

# A Co-spective Way of Working

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## 1. Introduction

For those who have followed our work over the last few years, this paper may come as a surprise. Our previous work has moved in a clear direction towards developing and using our own theory of learning (Duffin and Simpson, 1995). In this paper, however, we have paused from that goal to reflect on *how* it is that we are working and in what sense, if any, what we are doing is valid as research.

Early in our work together, we found ourselves talking about "our way of working". More recently, we began to notice that we were often replacing that phrase with "our methodology". When we began to notice ourselves using the two phrases interchangeably, we were led to one obvious, but important question:

how is a way of working different from a methodology?

We had also become aware, through responses to our work, that people were interested in what we did and how we did it, and that they were relating what we were saying to their knowledge of related literature. In order to site our work in relation to that of others, we found that we needed both to make explicit what it is that we were doing (and which had initially come about as a natural response to our different viewpoints on a shared interest) and to see how it might fit with our initial views on methodology. So, in this paper, we consider what a methodology might be, discuss our way of working, then try to relate that way of working with the methodological issue that we raise. In addition, we will highlight some of the important questions which were raised by the discussion which followed our presentation of these ideas and which, inevitably, have taken our ideas further forward.

## 2. Methodolatry and Our First Thoughts on Methodologies

When we first began to consider what we might mean by a methodology, we came across what became an important notion for us: not because it moved our thinking on in the concepts that it provided, but that it stimulated a chain of thought about the research process which became a central focus in our attempt to site our work amongst that of others. This came originally from the work of Daly (1973) which we first met in the context of women's involvement in both learning and the research process discussed by Belenky et al (1986). The notion which we met was embodied in the single word 'methodolatry', which Belenky et al interpret as the idea that there is a standard set of acceptable methodologies and - since the questions that can effectively be asked are, to some extent, determined by the methodology used - those who wish to ask different questions or use different methodologies are "rendered invisible".

While we find the notion of methodolatry in itself a useful one, our train of thought was caught by part of the interpretation: that methodologies, to some extent, determine the questions which can be asked. Our initial idea was that this was just part of a two-way process: that questions can determine methodologies and that methodologies can determine questions. Indeed, we might argue that such a clear-cut distinction may not reflect what we believe actually occurs: that questions and methodology are so bound up together that there

is a constant ebb and flow between them in the research process, as both become refined over a period of time.

As we continued to clarify our thoughts on this matter, we began to realise that this notion of 'ebb and flow' went beyond the clarification of the question and method. We introduced for ourselves the notions of the domain and range of research; that is the subject of the research (who or what is being researched) and the users of the research (who can or will use the results of the work) and we began to see that there are possible influences which may come from these. For example, if the researcher wishes (as we do) to make their research available for teachers to use in their classrooms, the form that the research results take must be one which can be accessed by teachers. This, then, influences the kind of questions that can be asked and thus the focus of the research itself.

The result of this chain of thought was a list of five questions which we felt could provide us with tools to site our work amongst that of others, if we could answer them. They were:

- who or what is being researched?
- what questions is the research asking?
- what form do the answers take?
- who can or does use the answers? •
- what do they use them for?

To indicate the fundamental notion, for us, of the ebb and flow of influence between these questions, which is lost when we write them as a list with an implied direction, we produced figure I:

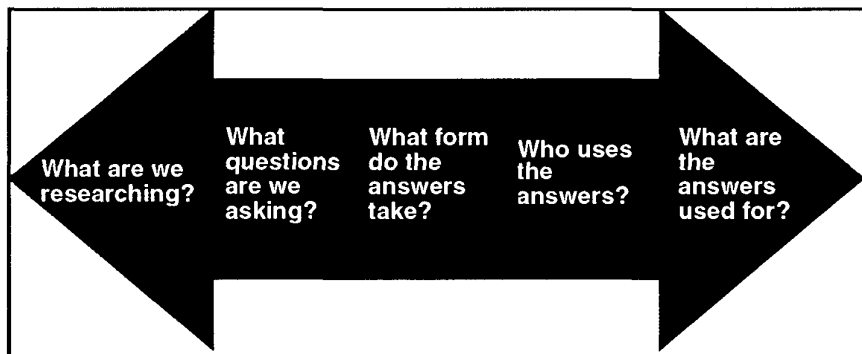


Figure 1

But, before addressing some of these questions from our own viewpoint, we need to make explicit the details of our own way of working.

### **3. Our Way of Working**

When we first began working together the idea that what we were doing might be called 'a way of working' was not in our minds; that we might be doing research was even farther removed from us. Initially we merely focussed, from our own experience as learners, teachers and teacher trainers, on any incidents which caught our interest and through which we hoped to arrive at some mutual understanding. This was purely for ourselves.

Indeed, we began working together when we discovered a shared interest in a single piece of work done by an eight year old girl (Duffin and Simpson, 1991). It was our realisation

that we had viewed the piece of work from two totally different perspectives that generated the original stimulus for continuing to discuss such incidents.

One of the features of these early discussions was that we found we were constantly referring back to our own learning as well as calling upon our current perceptions arising from our own work in different spheres. We became aware of the importance of our own learning to what we brought to the discussion. We also became aware of what was important to us in the sharing: the way in which this drew attention to differences of perception and, in the talking, enlarged and changed the perceptions of both of us.

It was only at a later date that our attention was drawn to the contrasts between the approaches of Piaget (working through the individual) and Vygotsky (seeing the genesis of learning as rooted in interaction between individuals) as we listened to colleagues more experienced in research than ourselves. For us, both our individual ways of viewing what we experienced and the important changes and developments arising from our interaction became cornerstones in our own development.

Only very recently, as our thoughts turned to ideas about connecting our work with that of others, that we began to feel the need to try to be explicit about our way of working. We identified three essential characteristics:

- Introspection
- Co-spection
- 'As if from the inside'

By introspection we mean constantly seeking to discern our individual perceptions of experiences, both past and present, and our reactions to them. We suggest that looking at ourselves from the inside gives us an access to the mental processes of a learner that we do not have in studying other people.

We use 'co-spection' to mean the sharing of our own personal reactions to experience with the deliberate intention of using samenesses and differences to further both our individual and our shared perceptions. By 'as if from the inside' we mean that we try to approach the observation of the actions of others, usually in some kind of learning context, from a viewpoint which takes into account the individual learner's likely perception of any experience they may encounter as far as that is possible and as fed by our own introspection and cospection in our way of working.

It is noticeable that much of the language which we use has come from reflecting upon the work of John Mason and adapting our perception of his ideas to our research process. It is Mason (1994) who points out that the sole use of introspection as a research tool in psychology was strongly challenged by, for example, Watson (1913) and the excesses of treating personal, inward looking accounts as unchallengeable partially led to the development of 'objective' behaviourism. It is clear in Mason's development of 'intra-', 'inter' and 'extra' spection (from which we developed the word 'co-spection') that he wishes to distance himself from these problems.

However, for us it is the synthesis of all *three* characteristics - examining our individual responses to experiences, sharing them closely with another (who tends to respond differently in many ways) and using the similarities and differences of the internal processes we get from these to consider our observation of others 'as if from inside' which constitutes our way of working. The sharing through 'co-spection' and the examination of any theory we develop through the 'as if from inside' process provides us with a challenge to our individual, internal accounts which introspection alone cannot do.

The phrase 'as if from inside' also comes from a reflection on some of Mason's work. In Mason (1987) he gives a partial classification of researchers:

We are all trying to model or describe the inner world of experience. Some of us proceed by contemplating and studying other people, or by studying ourselves as if from outside; others proceed by contemplating and studying ourselves from inside.

It seems clear to us that there is a partial symmetry here, relating the two dimensions of studying ourselves/others and study from the inside/outside. But while Mason relates ourselves to both inside and outside study, he only mentions the notion of studying others from outside. It appears to us that attempts to look at our observations of others by considering what internal structures may be being brought to bear (having looked at our individual internal structures and had the other's shared closely) fits this extra classification of studying others 'as if from inside'.

This element came across clearly to us in an early stage of our work (even though the vocabulary came later). It came about when we were developing our theory of learning, *Natural, Conflicting and Alien* (Duffin and Simpson, 1993). Initially, we only had the two concepts of 'natural' and 'conflicting' but it was in examining an incident about a seven year old boy that we became aware that something which, to us, seemed like a contradiction that should have caused a conflict in the learner, seemed completely to bypass the boy. This incident led us to consider what, in the mental processes of a learner, might lead to this kind of response and for which we coined the word Alien to describe that kind of experience. It also led us to realise that an essential feature of our work was that we were trying to observe learning incidents that came our way as if from the viewpoint of the learner - as if from the inside.

#### **4. Connecting Our Way of Working**

Our long term aim, then, is to try to connect our own way of working with the five questions (in figure 1). Before addressing this issue, however, it is important to note how our own work has shown the ebb and flow which we think is evident in much research, even though it may be hidden in the papers which many researchers produce.

Looking back at our earliest work together (in trying to explain why our reactions to that single piece of work differed) we can see that we began with a personally motivated question. This obviously influenced the form which any 'answers' we obtained took, since they were essentially just answers for us. The flow was predominantly from questions to the form of answers. However, as other people began to take an interest in our work, we were encouraged to make those answers available in a form accessible to other researchers (and, because of our own interests, accessible to teachers as well). Thus we were led back from the issue of the form of the answers we wanted to obtain, to the kinds of questions we were asking: the flow had reversed.

The notion of this ebb and flow makes the answering of these questions even harder. Whatever order we tackle them in will surely influence the way in which we answer them and is influenced by our current view of our research. Thus it is important to recognise that we have only just begun to address them and whatever answers we give are extremely tentative.

Perhaps we can start from the question 'who can or does use our research'. Our first attempt at such an answer might be:

For a considerable amount of the time that we have been working, we have wanted to make our research available to teachers. Part of the reason for this comes from our own feeling that some research which might have an influence over us, both as researchers and as teachers, is inaccessible to us: it is written in a language that makes it clear that its audience is (perhaps exclusively) other researchers in that field. (Again, we may see this as the influence of the question 'what are the answers used for' over 'who uses the answers' which also influences the other questions we are putting forward). So we see our aim as the production of research for three main groups: ourselves (to take us forward in our own understanding of the teaching and learning process), other researchers (to enable them to see our view of learning and compare it to their own and other people's) and teachers (who may wish to use our theory to enable them to model the learning processes of their pupils differently, or who may wish to use our way of working to develop their own models)

In writing that answer it is noticeable that we have had to bring in answers to 'what is the research used for' but also 'what form do the answers take'. Indeed, in coming to just this one partial answer, we have become aware of how threatening these questions can be when they are separated: it appears that the research process entangles them so much that they cannot be dealt with easily on their own. There remains much work for us to do in order to address these issues.

## 5. Ideas from Discussion

As usual, at BSRLM sessions, the discussion with colleagues who attended our presentation took us forward in our thinking. Their perceptions of their own research in the light of the questions we raised and of the questions in the light of their own thinking about methodology gave a new view on what we are trying to do.

There were clear differences in some of the perspectives of contributors: some were research students who felt that the conventions of writing a PhD thesis gave a tightly structured view of what could be classified as valid research. While they seemed to accept that all research had a substantial element of ebb and flow of influences between the five questions we posited, they saw the thesis as only permitting a linear story (perhaps in just one direction along the diagram in figure 1). Others appeared to see their work less constrained and spoke of being able to open their ideas up to alternative ways of working while conceding that, as students, they may also have had to conform.

In addition, a view came out that seemed to challenge even this. One statement made at the session brought in the notion that "research is systematic enquiry made public" (Stenhouse, 1984). This suggests that the essential feature of work which is deemed to be research does not arise because of its conformity to a *laid-down* rigour, but that validity comes from being explicit about the procedures used; that rigour might come from measuring reality against those explicitly expressed procedures within the work.

Perhaps this gives us the first, approximate answer to our question "how is a way of working different from a methodology?" A way of working becomes a methodology when it is made rigour (through being made explicit) and can justify the intricate relationships between the questions that it asks and the methods that it employs.

Perhaps that is just what we are beginning to do as researchers.

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