify specific needs or issues that required attention, decide which partner or group of partners would take responsibility for addressing that need or issue, and report back at the next meeting on progress as a form of accountability. As the partners began to implement this meeting format the group achieved a level of productivity that reinforced an emerging sense of shared effort in serving the students and families. However, there were limits to this growing sense of shared responsibility and accountability. Again, the partners could not discuss, or did not realize that they needed to discuss, their respective underlying assumptions on how each member will work within the partnership. Over time, lack or inability to explore unspoken assumptions created tension within the group. Managing tension was the forth underlying theme that emerged within the interactions between the partner members.

**Section III**

In this section, we explore further the inherent tensions that emerge in the context of collaborative action research. The tensions discussed below emerged out of project B which involved facilitating civic capacity building in a high school. The project involved two layers of action inquiry, i.e. action research among high school students and action research with the graduate students serving as coaches for these high school students. One of the tensions made visible by our participation as action researchers and reflecting on the dilemmas of practice was observed in the group of graduate students who had a difficult time differentiating between the
coach role from the teacher role which several held prior to entering graduate school. Just like in project A, the researcher and practitioner dilemma involved relinquishing one in favor of the other, instead of balancing the tension between the two. The graduate students needed to adopt the coach role but struggled with relinquishing the teacher role, which represented their professional skill set.

Another central dilemma faced in our action research project was to balance the tension between the need to document the process of civic capacity building while facilitating the process of building capacity. Each participant belonged to several different communities including coach, researcher, graduate student and/or a faculty member. These multiple communities influenced all activities and involved learning to become a member in more than one community. While reflecting on day to day challenges at the school, differences emerged between the roles held by the participants. The different priorities of documenting process and facilitating capacity building highlighted the fissures that divided us in different communities. While the project was focused on developing social action among high school students, the dialogue and action among the members implementing the project was dominated by a set of underlying role conflicts that stemmed from the different communities in which the members belonged. For example, the graduate students had the role and responsibility to serve as action research coaches for the high school students. Some also had the pressure and expectation to undertake and complete their dissertation. The faculty member had the responsibility to oversee the implementation of the project and to serve as a coach and teacher within this project. However, the faculty member also had the responsibility to guide the dissertation research of the graduate students or at least help to ensure that progress on their dissertations was not impeded by the implementation of the project. One of the ways to bridge the roles was to focus on observation as a tool for documentation (doing the dissertation) or facilitation (coaching the high school students) that was common to every member in the group. This is similar to the use of a “learning table” in project A as a tool that created a space to discuss the possibility of balancing the tension between roles of researcher and coach/practitioner.

**Conclusion**

What is the primary responsibility of a researcher-practitioner? In our experience, we found this an extremely challenging position to be in. We also found that instead of shifting from researcher to practitioner and vice versa, it is most productive to think in terms of balancing the multiple priorities that are part of each of these roles. This means that instead of viewing practice and theory as oppositional, we need to anticipate the tensions of inhabiting the practitioner-researcher role and balance the competing priorities. The opportunity is to begin to frame the roles, responsibilities, and skill sets of the research interventionist. This can be accomplished across the life cycle of multiple projects in which the research interventionist is engaged. From an action research/inquiry approach, the conclusion of one project is not the end but rather the beginning of another cycle of community action research. The four corners of the diagram point to topics for critical reflection that can/should inform future practice: What was accomplished? What challenges surface? What was learned? What facilitation practices can be carried forward? This critical reflection in current and past experiences can frame a systematic inquiry into one’s own practice to improve future practice. A challenge for practitioners is to create opportunities and expectations that this kind of reflective practice occurs on a regular and consistent basis.
Presentation on findings and practices in conferences like Midwest Research to Practice offers a vehicle for this reflection to occur with the benefit from comment and review by colleagues.

References


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