

## EXPLORING SOME THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS OF PRACTITIONER-BASED INQUIRY RESEARCH

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**Abstract:** There are many practitioners in organisational settings and their practitioner-based inquiry learnings are often not published in journals. In this practitioner report some reflections of a practitioner-based inquiry research conducted in a selected organisational setting (eThekweni Municipality) in the developing country of South Africa are described. A mixed-methods research approach was adopted: (1) knowledge claim – pragmatism; (2) strategy of inquiry – transformative procedures; and (3) methods of data collection and analysis – secondary data and analysis were used. From this survey, in which practitioner oriented knowledge is reported, the author suggests that encouragement be given for more practitioner-based inquiry research.

**Keywords:** Information and Communication Technology (ICT), practitioner-based inquiry, practitioner-research, reflection and practice.

## EXPLORING SOME THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS OF PRACTITIONER-BASED INQUIRY RESEARCH

### 1. INTRODUCTION

There are many practitioners based and employed in organisational settings and their practitioner-based inquiry learnings are often not published in journals. This practitioner publishing 'shortcoming' does not encourage learning which is relevant to real-life practice in organisations. The objective of this practitioner report is therefore to document some reflections of a practitioner-based inquiry research conducted in a selected organisational setting in the developing country of South Africa. This may serve to encourage more practitioner reflection and facilitate practice learnings and development in organisational settings. Furthermore documenting practitioner experience and reflections may also serve as an opportunity for peer-review in assessing Information and Communication Technology (ICT) contributions to development goals in a developing country. South Africa is a developing country.

A practitioner is "someone who holds down a job in some particular area [such as ICT] and is at the same time, involved in carrying out systematic enquiry which is of relevance to the job" (Robson, 2002: 534). Action research (AR) is a reflective process of progressive problem solving by an individual (such as a practitioner) with others in a team to improve the manner in which they address issues. Practitioner-based research implies an openness to any appropriate methodology that will inform the practitioner whereas AR implies the critical and reflective use of an AR methodology to inform practice and contribute to the field of knowledge through reflective writing (Hardman, 2009). Donald Schön (1930-1997), who was an influential thinker in developing the theory and practice of reflective professional learning, is an advocate of practitioner-based inquiry. The objective of this report is to explore some theoretical foundations of practitioner-based inquiry research.

This practitioner report is structured as follows: A background to reflection and practice are introduced. The practitioner-research concept is then discussed. Thereafter research design for the author's practitioner-based inquiry is presented. The research setting of eThekweni Municipality in South Africa is described. Reflecting on the author's practitioner-based inquiry research is then given. Finally some concluding remarks are presented.

### 2. REFLECTION AND PRACTICE

The notions of reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action were central to Schön's (Schön, 1983) work. Reflection requires space in the present and the promise of space in the future (Smith, 1994: 150). Reflective practice is therefore enacted. Practitioners usually need to combine reflection and practice when addressing practice issues in organisational settings. According to Price (2004: 47), the purpose of reflection is threefold:

- To understand one's self, one's motives, perceptions, attitudes, values and feelings. Practitioners understand themselves and in so doing become more open to understand the different perceptions of others;

- Reflective practice is based on the notion that everyone constructs meanings for and explanations about events (and some of these may be misguided); and
- To reflect on the possible consequences of one's actions.

Schön (1983) brought 'reflection' to the centre of an understanding of what professionals do. In the epistemology of practice, "the knowledge inherent in practice is to be understood as artful doing" (Schön, 1983). Given the purpose of reflection and the characteristics of reflective practice, it is argued that they can be seen as an approach to encourage practitioner learning and practice development in an organisational setting.

### 3. PRACTITIONER-RESEARCH

Practitioners often apply theories and exemplars to their own experiences and situations in organisational settings. What exactly is practitioner-research? Practitioner-research can be identified as "a systematic form of enquiry that is collective, collaborative, self-reflective, critical and undertaken by the participants of the inquiry" (McCutcheon and Jung, 1990). In a practitioner-research culture, individual enquiry is encouraged. The underlying question on the mind of a practitioner researcher is: Given the continuing technical change in an organisation, how can the researcher improve what is happening in a selected environment? Schön's seminal book, *The Reflective Practitioner* (1983), challenges practitioners to reconsider the role of technical knowledge in developing professional excellence. Given that the author has a technical ICT background, is employed as an ICT Research Analyst at eThekweni Municipality in South Africa, is a *professional* member of the Computer Society of South Africa, he actively participates in contents and contribution to academic conferences and journals, it is contended that he is 'qualified' to undertake practitioner-based inquiry that is relevant to real-life practice and for improving what is happening in the selected organisational setting of eThekweni Municipality.

Methodologies (eg. AR, case study, mixed methods) used in research provide a systematic approach to study the issues or problems in an organisational setting. AR, case study and mixed methods all emphasise the importance of the context and explicitly support the concept of practitioner research. The subject or area of study and the selected methodology are largely defined by the needs of the organisational work environment where the practitioner researcher is subject to a variety of personal, interpersonal and organisational influences (Costley and Armsby, 2007: 132). Robson (2000) suggests that practitioners require a high level of flexibility in their choice of methods (eg. primary or secondary data and analysis) and tools to help ensure credibility and dependability in the complex and context-bound research situation.

Research and development undertaken for practice-led research projects are located within a real-life social and work-based organisational community and give tangible meaning rather than in a hypothetical or devised scenario (Costley and Armsby, 2007: 132). In this case the focus is real-life research and a reflection on real-life practical and pragmatic activities which makes work meaningful to practitioner researchers. Gray (2004) suggests that this meaningfulness and the implicit understanding of the organisational context are starting points for practitioner researchers to theorise and become more reflective in their practice to enable an outcome (eg. an improvement to what is happening in a selected environment of an organisational setting) to emerge. It entails the practitioner to build new understandings in the situation that is unfolding. Schön (1983: 68) suggests that the "practitioner ... reflects on the phenomenon before

him, and on the prior understandings which have been implicit in his behaviour” (Schön, 1983: 68).

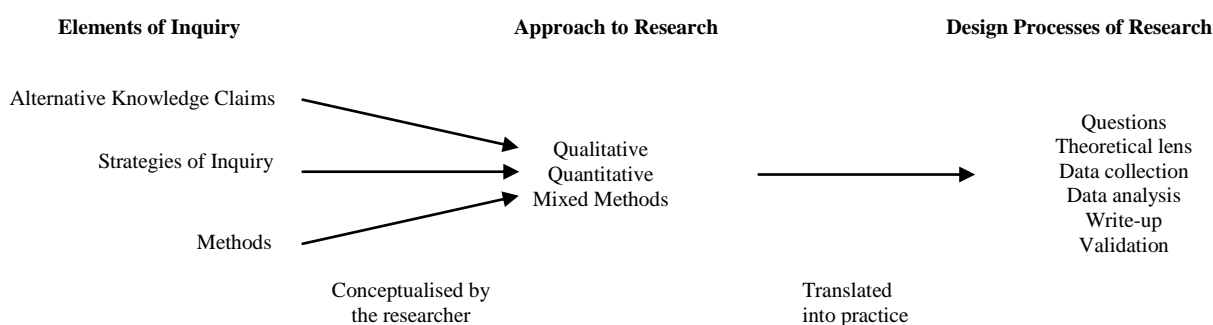
Practice-led research projects usually involve a meshing of practical and intellectual capabilities that rely on the context of the community of practice in which the research practitioner is engaged (Costley and Armsby, 2007: 132). It is within each research practitioner’s context that a pragmatic analysis and a synthesis of empirical and theoretical knowledge that a justification for the selected research methodology or approach should be made. In order to address the real-life problem in an organisational setting, the research design for practitioner-based inquiry is now discussed.

#### 4. RESEARCH DESIGN FOR PRACTITIONER-BASED INQUIRY

Philosophical ideas remain largely ‘hidden’ in research but they still influence the practice of research and need to be identified. The question is thus posed: When adopting a theoretical perspective (ie. philosophical stance) on research, what lies behind the methodology in question? In order to answer this, Cresswell (2003: 5) suggests three questions central to the design of the research:

- What **knowledge claims** will be made by the researcher?;
- What **strategies of inquiry** will inform the procedures?; and
- What **methods of data collection and analysis** will be used?

From these three elements of inquiry (ie. knowledge claims, strategies of inquiry and methods of data collection and analysis), they combine to form different approaches to research – see Figure 1.



**Figure 1: Knowledge claims, Strategies of Inquiry and Methods of data collection and analysis and the Design Processes of Research** (Adapted from Cresswell, 2003: 5)

From Figure 1, a researcher can identify whether a quantitative, qualitative or mixed methods approach to an inquiry should be adopted. Some researchers adopt a pluralistic approach to using multiple methodologies. Knowledge claims, strategies of inquiry and methods of data collection and analysis are now discussed:

##### 4.1. Knowledge claims

A knowledge claim means that the researcher commences with certain perspectives about how the practitioner will learn and what he will learn during the practitioner inquiry. Cresswell (2003: 6) suggests four schools of thought about knowledge claims:

- Postpositivism<sup>1</sup> – deals with the ‘scientific methods’ or quantitative research and reflects a deterministic philosophy;
- Constructivism – deals with interpretivism ie. addressing the ‘process’ of interaction among individuals while realising that their own background shapes their interpretation;
- Advocacy – deals with advocating for an agenda to help marginalised people and that the inquiry should be blended with a political agenda; and
- Pragmatism – deals with actions, situations and consequences rather than antecedent conditions. There is a concern with applications ‘what works’ (*sic*) and solutions to problems.

Cresswell (2003: 12) suggests that pragmatism provides a basis for inquirers drawn from both qualitative and quantitative assumptions when they engage in research and researchers are ‘free’ to choose from the methods, techniques and procedures of research that best meet their needs and purposes. Pragmatism allows an openness to appropriate methodologies in a mixed methods study.

#### **4.2. Strategies of inquiry**

Strategies associated with mixed methods include combining field methods eg. observations and interviews (qualitative data) with traditional surveys (quantitative data). The practitioner needs to engage with a situation in an organisational setting. Since all methods have limitations, researchers believe that biases in any single method can ‘neutralise’ the biases of other methods. Cresswell (2003: 17) suggests three general strategies for a mixed methods approach:

- Sequential procedures – the researcher seeks to elaborate on or expand the findings of one method within another method;
- Concurrent procedures – the researcher converges qualitative and quantitative data in order to provide a comprehensive analysis of the research problem; and
- Transformative procedures – the researcher uses a theoretical lens as an overarching perspective within a design that contains both qualitative data and quantitative data. This lens provides a framework for topics of interest and changes anticipated by the study. Within this lens there can be a data collection method that involves a sequential or a concurrent approach.

#### **4.3. Methods of data collection and analysis**

For a research approach, the specific methods of data collection and analysis must be identified. For example, for a mixed methods approach, Cresswell (2003: 17) suggests both open- and closed-ended questions, multiple forms of data drawing on all possibilities and statistical text analysis. For a mixed methods approach, the researcher tends to base claims on pragmatic grounds, employs strategies of inquiries that involve collecting data either simultaneously or sequentially and data collection that involves both numeric and text information to best understand the research problem (Cresswell, 2003: 18-19). Against this backdrop, the author now reflects on a practitioner-based inquiry research (using a mixed methods approach) conducted in the selected organisational setting of eThekweni Municipality.

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<sup>1</sup> This term is more generally referred to as positivism. For a discussion of both terms, see Jackson and Søren (2007: 247-266).

## **5. eTHEKWINI MUNICIPALITY IN SOUTH AFRICA**

eThekwini Municipality is the local authority governing the City of Durban, South Africa. Durban is South Africa's major port and the second largest industrial hub after Johannesburg. Durban is becoming recognised for its ability to contribute towards building a knowledge and learning network not just on the African continent but on an international scale (Making City Strategy Come Alive, 2004).

eThekwini Municipality comprises six clusters (excluding the Office of the City Manager): Treasury, Governance, Sustainable Development & City Enterprises, Corporate & Human Resources, Procurement & Infrastructure and Health, Safety & Social Services) and employs approximately 18,000 employees. For the 2008/9 financial year eThekwini Municipality has a capital budget of ZAR5.9 billion (approximately €0,39 billion) and an operating budget of ZAR17.50 billion (approximately €1.17 billion). eThekwini Municipality has some 6,000 networked desktops (personal computers, thin clients and laptops).

During 2005 eThekwini Municipality embarked on a knowledge management (KM) initiative and the practitioner was (and continues to be) part of this KM workgroup initiative. Joining the KM workgroup was on a voluntary basis. The KM workgroup comprises some fourteen employees from different clusters/departments within eThekwini Municipality's organisational setting. The purpose of this KM workgroup initiative was to 'explore' whether existing knowledge-sharing processes exist in eThekwini Municipality and to make recommendations towards a KM strategy for eThekwini Municipality. Exploring this real-life phenomenon in eThekwini Municipality and the author's reflection on the practitioner's research undertaken are now given.

## **6. SOME REFLECTIONS ON PRACTITIONER-BASED INQUIRY RESEARCH**

A detailed account of the practitioner's inquiry research is reflected in Averweg (2007). The mixed-methods research approach adopted in the practitioner's research was as follows:

- Knowledge claim – pragmatism;
- Strategy of inquiry – transformative procedures; and
- Methods of data collection and analysis – secondary data and analysis were used.

During the inquiry, the researcher was mindful that practitioner-research should be self-reflective and critical. From the notion of reflection-in-action, the practitioner reflected "on the phenomenon before him, and on the prior understandings which have been implicit in his behaviour" (Schön, 1983: 68). The researcher made use of a theoretical lens or perspective to guide the selected study. The researcher used theory inductively (as in qualitative research) and deductively (as in quantitative research). This pragmatic approach was to ensure that the researcher drew from both qualitative and quantitative assumptions. This act of reflecting-on-action enabled the practitioner to spend time exploring why he acted as he did. In doing so, the practitioner developed a set of questions and ideas about his activities and professional practice.

The survey on which the researcher reported was practitioner oriented knowledge. The researcher's survey design, process and results were presented as an exemplar of

practitioner oriented knowledge and should be seen in the context of informing the researcher's study. While the study was a practitioner-based inquiry, the researcher was mindful of "the threats to the quality of ... [the] data by being too close to ... [the] research setting" (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2006: 99). This served as grounding of professional knowledge (as advocated by Schön). When the author reflects thereon, the researcher was able to construct valid meanings from the research inquiry.

On reflecting-on-action, the researcher had to find a compromise between the ideals of good research and the numerous practical constraints that present themselves in real-life research settings (Terre Blanche and Durrheim, 1999: 36). The researcher had to look to 'what' and 'how' to research the real-life problem. This implies that from the practitioner's professional experiences, meanings for the events and the consequences of the practitioner's actions were taken into account. There was a clear relationship between reflection in and on action. By the author reflecting thereon, there was an emphasis of learning through a practice episode experience. Furthermore this has resulted in this practitioner report documenting the reflection of a practitioner-based inquiry research.

## 7. CONCLUDING REMARKS

It is in the interests of practitioner-based inquiry research to find ways of encouraging learning that is relevant to real-life practice and which does not require unduly tortuous and ideological debate about the merits of reflection. Practitioners are in essence, pragmatic. The wheel of learning consists of question, theory, test and reflection (Handy, 1989).

Practitioner-generated research is the way a particular area's content (such as ICT) will commonly be produced and out of which theories about practice can be formulated. Such academic theories about practice can then serve as a way for future practitioners to learn and apply new knowledge to current and future practice. The author bases his comments on his active participation in contents and contribution to academic conferences and journals and this practitioner-based inquiry reflection. These are two different research traditions and it is contended that each field can learn from the other. When the author reflects thereon, it is suggested that encouragement be given for more practitioner-based inquiry research.

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