In this chapter, using Action Research, I set out a framework appropriate to the study of my leadership practice.

Action Research is the approach

Barret and Whitehead (1985) propose an Action Research framework, which focuses on a process of reflection to promote change and enhance professional learning. The main characteristic of the author's framework is the acknowledgement of the practitioner's values. Whitehead (1989) argues that a living educational theory of professional practice can be constructed from the practitioner's action research enquiries of the kind 'How do I improve my practice?'

I have chosen action research as the framework for my self-study, because by enquiring into my leadership practice in the vocational education setting, I am contributing to the creation of my own living educational theory. I am constructing my living educational theory from my question 'How do I improve my leadership as a team leader in vocational education in FE?' There is more to be said about the creation of living educational theory and I revisit this notion in chapter 4 and in chapter 5.

To carry out my enquiry process, I have chosen the action plan developed by Barret and Whitehead (1985) and which was later modified by McNiff, (2002). This is outlined below.

- What issue am I interested in researching?

- Why do I want to research this issue?
- What kind of evidence can I gather to show why I am interested in this issue?
- What can I do? What will I do?
- What kind of evidence can I gather to show that I am having an influence?
- How can I explain that influence?
- How can I ensure that any judgements I might make are reasonable, fair and accurate?
- How will I change my practice in the light of my evaluation?

The aim of an action plan is to encourage us, the practitioners to ask critical questions about our own practice and find the answers for ourselves (McNiff, 2002). I have already addressed the two initial questions of my action plan in the previous chapters of my dissertation. I will address the remaining questions throughout the next three chapters.

What is 'self' that is at the centre of our life?

With the main focus of this dissertation being 'how do I improve my leadership as a team leader?' and with the emphasis being on 'I', it makes sense that the approach to complete this study is through action research. Referring to 'I' as the first-person, Reason and Bradbury (2001, p386) argue

"… the first-person research practice brings enquiry into more and more of our moments of action – not as outside researchers but in the whole range of everyday activities."

I am putting myself at the centre of the enquiry (McNiff, 2002).

The idea of self-reflection [the 'living I'[1]] is central to action research (Mcniff, 2002, p4). The self-reflective nature of action research is not new and is well documented (Barret and Whitehead, 1985; Kemmis, 1988; Bassey, 1998; Reason and Bradbury,

2001; Mcniff, 2002) to name but a few. I am very much interested in finding out how my team, as individual members, view my leadership influence and its impact on them in raising student achievement. As Mcniff (2002, p3), points out, Action Research is based on

"…the deep need to experience truth and beauty in our personal and professional lives. It is a way of looking at your own work to check that it is as you would like it to be."

The author further describes action research as

'…an approach that encourages practitioners to be in control of their own lives and contexts…'

This action research dissertation addresses the ability of 'me' as the researcher, to foster an enquiring approach to my own working life as a team leader and create my own 'living educational theory' (Whitehead, 1993, p.68).

All good teachers teach that, in order to really live – to live life to the full – we need to get in touch with the true 'self' (Living Faith, 2003). This can be difficult because the true self comes through most obviously when we are facing extreme situations. From the day I was appointed team leader three years ago, I often faced and no doubt will continue to face challenging and critical situations in my practice. Using action research, it is these situations, these concerns, some more extreme than others, that I reflect on. Some of these concerns negate my values but they shape my dissertation as I attempt to improve my leadership as a team leader in supporting the team enhancing their learning and in improving the students' learning in vocational education.

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[1] Walsh, 2003 - MEE assignment

I am interested in finding out about my leadership influence on the team because I have much more to learn about team leadership – I want to facilitate effective team working. A team that is passionate about helping less academically gifted students achieve their potential and enable them to believe in themselves and their self-worth as individuals.

What can I do about my leadership concern? I could try out new ideas, new ways of working with my peers and new ways of supporting them, in an attempt to improve my team leadership.

What kind of data can I collect to help me make judgement about whether the change is happening in my leadership? How would I collect such data? I can collect the information in the form of views of my peers through various methods: questionnaire, dialogues and journal recordings. I will reflect on the data and derived from it evidence to support or refute my claim to knowledge.

Validation and data collection

In action research, researchers conduct research on themselves. Action researchers enquire into their own lives. It is an enquiry conducted by the self into the self (McNiff, 2000). As such, I would liken my action research enquiry to self-study research (Elliot, 1991). Feldman (2003, p.26) acknowledges the need for researchers of self-study

"… to have ways to demonstrate its validity because of the moral and political aspects of educational research."

I am unsure about the political aspect of my research. I do not envisage my work to have implications for policy-makers. But I am in no doubt that I have a moral duty and obligation to present my research as accurately as possible so that team leaders in similar vocational contexts can relate in part to my experiences and make their own judgement on the course of action according to their value-base system. As action researchers, we want to improve what we do in our practice. As such, the representations of my enquiry, constructed through my narratives, have to be worthy of trust, credible, well grounded and just.

Whilst Feldman (2003) agrees that the question of what is quality in self-study is not easy to answer, the author suggests four ways to increase the validity of our self-study and to improve the manner in which we construct our representations of our research:

1. Provide clear and detailed description of how we collect data and make explicit what counts as data in our work.
2. Provide clear and detailed descriptions of how we constructed the representation from our data.
3. Extended triangulation beyond multiple sources of data to include exploration of multiple ways to represent the same self-study.
4. Provide evidence of the value of the changes in our ways of being teacher educators.

The data collection instruments

❑   Using questionnaire

A questionnaire is not some sort of official form, nor is it a set of questions, which have been casually jotted down without much thought (Oppenheim 2001). Indeed,

the final draft of my questionnaire was aided after meeting with critical friends[2]. My questionnaire was self administered in that I presented it to members of our team. I ensured that the purpose of my enquiry was clearly explained and I left the respondent alone to complete the questionnaire. These were later submitted via internal post. Oppenheim (2001) suggests that this method of data collection ensures a high response rate and accurate sampling. He also urged that greatest care is needed in briefing the respondents, or they may, with the best intentions, introduce fatal bias.

I formulated the questionnaire using the Likert scale [3] format of the '*strongly agree…strongly disagree*' style (Oppenheim, 2001,p.195). Bearing in mind that attitudes are emotional. I avoided the stilted, rational approach when formulating the questionnaire. The Likert scales tend to perform well when it comes to a reliable, rough ordering of people with regard to a particular attitude (Oppenheim, 2001,p.195).

❑   Using journal entries

The journal entries in my enquiry, which started in early Summer 2003, describe the challenges and successes I experienced during the data collection period of this dissertation. The journal entries are my evidence that would validate my values and ensure their consistencies. The entries describe my experiences in my practice as I

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[2] Your critical friend (also called a 'critical colleague') is someone whose opinion you value and who is able to critique your work and help you to see it in a new light. (McNiff, 2002,p.19)

work with our AVCE, GNVQ and GCSE ICT team. My values of leading our team and creating opportunities for educational growth not just for myself, but the team members, contribute to both my personal and educational growth. Furthermore, the reflections of the journal entries provide evidence to justify on educational and academic grounds, the reasons for selecting the focus on my team leadership

❑   Using feedback comments from my peers

Extending triangulation beyond multiple sources of data to include exploration of multiple ways to represent the same self-study has the advantage of providing multiple representations that support and challenge our reasons to believe and trust the self-study (Feldman, 2003). The use of feedback comments from critical friends and peers [as team members] provide another instrument of data collection in my enquiry and extend triangulation and thus increase the validity of my data.

When did my research begin?

My action research study started in Autumn 2002 during the Methods of Educational Enquiry (MEE) module. My research began with a small-scale enquiry, which focussed on the question *"how do I improve my leadership as a team leader in vocational education in further education?"* I wanted to review my leadership practice as a team leader. I was interested in enquiring into my professional practice in terms of my leadership influence on the team.

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[3] Named after Renis Likert, the Likert scales is a technique for the measurement of attitudes.

Using my personal reflective journal, I recorded and learnt to reflect on events that happen in my day-to-day duties as I carry out my role as a team leader. I became fully aware of the social intent of my focus - the criterion being that I plan how to improve my leadership for the benefit of my team and for my professional learning. For the benefit of my team I would like to maintain: a team that works together; shares good practice and resources; explores problems and resolves difficulties. At the end of the MEE module, I resolved to provide, as a team leader, an environment that would create the right conditions to facilitate such opportunities. The outcome of the MEE assignment provided the foundation for further research, which would move this dissertation further.

How would I check that my judgement about what is happening – the changes in my leadership – is reasonable, fair and accurate? By using critical friends I will validate my claim. I will use their critical comments to help build a dossier of my living theories.

My claim to educational knowledge is submitted in the form of narratives offered to team leaders of similar vocational programmes in FE or otherwise. Narrative is a way of representing a story in action research. (McNiff et al, 1997, p.21). My personal experiences that I write about in narrative format have educational significance and further illustrate my values and their connection to my life experiences and living standards. Connelly and Clandinin (1990) further endorse the use of narratives in educational research as they assert that

"… humans are storytelling organisms who … lead storied lives."

Therefore, as our team members and I document and construct our personal experiences, which I record in my reflective journal and they feedback in their comments, I am sharing theirs and my experiences to you the reader.

Throughout this dissertation, I make copious use of 'our team', 'my team' and the pronouns 'we' and 'us'. Collectively the use of these pronouns in narrative methods, authenticates descriptions and deepens meanings (Ogilvy, 2001).

My descriptions and explanations are presented throughout my dissertation, but most notably in the next part, Chapter 4: The Data, The Evidence. I have italicised the data and evidence as related and contributed to me by members of our team and by critical friends. These accounts show my development as a team leader. It traces my educational development through the experience of negation of my values. I imagine ways of overcoming the negation of my values with actions and I modify the actions using ideas that I try out (Whitehead, 1993).