

Plan of small-scale enquiry focussing on the promotion of student ownership of learning and the development of the student voice in the classroom in order to create a positive working environment.

Toni Bowden

Westwood St Thomas School

MEE

March 2003

Introduction and Context

After spending time researching the ideas of Wells, Vygotsky and Crooks¹, I have been ever impressed by the notion that the promotion of a positive environment within the classroom is vital to the success of the students. Through active engagement with these theories I have identified that there are three key influences on the success of positivity in the reality of the classroom:

- *Teacher* – becoming a ‘living model’ of positive engagement in talk and learning through use of body language, verbal signals and decision making.
- *External* – support mechanisms for both the student and teacher must be consistent and realistic in order for both stakeholders to feel secure in their environment.
- *Student* – an active and purposeful experience must be enjoyed by the students when partaking in lessons; they must feel valued and respected in their environment.²

Previously I have focussed my attention on improving my own role as facilitator within the classroom. In view of improving the learning of students within a particular Year 10 GCSE English group I have given further reflection on what I believe to be the key influences on positivity in the classroom, and I feel that a switch of focus is now necessary. I feel that issues regarding access to the curriculum are seriously preventing this group from engaging positively with the subject, and therefore I believe that my focus should now be placed firmly on what the students want to achieve from their learning³, rather than on what they are required to do by the examining board.

The issue now becomes ‘How do I facilitate⁴ the way we engage with learning?’ Rather than, ‘How do I improve their academic attainment?’ This is a result of watching the students’ horrific drudge through their studies of Henry V. The constant struggle to meet a preordained standard of ‘attainment’, rather than to enthuse over a basic engagement with a compelling narrative almost made the experience more painful for me than it was for the students. Five times a week I watched the dour expressions enter and the vacant, confused rabble leave; and I battled on. The constant internal question I posed was: ‘Why can’t they just try and engage with the lesson?’

¹ I focussed my preliminary research on their ideas about the ways in which social interaction should be encouraged through the use of group work to develop students’ ability to express and build ideas and personal theories.

² I previously explored this idea briefly and found it an interesting enquiry still to be developed within my own practice: ‘the lack of constructive communication between students was limiting and restricting their independence and ownership of their learning’ (Bowden, 2002)

³ University of Cambridge STUDENT VOICE website states that ‘Pupils learn more effectively as they acquire a fuller understanding of why teachers’ choose particular strategies and methods.’

⁴ Alfie Kohn states on her web page that ‘facilitating’ is a much more active role than the term suggests and that learning is encouraged through a sense of control: ‘I’m in control of putting students in control.’

However, the answer all too quickly ensued: 'Because they don't care!' It was only on further reflection of this issue, in the context of a tear-fuelled teacher's weekly confessional, that the much more vital question came into my mind: 'Well how can I make them care?' Immediately within that loaded question there is the overwhelming focus on the 'I', off balanced by the choice of 'make', a strange concept when placed in my utopia of positivity in a shared experience of enthusiasm and engagement.

And therefore it arrived, the realisation that at present my values are an empty vessel, carrying hope, yet not quite reaching fulfilment. This is because of a simple fact, sharing is a two way process, however at present, with my ever so selfish focus, I seem to have discounted the important 'we' in the classroom. So I finally arrive at what could be a key cause of discontent for the students: why should we care when we do not feel that we are active agents in our own learning? We are doing this because the teacher is telling us we have to, in a way that she thinks is right, what if it isn't right for me? The final word in that reflection stands out like a burning beacon of realisation for me as an action researcher, how can I help develop the students' sense of self in the classroom so that they feel they are active participants in a communal journey of learning?

Alfie Kohn⁵ identifies that students of any age can experience a 'burn out', or become disaffected, as it is better known. Students experiencing these difficulties 'just go through the motions of learning, handing in uninspired work and counting the minutes until freedom.' Kohn sees this as a result of their lack of ownership when taking part in a lesson, as they 'follow someone else's rules, study someone else's curriculum, and submit continually to someone else's evaluation.' I agree with Kohn to a certain extent, that this is the result of powerlessness, as the students fail to experience a sense of 'self-determination', which ultimately results in disaffection. Through the research of 'the four key realms in which students make academic decisions...what, how, how well, and why they learn', I will attempt to develop their sense of responsibility and control over their learning by 'giving them responsibility'.

Although the main aim of this research will be to facilitate the independence of the focus group as powerbrokers in their learning experience, more focussed objectives of the process can be identified:

- The students will identify the classroom as a forum for purposeful debate in which their voice can be respected⁶.
- The students will recognise that they have an element of control when attempting to meet common goals.
- The teacher will be identified as a facilitator, rather than as a central and purely authoritative force in the classroom.

⁵ All references to Kohn from: <http://www.alfiekohn.org.teaching/cfc.htm>

⁶ Tierney, as quoted on <http://www.edfac.unimelb.edu.au/DSME/lps/assets/Williams&ClarkeSA.pdf>, describes the importance of hearing this voice as they 'historically have been silenced or excluded'.

- The students will recognise that respect is a reward that is earned through trust and communal effort determined by the choices they make as individuals.

These are objectives that will mainly be measured through the development of relationships and attitudes within the classroom, however it will be of great importance to monitor the effect this has on the students' approach to their studies of the curriculum.

Nature of the Process

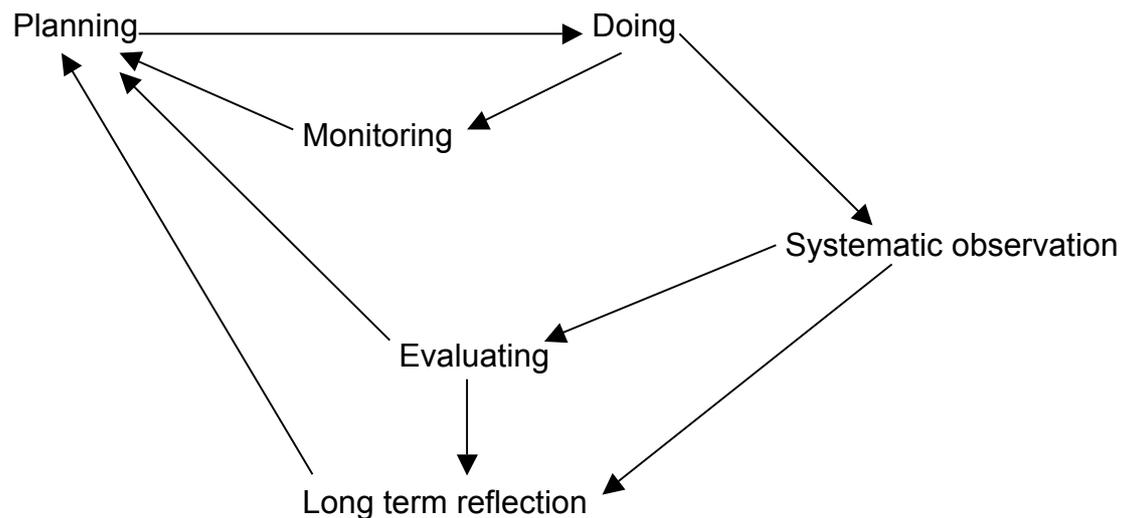
The key element of Action Research that draws me towards this method of enquiry is the idea that 'change'⁷ is to be implemented in an attempt to improve and develop my practice. This ethos supports my core values, as I believe that all research into my practice must have a 'real' and positive effect on the progress of my students. I am supported in this belief as McNiff *et al* (1996:14) state that Action Research 'should not be used as a manipulative device but as an educational means of bringing about good social order for all concerned.' By this I understand that I am attempting to create a more productive and positive environment in which the students experience a valued and critical role. This is achieved through the development my own learning through the use of the Action Research.

One notion of Action Research the ideas and theories are described as: 'information', this undisclosed data 'is collected, shared, discussed, recorded in some way, evaluated and acted upon; and that from time to time, this sequence of events forms the basis of reviews of progress.' (Cohen and Manion 1994:192) What strikes me about this process is its disconnected approach and non-committal sense of purpose. This lack of purpose is highlighted in the use of 'in some way' and 'time to time'. I see this as a direct conflict with my own idea of what Action Research entails, which is a much more determined and motivated enquiry. The approach to the question of the enquiry must indeed be flexible in 'the messy world of real practice'⁸, however the motivation for the research must surely come from the core values of the practitioner, which may develop but must surely remain constant. I am therefore drawn towards the more active and reflective idea of Action Research as discussed by Griffith. In this variation on the process the spiral, or cyclical nature of the research takes on a more 'educational', or enriching experience for the practitioner-researcher⁹.

⁷ McNiff *et al* (1996:12/13) and Cohen and Manion (1994:188)

⁸ Griffith, as quoted by McNiff *et al* (1996:22) shares my appreciation of action research taking place within a real life setting and the unpredictable nature of practice (Bowden, 2002)

⁹ Diagram taken from McNiff *et al* (1996:22)



I prefer the idea that the Action Research process can exist as a series of 'spiral of spirals' (McNiff et al 1996:23), this surely reflects the true flexibility of the research subject. As an Educational Action Researcher I must appreciate the vulnerable nature and unpredictable character of my research as I am exploring relationships, which are erratic due to the fact that they are formed by 'real' people. Therefore the cycle must have flexibility in order to cope with the external influences that will help to evolve and expand the area of enquiry.

On summarising the key ideas of Action Research, McNiff *et al* (1996:14) states that 'it is necessarily insider research, in the sense of the practitioners researching their own professional actions.' Therefore, in essence, this form of research is most applicable to my enquiry, as am I not indeed asking for this same, self-reflective approach from my students? I need the students themselves to become highly self-reflective as they enquire into their own decision making processes and how they can have a crucial effect on the achievement they feel in their own learning. However, this is not to be an entirely internalised process, as a key element of the Action Research process is to make the research public (McNiff *et al* 1996:16). Therefore the students will be encouraged to evaluate their own progress in the public, yet secure domain of the classroom, as they see their own voice as a valued part of the learning cycle.

Methodology

As the emphasis of the enquiry will be on valuing the student voice to promote independent learning the obvious starting point will be to listen to that voice. There are several methods that could be employed to gather evidence to inform the progress of the enquiry, however my preferred methods would be to use the questionnaire to gather initial evidence; and interview, journal and observations to help develop and build the process of the research.

Munn and Drever¹⁰ claim that the most suitable approach to questionnaires for use in small-scale research is that which can be completed without the presence of the teacher researcher. This is to avoid any obvious influence on the results of the questionnaire to ensure that the answers are as candid as possible. This apprehension about the possibility of bias effecting the validity of responses is indeed of the utmost importance, Munn and Drever suggest the use of sampling (1990:12) to counteract this issue, however this surely then enters their danger area of the 'Efficient Use of Time' (1990:2). However, I do not feel that the use of sampling or other such attempts at validation will honour the nature of my enquiry, which will depend on an honest and gut response from the students.

In order to begin the journey of elevating the student voice I will ask the students to discuss three questions in groups. Working in groups will give security to the students and allow them an element of anonymity, whilst allowing the process to seem less daunting and more relaxed. The proposed questions will be:

- What types of tasks do you prefer?
- How can we improve behaviour?
- How can we have more fun in English?

The students will also be given a title of 'How to make our lessons successful', and be advised that the three questions are there as a guide, some may choose to simply brainstorm the title to allow more freedom of expression. I will engage with a critical friend (McNiff et al 1996:30) concerning the questions and title, in order to reflect more openly on the direction of the data. The students will approach the questions as a brainstorm session, an activity of which they are accustomed. The use of A3 paper and markers will add to the 'informality' of the approach. One issue arising from this activity is that some students may not choose to work seriously, however this may validate my claims that they are not accustomed to having their voice heard in the learning environment with any real sense of authority.

The informality of this data will be supported by a more structured and traditional approach of an individual, anonymous questionnaire issued to the students for completion during the last ten minutes of the lesson. I propose to utilise a variety of closed, Clarity questions (Munn and Drever, 1990:22) and open, opinion based questions. Although McNiff *et al* (1996:99) claims that the closed question is limiting and will not necessarily lead to any fresh evidence, they will serve a purpose of allowing the students to feel less intimidated by the process and secure in their responses. I therefore propose to use a traditional tick box selection process for these questions with the options 'yes' or 'no'. Although the Clarity questions will allow me to gather vital data on the general feelings of the students the focus of the process will be on the Opinion based data, which will allow me to move the enquiry forward as the responses inform my planning.

¹⁰ Munn and Drever, Using Questionnaires in Small-Scale Research (SCRE, 1990)

Once I have gathered the preliminary data I will use the analysis of responses to inform my planning and direct my research. In an enquiry of this nature it is vital that the students see the results of their responses as soon, and as explicitly as possible. It is the evaluation of these responses and the progress of the implementation of strategies as a result of my further research that will form the next stage of my enquiry. I propose to triangulate the following spirals of the process to incorporate the use of interview, journal and observation. I see these methods as feeding into one another and helping to develop the research as many different sources work independently for communal benefit.

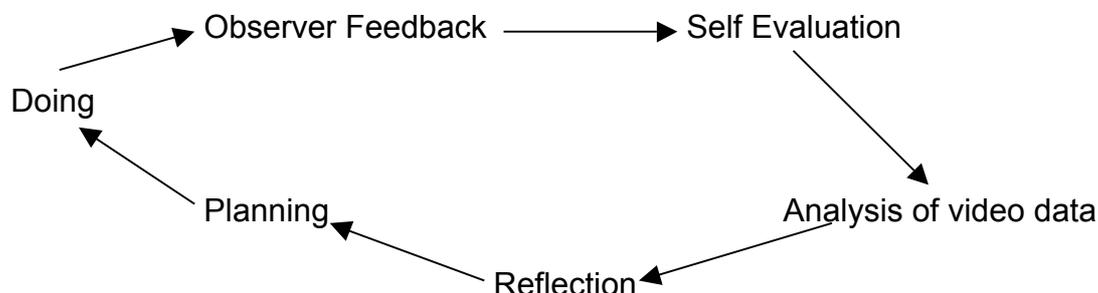
The dialogue between students and teacher having already been opened through the use of the brainstorming and questionnaire sessions will now continue in the form of the Journal. As well as acting as a personal account of progress made towards a sense of individual accountability I will also be able to monitor the impact of strategies from the students' point of view. Keeping my own personal journal will also enable me to chart my own progress and maintain my reflective attitude. The use of the student journal, as suggested by McKernan¹¹, could also reinforce the idea of ownership during this part of the process as students realise the true self-reflective quality of the work. The Journal will also be used as a personal target setting device, as students are asked to take responsibility for their own progress and reflect on their efforts on a regular basis.

The evidence gained from these personal progress accounts will be used to form part of the structure for the student interview, which will be video recorded in order to inform the progress of the research. I propose to conduct two different types of interview during the process: individual and representative. The individual interview will allow me to 'probe further' (McNiff *et al* 1996:101) and encourage the student to validate their own experiences and feel they are having an impact on their learning. I will do this by asking a series of open and closed questions based on a pre-interview sheet, which will enable the student to feel more secure in their responses. The students will also have an opportunity to discuss learning issues in groups, a number of prompt questions will be issued for them to consider, which will have been previously evaluated by a critical friend. The groups will elect one member to feedback in a representative interview and the feedback will be recorded in journals. In this way I will 'influence interviewee to become a collaborator.'¹² However, there must be some degree of reservation in the use of the interview process, which will have to be evaluated when the data is reviewed. This is due to the leading and personal nature of the interview, as it will be a testament to the progress of student ownership of the lesson to observe how much my role remains as mere facilitator.

¹¹ James McKernan, Curriculum Action Research, 2nd edition (Kogan Page Limited, 1996), pg 87.

¹² McNiff *et al* (1996:101) This idea of collaboration will aid the development of student authority in the classroom and add to a sense of community collegiality.

Finally the progress of the research will be evaluated through the use of focussed observations, the triangulation of which will aid the development of the Action Research cycle:



Two different parties would carry out these observations: a critical friend and a person not directly involved. I feel that this will result in two different perspectives, one of involvement and one of impartial criticism. Although I propose to rely on my critical friend for an objective view, I feel that a completely external observation may broaden and strengthen the validity of the account. The observations will utilise the school proforma as per school guidelines for Effective Teaching and Learning. In addition to following school guidelines I will produce a template, which will provide more focussed data to aid the cycle. I propose to utilise a 'headcount' method to focus on the amount of student-generated ideas and progress made in the lesson. This method will be accompanied by Interaction charting (McNiff et al 1996:95) to evaluate the use of constructive talk amongst the students. Gaining this additional data from an external party will also add to the validity of my account as my claims are challenged and supported by the response.

Presentation of Data

The initial data analysis and evaluation would be shared with the students to allow feedback from these key powerbrokers and stakeholders in the process. It is in this way that the presentation of the initial data can act as a catalyst for the furtherance of the Action Research cycle. Responses to the questionnaires will be collated and dominant issues and ideas will be discussed in order to establish common goals and mutual expectations. Time will therefore be allowed in the lesson to record the outcome of these discussions in Journals¹³.

¹³ The allocation of time to student discussion on issues of understanding the 'Why' of learning is of great importance: 'and there may be no better use of classroom time than a sustained conversation following someone's challenge "Why we gotta do this stuff?" Alfie Kohn.

The data from interviews, Journals, questionnaires and the observation process will be collated and evaluated in the form of a report, which will be made available primarily to all stakeholders in the process. Although the report will include quantitative data, the focus will be placed on the evaluation of qualitative data gathered from the methodology, as I recognise that the reliance on statistics could undermine the process of empowering the individuality of the students' voice. As sharing information is vital, the report will also be made available to outside agencies for wider feedback and validation, however I will firstly ask for my critical friend to advise on the report before passing it to the Headteacher for further validation.

The report must be accessible to all readers and therefore it will require a clear structure and 'clarity of expression' (McNiff et al 1996:134). I will therefore produce the report in five key sections based on the structure suggested by McNiff *et al* (1996:136):

<i>What did I wish to investigate when I undertook this piece of learning?</i>	}	Abstract and context
<i>Why did I wish to investigate it?</i>		
<i>What did I think I could do about it?</i>		
<i>What did I do?</i>	}	Method
<i>What did I learn?</i>	}	Analysis
<i>How can I show that learning?</i>	}	Evidence
<i>How can I evaluate the impact that the investigation had on my professional practice?</i>	}	Outcomes and Looking to the Future
<i>How has it extended me as a professional?</i>		

Proposed Timeline

April 2003

- Engagement with validation group with proposed research¹⁴.
- Data collected on Strategies for developing the student voice.
- Analysis of current student engagement and 'choices' through use of video evidence.

May 2003

- Start my Research Journal

June 2003

- Recruit critical friends
- Evaluate initial questionnaires with Critical friend.
- Carry out questionnaires in class.

July 2003

- Analysis of questionnaire data.
- Discussions of proposed actions with critical friend and stakeholders.

August 2003

- Development of programme to implement strategies for developing the student voice within lessons.

September 2003

- Student journals to begin.
- Implementation of strategies to begin.

October 2003

- Interviews with students to take place.
- First observation.
- Evaluation and analysis of new data to inform planning.

November 2003

- Presentation of research findings to the validation group.
- Initial plan of report to be discussed with critical friend.

December 2003

¹⁴ Validation Group to consist of the Teacher Researcher group at Westwood St Thomas School, Salisbury, which includes roughly 10 active practitioners from five different schools.

- Report to be completed with drafts reviewed by validating group and tutor.

January 2003

- Submit report to stakeholders.

Conclusions and Looking Forward

The need for flexibility in an account of this nature is paramount as the data and research will be influenced by the most unpredictable of all things: real people. This is due to the personal and reflective quality of an account such as this, which will rely on the students, as well as the teacher researcher to have 'the responsibility of stimulating and supporting change'¹⁵. This is the main reason as to why the cyclical and self-reflective nature of the Action Research process will enable me to strengthen, build and validate the account.

The proposed methodology does have its areas of concern and issues with regards to validation of data do arise in reflection. The use of critical friends relies on the good nature of those selected and it is important that they see themselves as a 'change agent' (Fullan 2001:56) within the process and the role they will play in the progress of the learner. However the process relies more heavily on the willingness of the students to engage with the process and take on this new role in the classroom (Kohn). The constructive input of these crucial stakeholders will enable the 'spiral' to develop and therefore further strengthen the account.

The vital aspect of sharing the account and presenting information for critical engagement will also add to the validity and strength of the account. However, issues with regards to ethics will always be at the forefront of data collection and dissemination of the research. A key part of the process will therefore be the involvement of parents and key stakeholders within the school, such as Senior Management and learning mentors. Although the public nature of Action Research appears to conflict with the importance of anonymity¹⁶, I will attempt to involve all stakeholders at key decision points and identify students within the account by using indistinguishable labels, e.g. 'one student', or 'Student A'.

Bibliography

¹⁵ Fullan, New Meaning of Educational Change (Routledge, 2001) pg 56

¹⁶ The importance of anonymity in order to strengthen and validate the account is crucial, as is supported in Researching Education, Scott and Usher (Cassell, 1999:134).

Bowden, How can I develop positive within my classroom, which have an impact on learning? (Educational Enquiry, University of Bath, 2002)

Cohen and Manion, Research Methods in Education 4th Edition (Routledge, 1994)

Fullan, New Meaning of Educational Change (Routledge, 2001)

Kohn, <http://www.alfiekohn.org/teaching/cfc.htm>

McKernan, Curriculum Action Research 2nd Edition (Kogan page Limited, 1996)

McNiff, Lomax and Whitehead, You and Your Action Research Project (Routledge, 1996)

Munn and Drever, Using Questionnaires in Small-Scale Research (SCRE, 1990)

Scott and Usher, Researching Education (Cassell, 1999)

<http://www.thegrid.org.uk/downloads/leadership/med/trg/studentvoice.ppt>

<http://www.edfac.unimelb.edu.au/DSME/lps/assets/Williams&ClarkeSA.pdf>