

Chapter three

How my research started and how I reformulated my initial question

In this chapter I want to show how the whole business of my research began. It's a time that has been called 'reconnaissance' in action research and I certainly tried to consider what I wanted to focus on and why that was important to me.

Meeting in September 1989 with a group of colleagues at school who were interested in educational action research that would help us to improve the quality of education for our students we were all faced with the same dilemma: Research into what? We'd agreed to meet regularly to support each other and many of us intended to register for higher degrees at the University of Bath but what exactly were we going to do? I wrote a brief note outlining some of my concerns :

How can I improve the quality of group discussion in my classroom?

I suppose what I'm aiming for is the type of classroom where groups of students can talk together to explore new ideas; exchange views and confusions; feel confident to range over various things together and have a positive attitude towards the value of such talk.

Too often I see groups of students who aren't taking the talking seriously; who find explorative talk threatening because of their mates' reactions and who make no

allowances for the more reticent. I'm concerned that generally groups of girls talk better than groups of boys and that girls in mixed groups get a raw deal because they aren't listened to and so remain compliantly quiet.

That's about it really. Those are my concerns and have been for a time...

20th September 1989."

Those concerns were echoed in the question I formed as a basis for my research "How do I/we improve the quality of group work on oracy and gender?" and I began, in a conscious way, the action- research cycle of plan, act, observe and reflect.

In these early days of my research I was quite confident about what I was doing and how to go about it. It went something like this: decide to improve talk in groups; observe what's going on; imagine a solution; put that solution into practice and there you have it, an improved classroom. It didn't work out like that.

I decided to concentrate on a mixed ability year 10 humanities class who were studying the history of medicine. I'd noticed that boys dominated the talk in my classroom and wanted to do something about it in order to enable the girls to participate more. I made a lot of tape recordings of groups of girls and transcribed them; wrote descriptions in my journal about what happened in each session; interviewed students and talked to friends

and colleagues about what I was doing. I worked for weeks on a paper about my work to present to the newly formed Greendown Action Research group and thanks to the persistent questioning of my colleagues in that group about what I'd written, I ended up not sure what I was researching into ! Questions about the validity of the evidence I'd collected to back up what was called my 'claims to knowledge', threw me and I struggled to articulate some of my educational values about equality and gender. I recognised that by their questions my colleagues were being critical yet encouraging and helpful : I liked that. A visiting academic from the University of Bath asked me questions about 'the literature' he believed would give me some answers to some of my concerns. At this time I wasn't really interested in entering into his debate as my classroom concerns seemed more important. His comments assumed a greater significance later on in my work and I'll come back to that at a later stage.

I decided to try again. As the extract from the introduction to my next paper to the Greendown Action Research Group shows I didn't do too well here either. I began the work expecting to improve the quality of discussion of students in my classroom and ended it by thinking that everytime I opened my mouth I put my foot in it. I began by being critical of my students and ended by being critical of myself, which is fair enough, but not easy.

Extract of Paper to Greendown Action Research Group

How do I/we improve the quality of discussion in my classroom? November 1990

I write this at the end of a period of work which has involved a mixture of classroom practice, reflection, writing and dialogue. My thinking at the end of this work is different to what it was at the beginning. This appears to be an obvious statement at the end of an action research cycle. But when it happened it was unexpected and unsettling for me. I hope that this paper will show you how my ideas and my practice are changing.

When I started out on this work in May 1990 I had two concerns which were in the form of these questions:

How do I/ we improve the quality of discussion in my classroom?

How can I manage a series of groups to enable students to discuss the play "Flying into the Wind" ?

" Flying Into The Wind" (1985) is a screen play which deals with a family and their decision to take their children out of the school system and to educate them at home.

The debate in the film concentrates on schooling and education. I wanted to organise a series of groups so that students had a chance to talk about the characters and the issues in the play and so develop their understanding of the tension between the individual and society; education and schooling.

Writing this now I'm aware of the limitations of those questions. "How do I improve the quality of discussion in my classroom?" carried no implication, for me, of anything but the improvement of student's discussion. I had not questioned my role as an active participant in my own classroom. I had not thought to ask "How can I improve the quality of my discussion with students?"

The other question about the management of groups is, in a sense, off beam. It's a question about organisation and control that has nothing to do with improving discussion. I found it perhaps a helpful distraction from what was most important.

In May 1990 these original concerns were very real for me and so I set up a series of groups, organised activities and taped what was happening in the groups that particularly interested me.

During the process of transcribing the tapes I began to change my thinking about my participation/ role when students are discussing in groups. I was able to see that instead of seeing my participation in a negative way I could see it positively. I concentrated on the work of one group where I had spent a lot of time and where I felt the discussion had been good. I thus wanted to claim that this work had moved forward my understanding of my own practice; that I had enabled one student to improve the quality of his discussion and that the experience of working in that group had helped him to understand something about himself as a learner.

But such tidy action research cycles which produce obvious insights and lead to immediate progress don't really exist in my real life. I could pat myself on the back for teaching well and improving classroom discussion but, I knew I'd made it sound all too neat and easy.

Through dialogue with Andy Larter, who has acted as a critical friend throughout the research, in which we focussed on the transcript of the group, I was forced to look again at what was really going on and was made miserable by my obvious shortcomings. I can pick out the exact moment when my confidence began to wane. I thought I was engaged in good discussion but I knew it wasn't so when Andy said: "Hang on a moment, everything you've said on this transcript is actually a question". My reaction was immediate; "Shit!" [pause... laughter] That really surprises me". I laughed because I didn't want to believe it. If I'd only asked questions how could I claim to have participated in the discussion? People engaged in discussion don't ask questions all the time. Had I so obviously played the role of teacher, setting the entire agenda for the discussion? I hadn't wanted to do that.

From the moment it was pointed out that I'd only asked questions I began to get miserable and self conscious about my teaching. I went around for days listening to myself as I spoke to students. I understood clearly for the first time what it was to see

oneself as a living contradiction. I held certain values about talking in the classroom and it was obvious that I'd negated them.

But there was more; in the process of negating them I had denied something else about myself as an educator. I had asked my students to understand the difference between education and schooling and had tried to encourage them to value education. The way I had organised the groups and involved myself in the discussion implied I actually valued schooling more.

I didn't like seeing myself do something badly; especially when I thought I was good at it. I had wanted to improve the quality of discussion for `them`, that is, my students. I had not thought about myself.

I had to try to understand why I was so critical of the way I was talking in the tape, and consider what the students thought of it all; reformulate my claims and revise my thinking for my future work.

By now, I'd spent almost a year trying to sort out what my research was about. Was it talk? Gender? Group work? The way I communicated to students? All of these things appeared to be disaster areas when I attended to them and I seemed more confused than when I started. Should I give students more time to talk together without my interference? Did my interventions help? An extract from my journal at the time shows that I wasn't happy:

“I’m miserable. I’ve just counted up the interventions I’ve made on a transcript: 29 interventions: 21 questions; 8 comments where I’ve corrected information or offered an opinion. This isn’t what I would have expected. I’m not only miserable but self-conscious. I now spend time in the classroom listening to myself and begin to believe I only ask questions. Do I really know what a discussion of quality is? I’ve also listened to myself in conversation with friends and colleagues and perhaps should take a vow of silence”.

My reaction to the whole business of me asking questions in conversation was a gut reaction of the sort *“If I’m asking so many questions I’m imposing a way of thinking on my students. I’m not teaching effectively. I’m stifling their own questions. This isn’t the way I want to teach....”*. I don’t think I was dealing with what was actually happening in my classroom but was reacting with all sorts of prejudices about the way I thought I should talk to students. I obviously had a lot of ideas about the way I should talk and didn’t feel that I was doing justice to those ideas. I tried to write something in my journal about my ideas on talk:

“Talk is important. Students should be given every opportunity to discuss their ideas at length. To discuss something with others is an important way to grasp new ideas, understand new concepts and to clarify ideas. Teachers often spoil the chance for real learning to take place by mis-timing their interventions. Too much classroom talk can be dominated by the teacher who can either lecture or ask closed questions”. (I find it

interesting, no, embarrassing, that in the extract I distanced myself from it all by writing about 'the teacher'.)

I went back to some texts about talk in the classroom that had been important to me when I began teaching. I found certain passages that had meant a lot to me then and had become a part of my own thinking. I am not claiming anything for these quotations except that they are the ideas that had become part of my 'knowledge' as a teacher. They represent ideas, rightly or wrongly interpreted, that I thought were implicit in my work in the classroom:

"We are saying that it is as talkers, questioners, arguers, gossips, chatterboxes, that our pupils do much of their most important learning. Their everyday talking voices are the most subtle and versatile means they possess for making sense of others, including their teachers" (Barnes D, Britton J and Rosen H 1969.)

"When pupils work alone their discussion may be inconclusive or inexplicit or superficial... Every teacher wishes to rush in and ask the well-placed question... this is sometimes helpful. but just as often it has the reverse effect. Taking the initiative out of the pupil's hands may reduce their learning from an active organising of knowledge to a mere mimicry of the teacher... there are other limitations to teacher-dominated learning. Questions can go very wrong, because of a teacher's failure to project himself into his pupils' viewpoint..."

When we consider children working in small groups we tend to compare their discussion with an idealised teacher-pupil dialogue, forgetting how often this falls below the ideal even for an experienced teacher, and forgetting too that it compels most of the class to

listen in silence. moreover, as we have shown, the very presence of a teacher alters the way in which pupils use language, so that they are more likely to be aiming at 'answers' which will gain approval than using language to reshape knowledge" (.Barnes. D 1976)

There appeared to me to be a consensus in educational theory about the centrality of talk to learning. But was I practising what I thought? I was wallowing in a miserable state and read something to depress me more:

" The monument to the value of talk has been erected with more loving care and thought than any passing craze. it has deep and lasting roots in linguistics, philosophy, theories of child development, sociology and in other stands of educational thought. it has stood the test of time. I choose the word 'monument' with care, denoting as it does something permanent, visible, perhaps with so many names on, but not something living... the messages so clearly emanating from this existing body of thought about talk have never really got through in any radical sense to influence everyday classroom experience, though I believe that the majority of teachers accept them or pay lip-service to them".
(Jones, P. 1988)

That last sentence put the boot in. I held certain values about talk in the classroom.

These values had been formed by what I had read and what I had observed in practice.

But was Pat Jones right? Was I paying those values lipservice?

I hope you can recognise that I was confused and uncertain about what I was doing. I'd

begun action research to improve the talk of students in my classroom and had ended

up questioning the point of me opening my mouth to speak. I know that's daft, as I am a teacher and talk and questions are part of my everyday work, but I wasn't very happy.

Something was niggling me about the whole way my research was going. I suppose I had this belief in myself as a teacher. I knew I did some things well but I couldn't put my finger on what it was anymore. I went back to my students and tried to figure it out by listening to them. The two I found most useful were Neil and Clancy. In talking and listening to them I realised what it was I was interested in exploring. They gave me back some confidence about the way I spoke to students and I stopped getting worked up about asking questions. They helped me to reframe my research in a way that gave attention to my own role as a learner in my classroom.

Neil first. I asked Andy Larter to interview him about working with me on "*Flying into the Wind*". I didn't always find Neil easy to work with but found his thoughts on how I worked interesting. I've underlined the bits I found most useful.

Transcript of Neil and Andy 17-10 -90

Andy: ... the first thing she (Erica) asked me to find out about was what you think about the way she works in the classroom.

Neil: What do you mean - the way she gets across the work?

Andy: Yea

Neil: I dunno - she`s laid back. I`ll give her that much.

Andy: What do you mean `laid back`?

Neil: She doesn`t try to put on the heavy lark and then people would just mimic her or something like that.

Andy: Yea?

Neil: And when she does try it she knows it don`t work. `Cause people know she can`t shout at you and get anything across so she sits down.

... she don`t try to do anything she can`t. Everyone`s got respect for her sort of thing.

Andy; What about you? What about the way you work in the classroom? She`s set up those conditions in the classroom. How do you get on with them then?

Neil: It depends what kind of mood I`m in. Sometimes you take it to the limits.

Andy: You mean you push her as far as you can?

Neil: She`ll say "**Neil**". I`ll say OK, Yea. But then again it depends what kind of mood she`s in as well. She can have a hard day and she`ll get all frustrated and just ignore me totally.

Andy: Do you think that`s fair? Do you think that`s OK?

Neil: Yea because I`d say that the thing is that she talks to me about things as if I`d talk to one of my mates. sort of thing.

Andy: She uses the same language that you do?

Neil: Yea and the working relationship I'd say is pretty good.

Now, Clancy. She was in the same class as Neil and also stressed the idea of the relationship of student and teacher and the quality of their talk. This is what she said about our classroom:

Transcript of Erica and Clancy October 1990

Clancy: normally we all sit in blocks of tables don't we and you always move around and see everyone. And occasionally you'll be in one space - like behind a table and people come to you- but normally you move around. I think that's another good thing because if you're in one specific place you get a queue of people and they start messing around and especially as well if you're in place you're, you don't have, I say control but that's like a negative kind of word and I don't mean it like that but you've got the control of the class and the respect of the students. They can get on with their work and you'll come over and see them. And I think you're in ten places at once, you know- it's good because you remember when people want to see you so you can be talking to someone and three people come up and say they want to see you and you'll get round and see all of them and so if it's not an immediate problem you can get on and you'll know that you're going

to come over and see us. ... I don't know it's like ... about relationships with people. If you're working and you've got - if you're allowed to talk you can talk over things and you don't mind or you'll come and join in and so you'll be like one of us. You're not the teacher sort of thing.

Erica: *Do I still teach you Clancy?*

Clancy: *Yes. Well the lessons we have when you're saying , the input lessons, you always make sure you explain everything like you could read something out and then you'll go over and explain everything really thoroughly and so we'll all know what we're doing and also the way you actually teach us actual writing, how we can improve our work, you might only need to say a few things but just what you say just develops and you pick them all up. I don't know how you can put you in a few words or a few sentences. ...*

Erica: *Well, you've made me think I've taught you something, Clance.*

Clancy: *You have. See, you talk to people. That's what it is with you. You've just answered your huge question. You just talk to people.*

Listening to Clancy and Neil had given me a focus for future research as they had both mentioned the relationship of student and teacher and the way they felt I talked to them. I hadn't given that part of my work much thought until they said those things. I became

interested in what happened between me and my students in the process of learning. I tried to form new questions and came up with these: What does an educative relationship look like in practice ? What is a true dialogue and can I engage in one?

It was as if I had spent over a year chasing shadows in the name of action research.

Listening to Clancy and Neil had done me good because they had enabled me to see past the shadows and understand my real concerns. I wanted to improve the quality of education of my students by improving the way I interacted with them.

I went on to try to understand my practice in three contexts: with a student; a whole class; and with a colleague. My papers show how my other concerns developed over time: concerns about accountability; tensions between my role of manager and educator; and the nature and status of teacher knowledge. Understanding these are part of my educational development and perhaps that understanding of myself is the most significant thing that happened in my research.

I've presented these accounts in chronological order but will try to show how they are linked by short introductions to each one and by commenting on them as a whole at the end.