

Chapter 5: The Outcomes

In this final chapter, I summarise the outcomes of my action research dissertation by discussing the strengths and limitations of the study in relation to the wider fields of educational knowledge - namely practitioner knowledge versus professional knowledge - from a team leader's perspective. I conclude that to be a team leader in vocational academic education, one must have the passion and motivation to work with less academically gifted students.

The Conclusion: There are no such things as problems; simply opportunities for solutions

The narrative accounts about my leadership practice presented in this dissertation show the challenges I faced as a team leader in vocational education. The challenges, whether positive or negative, provided useful learning experience. Through my reflective journal, I thought intensely about the experiences in my life that shape and question my faith and my values. These reflections are interpreted within the text of my dissertation as I attempt to use them to create my own account and understanding of events and situations. I have made every effort to interpret all contributions of data and evidence as faithfully as I can. I acknowledge that this can present a limitation and contribute towards a weakness of the study as I bring my own biases into the interpretation.

In writing this dissertation, describing my experiences, thoughts and reflections, I am claiming to know my own educational development. I am claiming that other team leaders in similar educational contexts could relate to some of my experiences. My practitioner knowledge in terms of my leadership practice and experience might be useful for practice by other team leaders because it developed in response to specific events in my practice. Perhaps giving comfort or an idea or maybe a point to disagree with, in order to discover what they themselves truly believed or experienced in their own context (Heibert et al, 2002). After all, action research encourages us, the practitioners to ask critical questions about our own practice and find the answers for ourselves (McNiff, 2002).

In addressing the problems of practice, Heibert et al, (2002) recognise the limitations that knowledge linked with practice is grounded in the context of the situation, setting or environment. As such, they recommend that the processes that yield knowledge of this sort are collaborative and involve practitioners working and engaging together to create professional knowledge that is linked to practice. Collaboration - a process considered central to successful professional development programs - ensures that what is discovered will be communicable because it is discovered in the context of group discussion (Heibert et al, 2002).

Whilst there is no doubt that practitioner knowledge possesses positive features (Whitehead, 1993, Heibert et al, 2002), there are shortcomings [*to practitioner knowledge*] that have prevented it from becoming a knowledge base (professional knowledge) for the teaching profession. Professional knowledge must be made public and be presented in such a way that it can be communicated among colleagues. Collaboration therefore seems to be the answer for the development of professional knowledge, not because collaboration provides the practitioners with social support groups, but because collaboration forces their participants to make their knowledge public and be understood by colleagues (Heibert et al, 2002). I do not deny the importance of collaborative research. But I also believe there is an increasingly growing awareness of the richness of practitioner's knowledge, which is context specific and to which many could relate to if put in the public domain. For this reason, in making public my dissertation, I believe I am contributing, in part, to the professional knowledge base. In addition, throughout this dissertation I have attempted, as much as possible, to represent leadership theories with examples. Leading alongside members of our team, preparing the environment and creating

opportunities for growth, I demonstrated characteristics of transformational leadership, and by playing an active role (as Vocational GCE ICT consultant) in shaping the vocational 'A' level GCE ICT with the government education body - QCA - I am keeping abreast of instructional leadership for the benefit of our team (Sawbridge, 2000).

Theories offer abstract knowledge that transcends particular contexts and ensure that the knowledge rises above idiosyncratic technique (Heibert et al, 2002). Theories, therefore, are hallmarks of professional knowledge (Yinger, 1999) whilst examples keep the theories grounded in practice and reveal the meaning of verbal propositions (Heibert et al, 2002).

Being a team leader in FE is a stimulating and challenging job. It can be repetitive, terribly stressful and sometimes wonderfully fun. No two days are the same. One does not know what each day will bring, what conflict to deal with, what different or life-changing experience one would bring to the students and the team. There are fantastic, gratifying and exhilarating moments. Some of the good moments come at the end of the academic year. Seeing the students' achievement at their 'graduation' ceremony, how they have progressed, their growth in maturity and the positive change in their ability and understanding of ICT; the thank you card (Appendix I), the flowers, the box of chocolates. The gifts may be small in gesture but are big in meaning. Acknowledgements and thanks (Appendix B) come in various shapes and forms.

But being a team leader can also seriously damage your health. Dealing with conflict and with difficult team members can be draining and very stressful. Life can throw

up some tough situations. In examining my own practice and my coping strategies, I imagine a way forward. For some of the time, the way forward could be an encouragement from a critical friend or a suggestion from one of our team members - *'As a team, we could benefit from having a more structured approach to new staff'* (Appendix A). I try it out, monitor what I do, seek evidence of improvement and review and evaluate the action (McNiff, 2002). I am creating a living form of educational theory (Whitehead, 1993). By using action research as an intervention in my personal practice, I believe my mental, physical and spiritual makeup have been strengthened and improved to cope with stressful events. I have been challenged to acknowledge my racial identity in my study. I certainly feel better equipped to deal with the Maggie of this world.

To be a team leader (and indeed any leader) in the twenty-first century means so many things to so many people. Coming from a diversity of backgrounds and upbringings, educational standpoints and value-based dimensions, this intense variety of perspectives can be grounds both for excited sharing and vivid disagreement. And when confronted with contradictions that question our leadership style and value stance, we can either be overwhelmed by the discrepancies or reaffirmed in our choice of leadership. But, it is precisely this wealth of opinion, this multitude of visions, that, through their sharing, can help us grow in our own leadership style knowing each one of us is unique in our own ways and understanding. Through the sharing of ideas, that understanding can strengthen more deeply our own perceptions.

As more and more students become disaffected and disinterested in schools, vocational academic education in FE offers a lifeline, another opportunity to fulfil

their potential as an individual. I firmly believe that society can do better than to judge disaffected and disinterested school leavers according to their GCSE results. Judging learners by their academic ability is not necessarily and not always a measurement of their capability as an individual. This is confirmed by Tomlinson (2004) reform proposals for 14 to 19 year-old qualifications in which he proposes a new education framework that would cater for students of all abilities, giving equal status to vocational and academic study. In the meantime, the availability of a choice of vocational programme in FE Colleges ensures that non-academic learners have an outlet to pursue their chosen vocation or get help to make a more informed career choice. In my view, the leaders of vocational programmes must be attuned to the needs of these students.

It is imperative that team leaders in such vocational settings understand the nature of these students and guide their learning accordingly through working examples of teaching and learning strategies that place the learner at the heart of it all. A team leader that can carry out performance reviews on team members in a holistic fashion; a team leader that can lead educational innovation and be prepared to try out new ideas; a team leader that is able to reflect critically and be open to scrutiny; a team leader that can motivate the team to secure and maintain high quality student experiences and provide professional support and coordinate teaching. As Mortimer et al, (1988) and Horsfall (2001) point out, improvements in educational outcomes provide a strong link between the relationship of team activity, lead by effective team leaders, and learner outcomes.

Part of the deal of this dissertation is a commitment to working on myself; to aim to understand my life; to improve what I am. The notes of reflection in the journal

show this process. The lessons learnt are always helpful. One of life's best lessons comes from learning from failure. Knowing our weaknesses and acting on them will enable us to turn them into strengths.

Each one of us lives according to our own values. Action research, according to McNiff (2002) begins with values. I believe in the philosophy of hard work, self-belief and lifelong learning for all, regardless of family background, ethnicity and racial identity and respect, both for self and for others - treat others as we would like to be treated. My parents imbued these values in me. I was inspired and spurred on by a driven and remarkable mother. As a strong and loving mother, she is my greatest motivator. She inspires me in my daily life.

There is still much to learn about team leadership and this dissertation is by no means the end of my journey. Life experience informs our view and we either change according to our perception of our experience or ignore the experience altogether. Emotional Intelligence plays a crucial role in our ability to respond and control our behaviour and action. We are in charge of our behaviour. Being a team leader teaches me, frustrates me, supports me and confronts me. It is a choice that I made three years ago when I was appointed and continue to make each day, because I believe I have grown through the trials and triumphs of my experiences.

With the documentation in this dissertation, I am hoping that I am contributing to the notion of more effective team leadership in vocational education in FE. I know that we are all unique individuals with different coping strategies, values and levels of commitment and motivation. But I hope that team leaders in FE throughout the UK and beyond will be able to identify with my experience as a team leader. My

professional development in understanding more about how to improve my leadership in vocational education in FE continues. My understanding of my leadership practice, which began three years ago, has only just started. But I am sure that where I am now is the place that I am meant to grow from, with team members around me that both help and hinder, and situations that will both frustrate and liberate. I have a lot more still to learn both personally and professionally. My leadership journey has only begun.

I hope that having read my experiences, you too will grow through your own unique experiences.

Team leader is not a job that I do. I am a team leader.

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