

Justify the appropriateness of the methodology to the nature of the enquiry

Well, in the police force we constantly use correspondence and conversation as our main means of communication, although internal correspondence generally takes the form of reports or memorandums rather than letters. However, I don't believe that the possible educational value and potential of these exchanges has been fully recognised or explored yet. At present they are used more for transmitting information than for any educational purpose. The contents of the reports and memos do not generally invite deep and lasting discussion or an ongoing dialogue. Instead they are concise and usually submitted in order to answer questions rather than ask them. Nevertheless, I believe it would be quite easy to change the style of some of our internal correspondence to make it more educational, the main drawback being that we are used to looking for answers and so it could be quite frustrating and confusing in the early stages.

Recently, I have in fact started to write to a few colleagues in the style of "educational letters to friends" but it's still early days and something that I'm in the process of developing so please don't ask me too much about it yet and no I haven't got the evidence about how its been received! When I use the phrase "educational letters to friends" I mean friendly letters with the usual courtesies but including contents concerning professional practice which inform or challenge or question or give ideas and so on.

For some time there's been distance learning with training packages that are written in a style that speak directly to the student. However, within my own force these don't involve writing back to a tutor. Instead, the self-teach booklets are littered with blank boxes in which the student is expected to write their answer before moving on to see what the book says. In practice I've never bothered to fill in the spaces but have simply read the booklet, or watched the accompanying video, from start to finish.

Then there's inter-active learning on computers, which don't let the student move on until they have answered the questions. We haven't got that in my force yet but from what I've seen of these computer programmes, they don't allow discussion or creative thought, but tend to give simple answers to simple questions.

I'm looking for more than these packages can offer, because I want argument and the educative relationship with the teacher, critical friend, collaborator, opponent or whoever. When I consider the amount of one to one communication that police officers do with the public, I find it quite amazing that as an organisation we haven't gone further down the line of educative correspondences with each other in order to help us make sense of our experiences.

I suppose I could say that I've used my correspondence with you as a practice ground which has enabled me to become comfortable with using correspondence and conversation as the basis for my own educational development. I find that I'm able to reel off letters in this style in relatively little time whereas if I try to make the same point in some detached third party "matter of fact" way it takes me much longer and the "emergent thought" has gone by the time I've rearranged it to write it down.

As you told me in a letter some time ago, I "focus on conversations and correspondence in making sense of the operational life of a police officer." Of course I have to disagree with you in that it's not only that I use it to make sense of my life as a police officer but I use it to

make sense of my whole life. That was you again focussing only on the police part of my life, one day I'll convince you that there's more to me than the police force.

So what is my methodology. One thing it's not is static or fixed. In fact I would say that it's changed and developed over time, just as my form of presentation has. Later in this account I would like to explain how my methodology has changed but for the moment I'd like to concentrate on the point that I've reached, my methodology as it is now.

To date I've not been able to get clearly into my mind the meaning of the word methodology. I'm therefore at a disadvantage when it comes to justifying my methodology. Judith Bell (1987) talks about *"approaches to educational research"* and says

"Different styles, traditions or approaches use different methods of collecting data, but no approach prescribes nor automatically rejects any particular method." (p.4)

She continues,

"Classifying an approach as quantitative or qualitative, ethnographic, survey, action research or whatever, does not mean that once an approach has been selected, the researcher may not move from the methods normally associated with the style. Each approach has its strengths and weaknesses and each is particularly suitable for a particular context." (p.4)

So Bell seems to define methodology as an approach to educational research which have differing labels such as action research, case study, ethnographic, surveys, and experimental, each with their own features that separate them from the rest.

Cohen and Manion (1989) only served to confuse me. They have a section headed methods and methodology. Methods was easy to understand in that they said

"By methods, we mean that range of approaches used in educational research to gather data which are to be used as a basis for inference and interpretation, for explanation and prediction." (p.41)

On the other hand, when it came to methodology they quote from Kaplin which quite frankly did nothing for me as I thought it was gobbledegook. However, they summarise it by saying

"... he suggests the aim of methodology is to help us to understand, in the broadest possible terms, not the products of scientific enquiry but the process itself." (p.42)

Unfortunately for me, this still didn't fully clarify the meaning of the word methodology.

Having gained little joy from Cohen and Manion I moved on to Verma and Beard (1981). They say that a

"useful way to classify or categorise educational research is by purpose which lies along a continuum from the most basic to the most applied. That is to say, is the research designed to add knowledge to the field of study which may or may not be of any immediate value (basic) or is it to be of immediate practical application?" (p.36)

In addition to this, they go on to list eleven kinds of research offered as an outline by Rowan (1976), which includes some very long and fancy words. However, the two types in there of interest to me were action research and dialectical research. Whilst Verma and Beard

describe action research, they pay little attention to the dialectic. However, they summarise by saying,

"It is apparent that educational research can take many forms; ... The most important point to be remembered is that the focus of educational research must be education, and that the foremost function is to assist teachers, administrators and all concerned in the field, with the aim of improving the quality of the educational process, and thus enhancing the quality of life." (p.40)

Later they comment that,

"There seems to be so many difficulties at both the conceptual and technical level concerning the methodology of research in education. For example, human behaviour - the concern of most educational researchers - is far more complex to understand and interpret than the forces operating to make up the content of the physical sciences. Educational research is a planned and deliberate intervention designed to improve the educational process which may differ from situation to situation, and from time to time in the same setting." (p.51)

Now can you see Jack why I get myself wound up about criteria when I can't even understand what the word methodology means and I have to say that I can't see the importance of my understanding it. Everywhere I look I find a different slant on the word, which leaves me feeling lost. My vocabulary, until coming to the university, managed perfectly well without methodology, but since coming there I've not only been conducting an enquiry but I've had to learn a new form of language in the process.

I have no doubt that my initial approach was one of an action researcher, that is of course if you accept action research as a methodology. Having read McNiff's comments (1988) I even have some doubt about that as she says, *"...my reading in the field led me to believe that a great emphasis was placed on an approach to action research as a methodological issue rather than a philosophical view of the nature of educational knowledge. This latter view is held by Jack ..."* (p.xvii) In spite of this, can we say for the time being that my methodology was grounded in action research. Now I'd like to come up to date and describe what I do now so that I can suggest a label for my present methodology and justify its appropriateness.

Well quite simply I use correspondence as a means to express my ideas that hopefully you will recognise as points that are open to discussion, argument and development. The letters are the medium by which I can tell you my thoughts with no fear that you will attack me, not least because you know how vulnerable I am when trying to put forward an argument that is still in the process of formulation.

If you challenge my ideas I have no need to lose face. Instead I can have time in which to construct my reply whilst maintaining my own sense of pride, judgement, and values. It is a gentler form of argument, based on a willingness to properly listen and engage with the other's point of view. It's what we make it.

It has a conversational base to it but provides the opportunity to think again and review the words before posting it off to you. It provides the chance to communicate when there's no time or space to meet or speak verbally to the other.

On several occasions you've mentioned the art of the dialectician to me. You referred me to the works of Plato and although I've not read his work, I've now read about him, especially what is said about him and dialectics. Cohen (1969) started me off in her introductory book on Educational Thought where she describes Plato's theories. She talks about Socrates, "whom Plato makes a leading figure in most of his dialogues," and says

"The most significant event in Socrates' life, indeed its turning point, was a declaration of the Delphic oracle: that there was no one wiser than Socrates. According to his own report, from that time on Socrates embarked on the career of questioning for which he is famous, his object being to prove the oracle wrong ... he tackled various "wise" men on the subjects on which they were supposed to be expert. He did this in apparent innocence, only wanting to make sure that they really were wiser than he was himself, but this method of questioning quickly reduced them to confusion. As a result of this procedure two things happened; one was that Socrates finally decided that the oracle was probably right, in that although he knew nothing, he was wiser than the professedly wise, since he knew that he knew nothing, whereas they laboured under the false impression that they knew something. The second result was to be expected; Socrates became less and less popular with people of importance in Athens," (p.29)

Cohen goes on to explain Plato's Dialectical method, saying,

"In earlier dialogues the method of discussion, which is clearly a faithful representation of Socrates' method, is dialectical. The Dialectical method is characterised by the fact that, at the outset, the aim is usually a definition, eg of justice, courage or beauty. A hypothetical definition is then suggested which should cover all cases; next a counter-example is found, and the definition has to be amended to cover this counter-example. The new definition is corrected and improved in the same way, and provides yet another definition, each definition being nearer the truth than the last. The positive function of the dialectical method is, first of all, the clarification of ideas; secondly, the philosophical or logical training of those engaged in it; and thirdly, the examination of presuppositions." (p.30)

Very interesting Jack, but I don't take part in dialogue in order to define things, in fact I think I'm quite the opposite, I don't want to pin them down but would rather allow them to develop into something new and different.

Then I turn to Barrow (1976) for more information about Plato. He introduces me to the techniques of "elenchus" and "epagoge", saying,

"Elenchus" is the technique of causing a man to drop or revise his original statement by leading him in the course of questioning to accept as an ultimate consequence of it a statement contradicting it. "Epagoge" consists of causing another disputant to accept a generalisation by getting him to agree to a series of instances. Perhaps, finally dialectic defies accurate description: it is that which Plato creates in his dialogues. It is the ruthless pursuit of some problem, the search for truth on some matter conducted with determination, subtlety, precision and care. It eschews short cuts, debating points, and persuasive arguments. It involves a genuine dialogue between two persons concerned not to "win" but to lose something of their own ignorance." (p.42)

Whereas Plato used the dialectic method to define things, perhaps the contradiction might be that it can also be used to do the opposite, as I have suggested here, to open up my mind to new ideas, to broaden it, to accommodate the contradiction. I smiled when I read that Plato

reserved the dialectic for the final stage of education, with Barrow quoting Socrates to make the point -

".. young men when they first get a taste of disputation, misuse it as a form of sport, always employing it contentiously ... they delight like puppies in pulling about and tearing with words all who approach them" ((Republic, 539) (p.43)

I wondered whether that was me at my more rebellious moments!

Then I read on and saw the control go back into Plato's ideas where Barrow remarks,

"That the students involved in dialectic should submit their own views on the question at issue is one thing; but that they should also be the arbiters of what criteria they use for assessing the validity of their argument for the view is quite another. The student of dialectic is not subject to the authority of any teacher, but he is subject to the rule of reason: he goes not whither he will, but whither the argument leads him." (p.43)

It would surely be interesting to me to figure out the contradiction to Plato's views on criteria, the contradiction that makes me wonder whether one day I will be able to convince you that there is no need for criteria.

We've talked about the dialectic approach, so here is my dialectic approach, in the form of correspondence.

Now I have to justify this dialectic approach as a valid means of enquiry. I've taken your advice Jack in reading yet again "The Narrative of an Educational Journey or Crossing the Track" (Lomax, 1994a). She proposes

"that we must look for an appropriate methodology and epistemology for the educational enterprise outside of social science." (p.4)

She says,

"We need to make a stand to support alternative forms of research, to challenge old assumptions, to work constructively with contradiction, and we need research that is able to make itself transparent so that we ourselves do not slip unconsciously back into that old world." (p.5)

She asks

"Why should our descriptions and explanations be constrained in the form of a research tradition that belongs to social science?" (p.6)

She points out

"I am asking the gatekeepers of research to move over a little, to recognise a new partner, to respect another way, to let an educational form of research into the academy." (p.6)

Her words reminded me of a rhyme I read not long ago:

I took a crowded train today from London Bridge to Lee, and someone kindly shifted up to make some room for me. "Squeeze up," he said to everyone, "and make another seat, 'twill

save this little lady from wearing out her feet." And what a friendly attitude, and kindly thing to say, to make room for a stranger in such a pleasant way. It would be well with bigger things to use this little plan, and squeeze another person in to any place you can. Not spread yourself, and take more room, and flaunt your luck about, using every means you know to keep another out, hoping in such manner your position to advance, but squeezing up a bit to give another man a chance. (Partridge, 1942 p.34)

There's no doubt in my mind that Lomax was opening doors to forms of educational enquiry that are better suited to the context in which they take place. However, I remain a little sceptical when I think back to a discussion at the World Congress 3, held at the University of Bath in 1994. I went to a meeting where Kevin Eames introduced the idea of *"The Education Journal,"* and which was also attended by Pam Lomax,

Eames had with him the introductory issue of the journal in which he feels that

"the dialectical form of educational knowledge is appropriate as a form of professional knowledge for educators," (Eames, 1994 p.7)

and he says

"a dialectical form of knowledge ... is above all an educational form, in the sense that it educates the participants - moves them from not knowing something, or not being able to do something, to knowing it or doing it." (p.7)

Yes I could go along with that.

The discussion initially appeared to go along the lines of accepting the imperfections of all of us as we use dialogue with others as a means to learn and move forward. This, I thought, could be a journal that included the contributions of the likes of myself, I had things to say but wasn't particularly good at expressing them. Perhaps the ongoing dialogue would enable me to speak up more and to take a more active role in the development of educational knowledge.

Eames had written,

"The Journal needs to reflect, as far as possible, the dialectical nature of educational knowledge ..." (p.7)

He continued,

"Such a process would embody the function of the journal - as a form for debate, where views are put forward on the understanding that they will form part of a developing dialogue. It would also embody the way our own educational knowledge develops within a conversational community, as we fulfil our professional responsibility for improving our practice, and hold ourselves accountable to our fellow educators by offering descriptions and explanations for scrutiny." (p.8)

Then came the contradiction which I found to be both shocking and distressing, as someone raised the question of how the contributions would be judged and what standards would be applied. Suddenly it became obvious to me that my contribution would be excluded because

it wouldn't be of a refereed journal standard. And guess who was speaking up for standards so that this journal would have credibility - Yes it was Pam.

Well Jack I'm sure you can imagine my anger. I was so annoyed and disappointed that I didn't speak, if I had I would have cried. Instead, I went away thinking "I don't want to be associated with a journal that excludes those of us who are just starting out, or think differently." For the rest of that meeting, indeed the rest of the day, I didn't feel valued but no-one knew because I couldn't tell them, and anyway I don't believe they would have understood. In some ways I'm sorry that I didn't tell Pam but maybe now that time has passed we will both be able to see the contradiction. It should at least help you to understand why I am so suspicious when I read of academics who appear to support a dialectic form of enquiry, I remain afraid that they'll dismiss my contribution because I still have much to learn.

Perhaps you can remember the occasion when I accused you of the same thing, of being my gatekeeper, because no matter how much work I did, you still kept telling me that it wouldn't pass for a degree.

I feel as if perhaps I've gone a little off track as I recall that incident at the World Congress 3. In fact I still get upset about it. It reminds me of a time when I felt unable to speak even though I was surrounded by people who were asking for more dialogue. Perhaps I should get back to a more structured approach (gosh did I say structured, most unlike me!) Anyway I have tried to discipline myself into thinking more about the task in hand which is justifying to you the appropriateness of the methodology to the nature of the enquiry.

I've now started to consider this in a back to front way in that I've begun to think about the nature of my enquiry before dealing with the methodology itself. Let me tell you what I've come up with. I've thought about the nature of my enquiry in terms of the features that it includes. I should say that these are not features that I planned to include, but it's just how it is. I think this needs some explanation because I believe that it has been through the process of our conversations and correspondence, as well as my reading of literature, that I have come to realise the nature of my enquiry. When I started out I saw the nature of my enquiry in a very different way. I saw it as engaging in action to improve practice which it probably was at that stage. That action was clear and organised addressing questions based on your action planner commencing "What is my concern, what do I want to improve?" Now I've moved on to a different type of enquiry which is much more integrated with my whole way of life. It seems to have a different purpose but I really don't feel that I can explain that to you at this point in time. I know that's not very satisfactory but I just can't pin-point exactly what I want to say about it. Maybe it will help if I go on to explain some of the features that make up the nature of my enquiry.