Biranda Ford 5.4.11

Paper presentation 5.4.11 'Stepping out of the Shadows, Practitioners becoming researchers'

Recontextualising educational practice as educational research: from conservatoire teacher to educational researcher

We've heard lots of compelling benefits of practitioners undertaking research to their practice, I'd like now, through an account of my own experiences of becoming a researcher, to explore some of the problems, difficulties and perhaps limits of practitioners becoming researchers.

The first point I'd like to make is that becoming a researcher, especially if it entails a disciplinary shift as it did in my case from musicology to the social sciences, is hard work.

My second point is that educational research and educational practice are not the same thing. Though one can have a bearing on the other, the act of research involves imposing principles of selection and organisation on what you are studying – your empirical setting – so that what comes out at the other end may not necessarily offer a representation of 'the real world', but rather, a theorised take on a small slice of the social world formed under controlled and preselected conditions. This controlled view is a far cry from the messy and unpredictable social world.

I draw upon the process of doing doctoral research at the Institute of Education on the topic of 'What are conservatoires for?', an analysis of discourses of purpose in the contemporary conservatoire. I'll tell some anecdotes based on some of my experiences along the way, particularly with regards to methods and methodology, changes I made to my research after my pilot study, the search for an appropriate mode of analysis of my data. I will conclude with some wider questions about the role of the practitioner-researcher.

Becoming a researcher is hard work:

I would like to put forward the idea that 'becoming' a researcher is not a simple step. Since generally we would not argue that a social science researcher become a professional musician in order to do music research, is it reasonable to expect practitioners to become

professional researchers? If indeed practitioners are to become researchers, what are some of the changes which have to be made?

My first obstacle in embarking on social science research was that becoming a researcher could only take place by *doing* research; just like one can't read about being a musician as a route to becoming a musician, one cannot become a researcher by reading about it, or even going on a set of courses entitled 'Research Skills'. Certainly, in my experience, the process of becoming a social science researcher, even though I knew my empirical setting through my activities as a teacher, only happened by engaging with research questions, making mistakes and realising inconsistencies. It was through doing research that I discovered that my experiences, thought processes and modes of action as a researcher were often quite different from those as a teacher.

Road to research

I had done musicology degrees at a university before doing a performance course at a conservatoire. I was also performing as a freelance violinist. In my role as conservatoire teacher, I was teaching something called Tutorial Groups – a class aiming to make academic work relevant to practical performance, to merge theory and practice. Through teaching this class, I observed students preferred not to think, but to play.

This got me thinking about the place of what I was trying to teach in the conservatoire. It was apparent from talking to colleagues that each of us had a different idea about what we were trying to achieve. If the aim was 'to merge theory with practice', what would count as 'useful knowledge' in this context? Or were we trying to teach students generic, transferable skills of 'how to think'?

After a few small scale action research projects, I realised I did not work in a vacuum, but rather, was a small cog in a larger, complex wheel. Action research on my own practice could only ask limited questions. Instead, I wanted to understand where my own practice fitted into the whole by asking 'What are conservatoires for?'

Conversion from musicologist to social science researcher

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I will admit now that I spent most of my first year of doctoral research lost about social science methods and methodology. My mind was stuck in the methods and modes of analysis of my musicology past which in the 1990s was dominated by historical, hermeneutical and analytical approaches. Right or wrong, historians do not tend to obsess over methodology to the same extent as social scientists. Whilst musical analytical strategies tend to be quite clearly defined and then applied to the bounded world of the musical score, the social world is inhabited by open-ended, constantly developing analytical strategies applied to an unbounded and ultimately unknowable social system. Though I went to courses on research design and was given reading lists which I attempted to apply to thinking about my own research, without having had much experience of social science research, these had limited resonance.
For instance, one of the key methods which perplexed me was the interview, a common component of the social scientists' toolkit of methods. What was the point of the interview? This was a question which exercised me for most of my first year. My musicological past had never required interviews as anyone of interest was dead, and besides, we were all taught to mistrust what composers say about their own work. For instance, using Harold Bloom's theory of 'anxiety of influence', we could prove that Stravinsky lied through his teeth – or creatively reinterpreted his story to suit his own narrative – in his later interviews (Taruskin, 1993). Alarm bells started ringing when one of the first sources I read on the social science interview claimed that interviews could give the researcher access to 'what is inside a person's head' (Tuckman, cited in Cohen and Manion, 1994, 272).

Despite suspicions that I ought to be sidestepping this dubious form of data collection and doing documentary research of historical and contemporary material, I embarked, at the advice of my supervisor, on pilot interviews, aimed at first to look at student aspirations. My first act of recontextualising the place I worked to the site of research was with the selections I made of who to interview. It was to be students, teachers and those in the music profession. Later I discovered that interviews with the first two categories yielded over 40,000 words of interview material. I stopped there before I became swamped with data.

My pilot interviews were with students. Whenever I'd asked students who I'd taught what their aspirations were, they'd always expressed a desire to play in orchestras, chamber

music, or be soloists. A few, by the third year, had even considered teaching. However, my pilot interviews were turning out different results.
In my first interview, the first question I posed was:

- I'd like you to tell me, as you see it, how your conservatoire training is helping you towards a future in the music profession?

The student replied:

- I don't think it is helping. I want to be a banker

The second student said she was planning to finish her degree as a wind player because she only had a year to go, but actually she wanted to be a singer-songwriter of pop music. She told me she was taking lessons for this outside college. This second student seemed to be pursuing her career aspirations *despite* being at the conservatoire.

These students had a much more complex relationship between their studies and their career aspirations than my previous students had described. The worth of the research interview had been proven; Eric Clarke's description of the process of empirical research as 'the rubbing of attractive ideas up against the hard and bumpy edges of empirical reality' (2006, 31) described all too well how my assumptions about my research – informed by my experiences as a practitioner – came unstuck when challenged by my participants responses.
Interviews turned out to be an excellent source of contradictory information which went against my own experiences, and contradicted much documentary evidence available through official conservatoire sources such as handbooks and websites.

Transcribing my pilot interviews, I saw further evidence of the extent of my own mindset as a teacher/ performer creeping into the research process. I had not made that leap of recontextualising the research interview, particularly because at times it seemed to me too much like an individual tutorial that I was used to engaging with students on a regular basis, rather than a research encounter.

For instance, there was the fourth year student with what I judged to be 'incorrect' views on teaching. He seemed to want to be lectured – which went against my reading on social constructivist teaching theories of the student 'doing' the work (Biggs, 2004). I found myself suddenly compelled to turn off the tape to lecture him on the merit of different teaching styles before switching the tape back on to resume the interview.

Equally annoying was when I agreed with interviewees. I found there were points at which I nodded to indicate 'yes, I understand', because my participant's statement seemed to be similar to my own experiences. However, later when reading through transcripts, I realised this assumption of a shared experience might not have existed at all. Had I not been listening to students' accounts of their conservatoire experiences filtered through my own educational experiences, invested with my own stake in my narrative as a performer, I could surely have asked pertinent follow up questions rather than just nodding in empathy.

Lapses in my nascent social science researcher facade led me to harbour secret suspicions that I was a faulty researcher, but I found other researchers with similar stories of slips between their practitioner and researcher identities (see for instance, Lapping, 2008). Over time, it seems to me that these mistakes are an inevitable part of recontextualising the place of work to the focus of research. Becoming a researcher is hard work because it entails a change and challenge to habitual modes of thinking, and it is only by doing research that one can really begin to understand what it is that one has embarked on with all the attendant pitfalls.

Key revisions to my methodology after my pilot interviews:

I decided to assume nothing; discovering the discourses of purpose became my aim, rather than starting from a viewpoint which privileged a notion of employability in the conservatoire. I also threw out my semi-structured interview schedule in favour of narrative style interviews. Instead I asked 'tell me how you came to be at this conservatoire?' I would then proceed to tease out relevant elements of what participants were saying in the rest of the interview. This approach had the advantage that richly different accounts emerged, however a downside was that since no two interviews were the same, comparisons were sometimes difficult to make.

Though narrative style interviews helped me to take my assumptions out of the interview questions I was asking, I realised I still brought my own practitioner's mindset to the act of analysis. Searching for a mode of analysis which would distance me from the everyday assumptions and beliefs which I held as a practitioner and would circumvent a tendency to insert ones' own opinions into the data analysis, presenting it as 'research' (however much one tries not to), I adopted an approach which looks at the work achieved by words and social practices. I chose a type of discourse analysis to analyse my texts based on a Foucauldian (1972) notion of discourse. Though from the array of discourse analyses which are available to the social science researcher this seemed to be one of the most obscure and difficult to get to grips with – one which attempts to see under which conditions certain statements are possible, to look at texts for their rhetorical strategies, the work they achieve, rather than their content. Difficulty and remoteness from my regular modes of thinking conferred advantages as discourse analytical strategies became a conscious choice I made in recontextualising the conservatoire as my site of research rather than a habitual mode of thinking from my teacher mindset.

The second important advantage of using discourse analysis was that it allowed me a theoretical route to dissociating my participants from their interview scripts, a route to avoid claiming I was getting at 'what was inside my participants' heads'. The prospect of this latter approach had had uncomfortable ethical implications; I was uncomfortable with taking interview texts from my colleagues and then, using my researcher's role, making value judgements on their interview texts. One can end up writing things in a research account which you know you wouldn't say to someone's face, so it's an odd, slightly duplicitous experience extracting an agreement to a research interview on the basis of a colleague relationship, but then subjecting these words to judgements as a researcher.

What discourse analysis allowed me to do was to sidestep making value judgments about the statements my colleagues were making through conceptually severing the link between the person who made the statement and the statement itself. It provided a theoretical route to analyse the statement as part of a network of other statements and social practices current in society, rather than as the result of my participants' individual and personal idiosyncrasy. I found my analytical method served an ethical purpose too.

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What does research achieve?

To fast forward to the end of my research – it's all quite new (I passed last week), so I'm still evaluating its effects and potential uses. I embarked on research to learn something of the institutional dynamics outside of my own classroom, however, when thinking about any implementation of my research findings, there is a problem of scope. If researchers are using an action research model to view their own practice, then there can be a direct feedback loop into continuing practice. However, when it comes to implementing any implications of asking broader questions such as 'what are conservatoires for?' there remain limits to what one can personally change in an institution as a whole as a result of research.

Because of this, I would say the primary effect of undertaking social science research is that I now think like a social scientist; I'm aware of pitfalls, research design and the relevant literature. Though I also feel like I have a useful set of tools for evaluating the conservatoire environment as well as a set of principles which motivate my own work as a teacher, the primary effect of undertaking social science research has been to affect my transformation into a social science researcher.

I said at the outset that the first point I wanted to make was that becoming a researcher, is hard work, and that the second was that in my experience educational research and educational practice are not the same thing. I actually think both these points are different sides of the same phenomena – that moving from educational practice to educational research involves an act of recontextualisation. Recontextualisation at its simplest is the shift which takes place when you change your position from that of a participant to that of an observer. The sociologist Bourdieu talks of how 'the **objectification** of your activities is always a different experience from your **experience** of those activities themselves' (Brown and Dowling, 2010, 7; Bourdieu, 1977, 1990). Brown and Dowling (2010, 53) talk of this as being an 'epistemological paradox' that is, the act of making your experience explicit of necessity entails its transformation. I would argue that the transformation is not something isolated to yourself and how you view your environment but also transforms your interactions with others.

However, having undergone this process of transformation, the route back to practice is not so clear. In trying to find out something new – the point of the research process – you really do get something new out at the other end, and this outcome of research may not necessarily offer a representation of 'the real world', but rather a particular model or theorisation of it as mediated by the principles of selection you made at the outset and during your research.

With this in mind, I'd like to end with asking the following questions along the theme of: To what extent is it viable for practitioners to 'become researchers' and to what end?

- If there is a more complex relationship between research outcomes and the social world, then what are the benefits of becoming a researcher for the practitioner-researcher?

- Would there be an alternative case for the model of the practitioner who engages with scholarship – and gets recognition and time off to do so? Is there just as important a role for reflective practice, keeping up with new practice and incorporating it into your own practice, much like GPs have to do?[1] GPs do not do the research, but they have to keep up with new developments for continuing practice. Does the rhetorical force of 'research' involve devaluing the process of 'merely' keeping up with new currents and thinking imaginatively about your own practice because it's not actively producing research in recognised outputs?

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[1] My thanks to Sue Hallam for this comparison.

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