

Chapter 4: The Data, The Evidence

With the emphasis being on 'I', the action research approach of data gathering puts me as the researcher and participant as the central focus of the enquiry. Therefore, my data gathering process emphasises my 'participative' rather than 'spectator' or 'observer' approach (Cunningham, 1999). My intention in this chapter is to show evidence of leadership influence on the team members and ultimately on the students' learning.

In Chapter 3: The Methodology, I described the action research framework and the data collection tools I would use. I am now in a new phase of my enquiry. The research question - '*How do I improve my leadership as a team leader in vocational education in FE?*' remains the same. I am moving my enquiry forward as I support two new curriculum staff integrated into the AVCE, GNVQ and GCSE ICT team.

The voices that validate and quantify

"If your influence as a leader is felt through conversation...you might bring the voices of your colleagues and students into your account of your educational influence through your leadership."
(Reflective Journal 11 Dec'03)

Feldman (2003) argues that providing a clear and detailed description of how we collect data and make explicit what counts as data in our work can increase the validity of our enquiry. My method of data gathering was guided mainly by the questions:

- *How do I judge the influence of my leadership on the team members and on the students' learning?*
- *What kinds of data could I collect to get the meaning of my values?*

Evidence of my leadership influence on the team members and on the students' learning is documented within the text, mainly throughout this chapter as well as throughout the chapters of this dissertation. The voices of my colleagues and the voices of the students captured in their feedback comments and in my journal entries

provide the data that would become the evidence. These are interpreted and form the literary representations that collectively give meaning to and determine the quality of my enquiry.

In action research, it is not always obvious how an artistic representation of the research has arisen from the data (Feldman, 2003). In the remainder of this chapter, using narratives, I provide a clear and detailed description of how I constructed the representation from the data collected using the data collection instruments described in chapter 3.

My first set of data

In June 2003, at the end of that academic year, I sent a questionnaire to each team member to gather their comments and feedback about how they perceive their role in the team.

I asked:

'What do you think we do as a team that is supportive?'

The responses were:

- *We talk and listen.*
- *Through regular meetings, discussions, communication and helping each other whilst working together makes the group supportive of each other.*
- *We talk over problems and strategies for dealing with the students.*

(Responses collated from questionnaire in Appendix A)

As a team we thrive on collaborative decision making that our team has successfully established and validated in the questionnaires.

I asked:

'List three strengths of the team'.

The responses were: As a team we:

- *Respect each other*
 - *Look after each other*
 - *Have a good understanding of our students (their issues, their strengths, their workload)*
 - *Show openness to each other and trust in each other's abilities*
 - *Have good tracking, are supportive and hardworking*
 - *Do our best for our students*
 - *Can be open about individual/team 'catastrophes'*
 - *Show humour in the face of sheer despair*
 - *Have good fun*
 - *Have welfare of students uppermost*
 - *Are very professional - have genuine commitment to achievement and welfare of students*
- (Responses collated from questionnaire in Appendix A)

I asked:

'What might we do to be more supportive?'

The responses were: As a team:

- *We could benefit from having '...more structured approach to new staff.'*
 - *Communication is the key to support therefore this area needs to be enhance on to ensure all staff are happy and aware of their role so that high success can be achieved.*
- (Extract from questionnaire, Appendix A)

Welcoming the strangers who bring new life

In September 2003, at the beginning of the new academic year, I welcomed Annia and Nita as new tutors and lecturers to the team. I took stock of the feedback comments made by the team members the previous academic year (see above). I welcomed them and explained their new tutor and lecturer roles.

"Today I welcomed Annia and Nita into the AVCE, GNVQ and GCSE ICT. They are new tutors and lecturers to the GNVQ Intermediate and AVCE ICT students respectively. Although inexperienced in tutor roles, I believe Annia and Nita will bring fresh ideas and breathe new life into the team. I welcomed them to the team. I explained to them their tutor roles and their lecturer roles. I reassured them that as a team we are there for them, to support them."
(Reflective Journal, 9 Sept'03)

By employing a structured approach to the new staff, I am following part of the Action Plan that makes up the basic steps of action research process (Mcniff, 2002).

As a team leader, I am absorbed in a leadership relationship with the team members as I provide guidance about teaching and learning activities that support improvement in student achievement. As I support Annia and Nita as new tutors in the AVCE, GNVQ and GCSE ICT team, I am learning, developing and improving in my role of curriculum team leader. At the same time I am sharing my experience with them and influencing them (Whitehead, 2000). As we meet formally and informally in meetings or during correspondence via e-mail, I seize upon these encounters as vital data gathering opportunities. After all, the purpose of my enquiry into my leadership is grounded in my influence with members of my team in enhancing the students' learning outcomes.

As mentioned in Chapter 1, Annia and Nita are pseudonyms – fictitious used to protect their identity in real life.

"You must let your participants know that their rights are protected and that if they wish to withdraw they may do so." (McNiff et al., 1997, p.35).

However, I am aware that situations and events that I record could make their real names identifiable. Later on, in this chapter, I discuss in details the ethical issues that relate to protecting individual rights and how I obtained permission to use their experiences.

Our team consists of eight members, some new to the teaching profession (Annia and Nita) and others with varying years of teaching experience. Collectively, our experiences positively influence each other and that is partly what makes our team successful.

Creating opportunities for empowerment

My interest in my own leadership influence leads me to the ultimate goal of creating an effective team. A team who would have ample of opportunities that would result in the empowerment of not just Annia and Nita as new tutor and lecturer staff, but also for our existing team members.

"Teachers feel more empowered when they believe they have the skills and ability to help students learn..." (Short, 1998, p70).

One of my duties as a team leader is to carry out at least one formal lesson observation of each team member in the academic year. The observation also forms part of the Annual College Individual Performance Review. After each observed lesson, I give feedback to the lecturer. After the feedback, I encourage the lecturer to respond and comment on the feedback I give. Their feedback is important to me and allows me to capture their voices and bring these into my account of my educational influence through my leadership.

"I thought the feedback comments I had were very positive and helpful. A lot of time goes into planning and delivering a lesson to fit in with all the needs students have and it is very valuable to have constructive and helpful feedback. To begin with I felt slightly on edge but was soon made to feel comfortable and at ease by the way the feedback was given.. The atmosphere was friendly although the feedback was given in a very positive way. When we discussed a couple of points (Daisy) the observer was very interested to hear my views. I felt the observer was genuinely interested in what I had to say and it enabled me to feel free to discuss any matters I felt I needed to put across.

Overall I would say the experience definitely had a very positive influence on my role as a teacher. Over the years I have had many observations and they have often fallen short on the feedback sessions but this observation/feedback was very positive and has left me feeling highly motivated."
(Lesson observation feedback response - Appendix J)

By listening attentively, I believe I showed empathy and interest in the lecturer. By listening to what the lecturer, had to say, I was able to adjust my argument to suit their concerns. By being heard the lecturer was made to feel valued. This is important in my relationship with individual team members. The lecturer left the feedback session feeling highly motivated. This builds the foundation of trust.

Transformational leadership - leading beside peers

It is important to 'lead beside' my peers, preparing the environment and creating opportunities for growth.

"(Today I) Interviewed three prospective students with Annia observing the process. She took copious notes. As a tutor, Annia must participate in the recruitment of prospective students. For that she must be 'trained' and supported in the process. Today I was 'preparing the environment' for this process. In two weeks' time Annia will interview a prospective student on her own. It will create an opportunity for growth.. "

(Reflective Journal -10 March'04)

Transformational leadership model according to Burns (1978) has its origins in non-educational settings where the emphasis is put on leader agency. Gunter (2001) identifies characteristics of the transformational model as:

- Inspiration: motivating the subordinate through charisma
- Individualism: focusing on the individual needs of subordinates
- Intellectual stimulation: influencing thinking and imagination of subordinates.

"During the feedback session the observer (Daisy) checked my views and understanding of any terms or comments made which made it easy to state any opinions. (Daisy) was concerned that I understood why my feedback was important and explained how this could benefit my individual needs in the future."

(Extract from Appendix K)

A central feature of transformational leadership is direction setting through the building and communicating of a commitment to a shared vision, and a positive response to high performance expectations (Leithwood et al, 1999). Gunter (2001) recognises that this is to be achieved not just through structures and systems, but by enabling the followers to 'feel' the leadership.

"... I must yet again, thank you Daisy...you are an endless source of help, encouragement and inspiration to me...I wouldn't be where I am today without you".

(Extract from Appendix H)

Quoting Leithwood et al (1999), Gunter (2001) explains that charismatic leaders are perceived to exercise power in socially positive ways. Such leaders

"... create trust among colleagues in their ability to overcome any obstacle and are a source of pride to have as associates. Colleagues consider these leaders to be symbols of success and accomplishment, and to have unusual insights about what is really important to attend to; they are highly respected by colleagues." (Leithwood et al, 1999, p.57).

Leading beside members of my team results in their 'empowerment'. I believe I am acting as a transformational and facilitative leader. (Knill-Greisser, 2002).

Taking responsibility for learner's growth

"Dear Daisy

I am just writing to thank you and all the ICT team for the help and support given to X over the last two years. It has been a slightly turbulent period for him but all the positive encouragement and coaxing has enabled him to achieve and just about stay on track. Leaving him with a sense of achievement rather than the failure he felt when he left school. He has always enjoyed being at the College and speaks very highly of the help he has received from every one in the department."
(Extract from Appendix B. X has been used to anonymise the student)

As the team leader, I often feel that the ultimate responsibility for students' achievement and retention at the end of the academic year rests with me. That the buck stops at my door should the ICT programmes not perform on target. The inclusion of Ali's parents' voice in my dissertation provides further evidence of effective team support - those of having the welfare of students' uppermost (Appendix A).

Daloz (1987) explains that

we acknowledge the power of our presence in our students' lives and accept the responsibility for providing them with the vision they may lack. But we can also recognise that we are only a single force among many and that our ultimate task is to help them understand those forces so that they can travel ahead on their own.

Black is Beautiful

Throughout the research for this dissertation, there have been several attempts by my tutor, to steer me in acknowledging in this enquiry, my ethnicity, my racial identity and its influence on me as a leader on the way I lead my team¹.

"In working with XX, a mixed race educator... he has stressed the importance of acknowledging that 'whiteness' speaks from within a privileged position and that it is important in the development of post-colonial forms of theorising about leadership to consider issues of racial identity."
(Extract from Appendix M)

I am a black female team leader. I was born in The Seychelles where I grew up and spent most of my formative years. Of course I am part of the ethnic minority. But until now, I have resisted this inclusion in my enquiry because I believe my racial identity has little significance on how I lead my team. I work alongside several Caucasian Programme Area Leaders. We differ in our leadership style and this is shown in the way we lead our team. The characteristics of our students and the types of educational programmes we offer further compound the difference in our leadership style. Besides, there is no one 'right' way to lead people. I was not sure that acknowledging my racial identity was necessary or important in my account of my leadership. But an incident (Appendix C and Journal Entry 23/01/04), which took place on 23rd January 2004, forced me to review this stance.

I have been living and working in the United Kingdom for over seventeen years. For many years I worked with the police force where 'institutional racism' was widely acknowledged. During my employment with the police force, then, I was the only black professional female in the force. Other black personnel working in the Constabulary were cleaners. Not once during my employment with the Constabulary

¹ See Appendix M

did I encounter racial harassment neither was I made to feel different to my white colleagues because of my black skin.

After almost seven years working at the College, I had my first and I pray my last 'racial harassment' encounter with a colleague (Maggie) I have known and worked with for the last four years. A detailed documentation of how the 'outburst' started can be found in Appendix C. What matters most to me is the underlining racial hatred that surfaced from that colleague during this totally unprovoked incident. Perhaps she thought that if she makes racist, derogatory and abusive comments about the colour of my skin, that makes me inferior (to her).

I have had well-documented disagreements concerning academic matters with that colleague in the past, (Reflective Journal entries for 15th May to 27th June 2003) but not once did I suspect her to be racist. Her choice of words reminds me of a passage I once read in the Epistle of St James in the New Testament:

"It is the same way with ships: even though they are so large and driven by fierce winds, they are steered by a very small rudder wherever the pilot's inclination wishes. In the same way the tongue is a small member and yet has great pretension." James 3:4-5.

How does this racial abuse make me feel? The symbol of human expression, the tongue, is the most immediate form of complex communication. Foremost, it has the potential to do much damage very quickly. But I cannot help thinking, that her thoughts, whatever form of communication she chose to express them, must have deep rooted racism embedded within. I feel that Maggie has damaged our professional and personnel friendship but I never felt bitter or vengeful about her

racist insult. Hatred is antithetical to Christian life. Left to fester it fills us with negative energy, consuming us with vindictiveness, bitterness, disgust and even the desire to inflict injury. During the incident, she displayed a combination of all these traits. I refuse to hold a grudge or harbour negative attitude towards Maggie. Her self-justification to racially abuse black people like myself has the potential of becoming normative. The law of the land clearly dictates against racial harassment and I prefer to let the Employment Tribunal deal with the legal aspect of her irrational behaviour. The College, as my employer, has clear policies for Personal Harassment Procedure for Staff and actively promotes Equality and Diversity. Unfortunately their procedures could not be activated because Maggie resigned from her lecturer post the same day she racially abused me. As a Christian, I forgive her and I will not let her racist comments damage me emotionally and spiritually.

'Black is beautiful' wrote Jack². **Of course Black is Beautiful, and I am proud to be black.** I was, in my leadership capacity, dealing with an incident of verbal abuse from Maggie to one of our team members.

"As a team, we look after each other."

(Extract from questionnaire response in Appendix A)

But I fail to see why Maggie should refer to the colour of my skin in a derogatory way if she disagrees with aspects of my professional life. I also fail to see how the colour of my skin can influence the way I lead my team. It is what I do in my leadership role - how I support the team and motivate the team, that matters. It was my belief that the

inter-relationship between my racial identity, my leadership style and my educational influence on the team had very little or no significance before this incident. I do not want it to play a more significant role. Or do I? Should it play a more significant role?

"Sometimes we say we believe in something, but are unable to live according to what we believe, for a variety of reasons. Here we would experience ourselves in Jack Whitehead's words, as 'living contradictions'" (McNiff, 2002).

Values versus racial identity? Is this an issue? Is it important? Am I experiencing a 'living contradiction'?

Douglas (2002) questions the notion of *"Is it possible for Black women to thrive in Britain?"* She argues that the idea of 'surviving' and 'thriving' are distinctly different goals for the Black woman. To get to my position of team leader, I have worked hard through my passion and motivation to work with less academically gifted learners; learners who are disaffected by school. I did not set out to be a team leader. It happened because of what I am which transpired in what I do. Our team shares my passion for working with these students.

"As a team, we do our best for our students. We have the welfare of (our) students uppermost." (Appendix A).

Before the racial harassment incident, the notion of 'surviving' and 'thriving' was not significant to me. I was 'thriving' (if that is the word) because of what I do, which I try to do to the best of my ability. This means supporting the team and helping them to do their job successfully.

² See Appendix M

"A point of entry for action research would be to find ways of overcoming the contradiction so that we might live more fully in the direction of our values" (McNiff, 2002).

We learn from life's experiences. In my evaluation of the above event, I am now beginning to make more sense of the struggles and challenges of my ancestors and the oppressions they encountered as they paved a fairer way for more equal opportunities for people from oppressed groups. The benefits we, black people, now enjoy (Hooks, 1982).

I live my life according to my standards of practice, dictated by the values that were shaped by my past experiences and people I aspire to (my mother). My values are unique to me and are transparent and emerge in what I do in my leadership practice. They give meaning and purpose to my life in vocational academic education (Whitehead, 2000). The Colleagues who provide feedback via correspondences; referred to in the reflective journal, the very same people who put their views and comment via questionnaires, critical friends whose opinions I value and help me see things in a different, new light; they all lend voices to and influence my standards of practice. Together, they validate my living standards of practice and help me evaluate the quality of my research. What I am saying is: I am what I am in what I do, in my actions, in my thoughts and in what I say. My values do not stem from my racial identity and ethnicity. But does it? Should it?

So, how will I change my practice in the light of my evaluation?

Having experienced and been a victim of racial abuse because of the colour of my skin, I now have a better understanding of the works organisations such as The Racial Equality Council do in their efforts to make our society less discriminatory. By not harbouring the sickness of anger towards Maggie, this experience has renewed by spiritual values and strengthened my faith. I feel I am living more fully in the direction of my values (McNiff, 2002). I have retained my integrity in the face of racial abuse and extended my assertion skills by remaining calm in a threatening and aggressive situation. Day et al, (2001) identify these qualities as common to effective leadership.

My experiences with most of the team members have been mainly positive. My experiences have helped me realise that being an effective team leader, in all its honourable and sometimes difficult situations, is in part simply about making connections with the team members.

“From what I have seen, you fully involve your staff in the work and the decisions needed to perform to their best ability. A particular strength is how you 'grow' team members and nurture them to develop into good practitioners and team players. ”
(Extract from Appendix E and Reflective Journal 24, October'03)

Where I have not been able to connect with a team member (Maggie is an example), I can wholeheartedly say, it has not been through not trying on my part. The aftermath of the racial harassment incident has taught me to remain calm in tense and aggressive situations and to retain a form of professional assertiveness that does not aggravate the situation further.

“... The mix of personal characteristics and behaviour underpinned by the professionalism in terms of organisation, commitment and caring about what you do, quality of what you do and the support for

students and staff, is a model I believe. It enables you (Daisy) to drive forward real improvements and set demanding standards to up performance in a supportive and caring way."

(Extract from Appendix E)

"Daisy was very calm and gave Maggie the chance to calm down..."

(Extract from, Appendix C)

"Daisy tried to calm her (Maggie) down by suggesting she was saying things she didn't really mean."

(Extract from, Appendix C)

"At all times Daisy was calm and she tried to get Maggie to calm down."

(Extract from, Appendix C)

All quotes above have been reproduced with the witnesses' permission (Appendix O).

'Being' is first, 'Doing' is second

Under the present education system, thousands of young people are written off if they do not get five A to C GCSE passes. Most of the students who choose our vocational programmes are not particularly 'wanted' in their sixth form feeder school because they did not achieve the 'required' grade in their GCSEs. They tend to be the schools' rejects'. Alistair's case comes to mind. This situation explains why the government recently commissioned Michael Tomlinson (2004) to propose sweeping reform of 14 to 19 year-old qualifications. Tomlinson's working group propose a new framework that would cater for students of all abilities, give equal status to vocational and academic study, and encourage more students to stay on past 16. I believe that this is our chance to introduce an exam system that create opportunities to succeed for both academic high flyers and students with vocational aptitude who are not currently getting the encouragement they need to achieve. The vocational education FE colleges currently offer has the potential to bring out the good in learners deemed not worthy of continuing education post 16 in school's sixth form centres. Team leaders who would

be responsible for implementing Tomlinson's reform must be prepared and consulted at every step of changes.

I believe that as a team leader it is important to have a good understanding of our students' characteristics, work with them, believe in them, laugh with them and most of all earn their trust. Therefore, it is imperative to have a team that displays the strengths mentioned above as their characteristics. In addition, most of these students come to college with their own personal baggage. Some are genuinely socially disadvantaged. I support the view that education is the way out of deprivation (Stubbs, 2003). By earning their trust, a special relationship develops. A relationship in which there is mutual trust and respect, in which the student learns to trust in his or her own abilities and move forward in their development, both academically and emotionally.

I strongly believe that the power to influence others comes foremost from 'being' and then from 'doing'. We are surrounded by voices that tell us we are *what we do*, that success is defined by what we achieve. Recruitment, retention and achievement are indicators that define the success of our AVCE and GNVQ courses. If recruitment were below the College target, our courses are at risk of being withdrawn. If retention were below the College target, the course leader would have some explaining to give. If achievement were below target, the course leader would need a more stringent development plan.

Whilst the emphasis on activities of recruitment, retention and achievement should not be understated, as a team leader, it is the source of my actions, my spiritual energy and my interaction and relationship with the team members and the students, that matter most. The word of a critical friend is a point in case:

"... you, Daisy, have a natural ability to be completely honest with people - student or colleagues - and yet present criticism in this constructive way, which is part of why you're such a good leader. Be honest, be constructive, be supportive - i.e. be Daisy!"

(Extract from Appendix N and Reflective Journal 17 March 2004)

"Following my recent probation review experience, I found the experience with my reviewer (Daisy) to be caring, understanding and supportive. The review allowed the reviewer and I to discuss the way ahead. As a team leader, the reviewer dealt with the probation review in a professional way which demonstrated great management and ethical skills. As a colleague, the reviewer was able to assist in any decisions to be made and to debate any issues raised. I feel that I can approach my team leader to talk or ask for assistance at any time."

(Extract from Appendix F - Probation Review feedback)

Reflecting on my professional practice in my role as a team leader has been central to the progress of my dissertation. It has afforded me the opportunity not just to reflect on my practice, but also on my values and on my leadership improvements. The feedback I obtained from the team via the questionnaires was very positive. The feedback from the critical friend is of equal importance. I reflect on the comments and concerns voiced by the team and reflect on the improvement I will initiate in my practice. For the majority of the time such improvements would be focussed on how to improve the team members' working environment.

"In preparation for my forthcoming Performance Review, I feel that presently I am receiving feedback during any time as and when the need occurs. However, I feel that in anticipation of the Performance Review, short and concise feedback should be given to lecturer/tutor possibly on a termly basis. This would prevent a large review at the end of the appraisal time but will still allow for future goals to be set for the next academic teaching year. Regular but short feedback would allow improvement to the practitioner in small doses but would ensure that the reviewer could then deal with any issues at an early stage. It would also allow the reviewer to endorse the Performance Review with positive and constructive comments."

(Extract from Appendix F - Probation Review feedback)

"Communication is the key to support therefore this area needs to be enhanced to ensure all staff are happy and aware of their role so that high success can be achieved".
(Extract from Appendix A)

Communication is indeed the key to support and I will modify my leadership practice in the light of this evaluation. This new action will be the focus of a new area of investigation in my leadership practice and will form part of my action research cycle (Mcniff, 2002).

Experience is a wonderful thing

Experience is a wonderful thing. It enables us to recognise a mistake when we make it again. But we learn from life's experiences and if a mistake is not acted upon, then we have not learned from the experience and we cannot progress and move forward.

Conle (2000) recognises that

"feelings and experience come together in the first step of any thesis work, that is, they come together in the motivation that generates initial involvement with a topic."

Three years as a team leader and two years doing action research have made me more conscious of my own learning experience. When I reflect on who I was three years ago, I realise that I have come a long way. Whether this is due to the experience of action research or the experience of mature years, it is open to discussion. What I do know is that my ability to reflect on my leadership activities and be confident enough to try out new ideas is more evident. After all, some people will agree that confidence comes with age. But I have always taken a certain amount of risk in my life. If I had

been afraid to leave The Seychelles and my parents behind seventeen years ago, I would not be here. I also believe that I have grown more spiritually. It has been quite a journey so far and the journey continues.

How do I warrant my claim to know my standards are true?

I believe I have resolved this question in my enquiry through examining my research from personal reflection and from substantiated feedback from the team members. The team feedback, through questionnaire and individual comments further triangulates my research, thus increasing its validity.

"Don't shy away from your spiritual values. They energise your practice and bring a sense of commitment, a sense of spiritual commitment to your practice. This commitment brings authenticity/uniqueness to your practice" (Walsh, 2003).

As a Roman Catholic, I feel my faith comes alive in everything that I do. As I mentioned clearly in Chapter 1: Setting the Scene, my spiritual affiliation is a private area of my life, but nonetheless, a very important one too. I do not walk around with a bible and attempt to convert everyone I meet, but I do, in both my personal and professional my life, treat everyone with affection, love and kindness, a smile and to friends and most colleagues, a hug.

"...you are an endless source of help, encouragement and inspiration to me (and you make me laugh) ... I wouldn't be where I am today without you!"
(Extract from Appendix H)

I smile a lot. My smile to colleagues, friends and students shows the love I bring to others. A smile is always a good asset.

My philosophy is 'Do unto others as you would have done unto you.' I have always striven to be fair and hate upsetting people. I would like to think I treat everyone the same way, from team members and students to friends and family. The racial harassment incident was a testing time. I did find it difficult to apply this philosophy when I was not afforded the same respect, professionally and personally. However, I believe when one is treated shabbily by someone, then it is twice as important not to lose sight of one's own integrity. Besides, I believe that if one is good to other people, then one gets that back.

I always try to understand others, but that does not mean I have to accept all that people say and do. I am anxious not to hurt anyone by being conscious of what I say and what I do. This is sometimes an impossible goal, but to me it is important to avoid unnecessary hurt to others. I suppose this is part of my Christian and spiritual values.

How do I know I have improved in my leadership practice as a team leader?

"...Daisy, (you) have a natural ability to be completely honest with people - student or colleagues - and yet present criticism in this constructive way, which is part of why you're such a good leader."
(Reflective journal 17 March 2004)

I do not share the view that one is born with a 'natural ability'. But I do know I have 'learnt' through my leadership experience. I have learnt that one can communicate criticism in a constructive and positive way so that the receiver can see opportunities to improve their work. I have seen several team leaders flounder with their team

members through poor communication skills, which resulted, in part to ineffective teamwork where members feel unsupported.

How do I know I have had an influence on the practice of the lecturers as teachers-educators?

*"...(Your) feedback was useful as I received constructive feedback and advice.
...I felt at ease...I felt my views and comments were valued.
...Being new to the (teacher) job, I find receiving feedback extremely useful for two reasons. Firstly so I can discuss areas that I feel I need to improve upon with someone more experienced than myself. Secondly, sometimes I have felt that I am not cut out to be a teacher, and getting constructive/positive feedback has been essential to me carrying on!"*
(Extract from Appendix G - Response to feedback on Lesson Observation -)

Through my professional experience and knowledge I believe I have helped support and improve the teaching and learning of members of our team. But our intellectual knowledge is insufficient on its own; it is best mirrored in action and being (Marshall, 1992). It is said that actions speak louder than words. Our action is visible through our emotions and the way we respond to people and situations. Emotional Intelligence Quotient (EQ) tests are now widely and universally used by many businesses to evaluate staff and to test their emotional responses to various situations to determine their emotional strengths and weaknesses. According to Davis, (2004) being emotionally intelligent is a complex process. It requires give and take, learning and understanding, thoughts and action. It requires recognising how emotions, actions and words (ours and other people's) affect what is happening. Being emotionally intelligent involves getting our needs met while at the same time meeting the needs of those of other people. At times it feels like I have three different sets of families: My students, my team members and my own 'home' family. Each set of families requires

a different type of understanding, support and co-ordination from me - a different juggling act involving displays of different emotions and actions.

For an effective team, I believe it is crucial and important for the team leader to facilitate and create team spirit and to meet the needs of all our team members. In my view, an effective team is one, which is capable of helping others, and shows solidarity in team situations. D'Ambra, (2003) identifies four types of emotional intelligence: Rational, Intuitive, Relational and Practical. I took the EQ quiz test to find out my type. (see Appendix L). My profile matches the Relational EQ type.

"You're a sociable spirit with excellent people skills and your intelligence is based on understanding people around you. You empathise with others...and adapting to the needs of those around you. You interact well with people quickly grasping their needs and limitations. You are capable of helping others and showing them solidarity in a team situation and you encourage dialogue, never imposing your own views but allowing others to express themselves. You crave harmony and dislike any kind of conflict."

(Extract from Appendix L)

It was like reading about the true self. I could see my personality in each and every sentence the Relational Emotional Intelligent type. Scary? Yes and No. Yes, I felt a bit scared, and no, I could see immediately the weakness of having this type of emotional intelligence and the next part of the profile confirmed my thoughts.

"Your weak point - naivety, trusting others too much, trying to please everyone too much of the time."

(Extract from Appendix L)

"On the other hand I did not feel scared. I know that my strengths of being able to respond well to others and creating a good team spirit far outweigh my weaknesses and moreover, knowing my weaknesses I am in a better position to step back if I feel I'm putting too much trust in someone."

(Extract from Reflective Journal 19th Oct'03)

I find emotional situations quite overwhelming. The racial harassment incident, with all the anger, ranting and raving expressed by Maggie was clearly a situation in which

she showed she was unable to control her emotions. On the other hand, I chose to remain calm and I was totally in charge of my emotions and behaviour. Davis (2004) advocates that as individuals, we are always in control of our emotions and that they do not control us. To improve our emotional intelligence, he claims we have a choice to modify our direction and intensity of our emotions - how we perceive others, how we interpret their behaviour, what we feel about them and their actions and most importantly how we respond.

Staking my claim to creating a living educational theory

I am claiming that to have an effective team in vocational education, it helps if the team leader sustains the characteristics, traits and skills outlined below, within the team:

- Have a good understanding of the characteristics of the students who choose to further their studies in vocational education in FE Colleges and understand what drives them.

As a team, we have a "...good understanding of our students (their issues, their strengths, their workload)...We have the welfare of students uppermost " .
(Extract from Appendix A)

"I am just writing to thank you and the ICT team for the help and support given to X over the last two years...all the positive encouragement and coaxing has enabled him to achieve...leaving him with a sense of achievement rather than the failure he felt when he left school."
(Extract from Appendix B)

- Have an effective team that shares good practice; works well together; shares common values; has mutual trust and supports each other.

"...I am thoroughly enjoying working with such a fantastic group of people. Everyone, and I mean everyone, has been supportive, encouraging, inspirational, caring, helpful and most certainly entertaining - you all bring out the best in me.."
(Extract from Appendix H)

As a team we "... are open to each other and trust in each other's abilities... We can be open about individual/team 'catastrophes'... We have respect for each other... We look after each other "
(Extract from Appendix A)

- Be open to ideas from all team members, experienced or newly qualified.

"...you fully involve your staff in the work and the decisions needed to perform to the best of their ability...A particular strength is how you 'grow' team members and nurture them to develop into good practitioners and team players."
(Extract from Appendix E)

- Treat team members like valued friends and colleagues.

"Through regular meetings, discussions, communication and helping each other whilst working together makes the group supportive of each other."

"(As a team we) look after each other."

"(As a team) we can be open about individual/team 'catastrophes'"

"(As a team we show) humour in the face of sheer despair"

"(As a team we have) good fun."

- Be able to remain calm and assertive in difficult situations.

"Daisy was very calm and gave Maggie the chance to calm down..."
(Extract from, Appendix C)

- Have good listening skills.

"The atmosphere was friendly although the feedback was given in a very positive way. When we discussed a couple of points the observer was very interested to hear my views. I felt the observer was genuinely interested in what I had to say and it enabled me to feel free to discuss any matters I felt I needed to put across."
(Extract from Appendix J)

- Provide positive feedback and encouragement to both staff and students on a very regular basis.

"In relation to my feelings and views on my recent feedback as a new team member and a member of staff, I feel that the feedback given was beneficial and valuable...The experience of having feedback from a peer, team member or team leader is of great importance as it gives the observer the chance to reflect on their experience."

(Extract from Appendix K)

- Possess more than a willingness to want to work with disaffected learners. Be passionate about promoting vocational academic education.

"Very professional - have genuine commitment to achievement and welfare of students".

(Extract from Appendix A)

I believe I have a privileged life working with such a wonderful team, but how do I know I am creating my own living educational theory?

By conducting this action research into my leadership practice, Whitehead (1993) concedes that a living educational theory of professional practice can be constructed as practitioner knowledge is generated (Heibert, Gallimore and Stigler, 2002). The authors describe practitioner knowledge as the kinds of knowledge practitioners generate through active participation and reflection on their own practice. In other words, the 'living I'. This dissertation sets out a claim to recognise and appreciate my own leadership growth and learning as a team leader in the academic and professional knowledge base of vocational academic education. Heibert et al, (2002) identify several characteristics that the practitioner knowledge must take on for it to become a professional knowledge base for academics. They propose that professional knowledge must be made public, represented in a form that enables it to be accumulated and shared with other members of the profession and it must be continually verified and improved.

I am claiming to know the educational development of my leadership practice through data and evidence gathered during this action research study via reflective journal and feedback from our team members and verified by critical friends. I will be subjecting my enquiries to public scrutiny by making it available for publication. Other team leaders in similar vocational contexts can relate directly, wholly or in part, to my practice (Whitehead, 1993).

While the concepts of effective leadership continue to be subjects of research and journal articles, I will continue to reflect on my practice. With 'team communication' being the next focus of my leadership practice, I will continue to grow. I will continue to develop and apply what I learn from my research to my practice (Marshall, 1992). My social intent in improving and understanding what I do as a team leader has certainly increased and I hope this has been made apparent throughout this dissertation.

Limitations of Process and Outcomes of data collection methods

Reliability and validity of questionnaire

In any research, the use of questionnaire to collect data always poses questions in terms of the reliability and validity of the respondent's response. I used the Likert scales to construct one of my questionnaires. The Likert scales provide more precise information about the respondents' degree of agreement or disagreement and this, agrees Oppenheim (2001) tends to be the respondents' preferred choice of questionnaire.

In terms of reliability and validity of questionnaires, Oppenheim, (2001), sees the concepts of these two technical terms as interconnected and overlapping in their meanings. Validity, for example, may be concerned with the factual here-and-now. He calls this "*concurrent validity*", i.e. is the respondent telling us the truth? Reliability refers to the purity and consistency of a measurement, to repeatability, to the probability of obtaining the same results again if the measure were to be duplicated (Oppenheim, 2001, p.144).

The problematic nature of concurrent validity in qualitative research such as action research is well documented (Philips, 1987). The respondents are my work colleagues and members of the team and I am very aware of the problems associated with the 'biases' of responses. The respondents were asked not to disclose the identity of their course or their name. The questions were also formulated in such a way so that the responses could not be associated with specific respondents. I can therefore claim, without hesitation, to know that the responses are honest, credible and believable (Eisner, 1991)

Reflecting on my reflective journal: limitations of process and outcomes

When we engage in reflective processes that focus on ourselves, issues of validity are important because we cannot be sure of the accuracy of what we see (Feldman, 2003). Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2000) argue that provided the recorded accounts of events in our journal are authentic, *there is no reason why they should not be used as scientific tools in explaining people's actions.* (p.294). Whilst the journal is one of the sources of triangulation in my study, as the researcher in this action research, I am

also part of the data collection team. Therefore, there is the possibility that my influence on the interpretation of the situations reflected upon in the reflective journal may be biased. So that the judgement of my work is not held to be only my opinion, I enlisted the help of two critical friends at the outset of the enquiry. By making my work available to them for critical scrutiny, they helped to validate the quality of my research (McNiff, 2002).

Anyone who has pursued action research and taken time out to build a reflective journal knows how time consuming this activity can be. At times I struggled to interpret and narrate my every day experiences, to record in my journal. In other words, making sense of what was happening to me. I struggled in identifying which experience to write about. What makes an experience more significant than another? How do I know I am interpreting my experience correctly? As mentioned earlier, by subjecting my representations to critical friends, their professional judgements add validity to the quality of my research. But I find that sometimes critical friends, although some were team leaders from other programme areas, therefore drawn from the same professional circle (McNiff, 2002), were 'detached' from my experience. They were unable to 'connect' with what I was going through.

Ethical Issues

In Chapter 1: Setting the Scene, I expressed my desire, as a 'knowledge-creator', to share my experience and embodied knowledge as a team leader with other team leaders, perhaps, in similar vocational context. Before putting my research in the public domain, principally for on-line access, I am aware of the additional ethical

issues in terms of access by a wider public audience, this entails. It is essential that these issues are carefully addressed. I have a duty to protect all individuals and participants who are mentioned within these texts.

"This questionnaire is designed to protect your identity. You are not required to disclose your name."
(Extract from Appendix A)

"You are not required to disclose your identity and your response, which should be wordprocessed could be used in my dissertation report."
(Extract from Appendix D)

Protecting individual rights, seeking the participant's agreement, preserving their anonymity and gaining their permission to do the research are ethical issues I considered and adhered to during the study. The covering letter (Appendix A) and e-mail (Appendix D) explaining the purpose of the research and seeking the participants' permission and assistance in my research address important ethical issues. Cohen et al (2000, p.62), observed that

the essence of anonymity is that information provided by participants should in no way reveal their identity.

Franfort-Nachmias and Nachmias (1992), further reinforced the importance of anonymity,

"... the obligation to protect the anonymity of research participants and to keep research data confidential is all-inclusive."

In Appendix B, the addresses and names of individuals have been blurred. For this document, verbal permission was given to use the entirety of the letter. Indeed, the parents of student X considered it to be an honour to publish their child's achievement. However, without written authorisation to confirm this, each

individual identity had to be protected. In Appendix C, D, E and H the names, other than my own have also been blurred. Written permission (Appendix O) to use Appendix C was given by all individuals involved. In the Reflective Journal, I have used fictitious names throughout. Blurring the names would have further reduced the authenticity of the Reflective Journal. As mentioned earlier, it has been necessary to take these ethical measures because the dissertation would be presented in the public domain, being accessible on-line as well as in the library. I believe I have address all ethical issues accordingly.

As a researcher, I have a responsibility to protect participant individuals because insensitive handling of their comments, feedback and observations of my leadership may damage the trust they have put in me. By requesting the respondents to word-process instead of hand-write their response, I was consciously active in further protecting their individual rights and preserving their anonymity. Being their team leader, taking this responsibility is even more significant. Furthermore, knowing their identity is anonymous; our team members can be more honest in their responses.

The fact that the respondents did not disclose their names enabled them to be open and honest about their feelings. But should they have given their name? Had they given their name, then I could adjust my practice to better suit individual needs. The group sample was small; does that enable me to identify the respondents through their responses?

As my dissertation draws near to a close, I wish to stand back and consider how this end can now become a new beginning in my life as a team leader. In the next chapter, Chapter 5: The Outcomes, I summarise the strengths and limitations of my self-study action research and from a practitioner's perspective, discuss the implications of my research in relation to the wider fields of educational knowledge - the professional knowledge base.