Theorising from action research projects in a regional university

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Introduction

Central Queensland University (CQU) is a 'new' university, moving from a College of Advanced Education in 1991. As such, like many of its Australian counterparts, there has been anxiety about moving to 'real research' legitimacy as a university, even though a number of staff had long engaged in a range of forms of research and consultancy. There continues to be a level of anxiety about participation in research activities, and divisions constructed among 'old' and 'new' staff, between general and academic researchers and among students and staff on the basis of their engagement in research. A number of staff have engaged in action research as one way to commence as 'researcher'. In this paper, I outline the use of action research as a form of staff development in research, and take a series of staff action research projects, members of whom came together to theorise their work after completing the projects, under the auspices of a Collaborative Research Group grant. The main focus of this paper is reflection on the issue of how to theorise from action research projects, using our experience in the latter project as the 'data'. In particular, the issue of surfacing similarities and differences across projects was found to be helpful in theory building around particular themes which could then form the basis of further reading and secondary interrogation of data.

In what follows, I first introduce the projects and their university context to give some idea of the diversity of issues and practices being action-researched. This gives some idea of why the follow-up project was undertaken. I then consider both the strategies used and the theoretical exploration developed in this follow up project. I then suggest some of the learnings about theory-building and its place in action research, with reflection on its significance in the changing research scene of the late 1990s.

CQU as a context for action research

The university commenced an 'Action Learning' program for staff development and promotion of innovative practices in 1995, with groups of projects being funded for a year. Thus far, three funding cycles have been provided, with projects bringing together staff from different campuses, from different Faculties and Divisions, on topics ranging from improving Indigenous student pass rates in the Business Faculty, to the introduction of student mentoring, to participation of general staff in university decision-making or introduction of web-based teaching in a unit. Approximately eight projects are funded in any one cycle, with teams of staff engaged in each project, and receiving residential training in action research, and three or four further half day meetings across the year to share knowledge across teams, to present work in progress and to explore further issues about research. A final meeting, chaired by a senior member from Chancellery, receives the

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projects, which include a written report and recommendations for further action within the university.

A number of staff have reported that participation in one of the action research projects has been their first experience of research, for some even their first experience of public presentation and writing. Many of the projects have acted as ‘pilot’ or trials for innovations which have then been ‘mainstreamed’. Other spin-offs from the Program have included staff enrolment in further degrees, applications for further research funding from other sources and a more widespread acceptance of action research as a valued form of social and educational research (Brennan, in progress). All the action research projects in the last two rounds have been asked to report processes and findings in terms of contributions to understanding their own topic or focus, change process at CQU and learnings about action research.

The four projects that formed the basis of further theorising were:

- the introduction of student mentoring by third year students of first year students, and distance education students of their distant peers;
- the improvement of the experience of first year students in Health Science;
- general staff participation in university decision making;
- ‘Orient-flex’: orientation programs that included introduction to academic work and technology as well as social activities and introductions to university services.

The follow-up project brought together three general staff and two academics, one from each of these project teams, and one acting as research mentor for the group. Several of these projects were seen to have major implications for learning about the university, and efforts were made to follow up these perceived conjunctions of interest. What we were interested in was building better explanations of our work, making those explanations more explicit, trying out the explanations in terms of co-practitioner lived experience and co-researcher critical scrutiny. All members found the process interesting and challenging, building capacity for judgement and a greater familiarity with the different roles of theory in research.

The projects are very much creatures of their time and place. The ‘Orient-flex’ project, for example, recognises that most of the domestic students of CQU are first generation students (as are a significant proportion of staff). Central Queensland as a region has one of the lowest participation rates in tertiary education in Australia. Orientation week programs have to introduce an institution which is foreign to the majority of students. Thus, the introduction of academic issues and technological training alongside the more familiar socialising activities were seen as necessary. Building links across the student body around study as well as social interaction have been seen as crucial to establishing a sense of community among the student body. Similarly, the efforts to improve retention and student achievement in first year health science focussed on linking the academic and social dimensions of being in a university. The introduction of student mentoring for both on-campus and distance education students was also a means to ensure that the university treated all of its students as members of the community, in the process redefining ‘community’. General staff participation in decision-making has little tradition within universities where democracy and participation are usually discussed as the province of academics, part of academic freedom, but rarely considered in the context of general staff who form about half of the overall staff numbers in the institution. ‘Who counts as part of the university community’ was thus a theme which became focal for all projects.
Regular meetings of the project were held, to discuss the prior projects as ‘data’ for the new project, to discuss readings and set further readings, to identify themes as they emerged from engagement with one another’s projects, to develop and outline arguments and to workshop writing of articles. The project held a two-day writing workshop with an outside facilitator, who helped to clarify purposes, sharpen argumentation, open writing processes up to scrutiny and set further areas for reading. This paper reports only one aspect of our learnings from the overall project and represents a particular interest of the author as research mentor to the group.

Theorising in action research

‘Theory’ belongs in both moments or dimensions of action research: in the action part and in the research part. It is often wrongly presumed that the theory work is associated only with the research, while action is really about a narrow form of practice, thereby continuing the theory-practice binary which much action research has attempted to redress. This also tends to lead to the problem where some participants in group projects are seen as researchers, who do the research and theory work, while the practitioners are allowed to reject theory and ‘get on with the job’. Certainly this problem did not disappear merely because the action researchers were located in a university. Indeed, perhaps nowhere else is such a strong binary privileging theory as distinct from practice more in force than in universities which have to ‘prove’ their credentials as serious research institutions. The term ‘practitioner research’ is thus a strong challenge to many working in universities; that we might research our own practice at the university is still a foreign concept to most researchers, even those in the social sciences. The task of universities has largely been seen as looking elsewhere, turning the researchful gaze ‘outside’.

These projects thus had to deal with many hidden and some not so hidden biases against action research as a legitimate form of research. That the program was funded through staff development resources tended to assist the cause of those who believed it was not ‘real’ research. The inexperience of many in the teams also tended to mean that problems common to many forms of research—including working in teams, as well as methodological and theoretical problems—were seen as more significant than they were; such problems also meant that there were obvious points for potential detractors (and for those participating with their own doubts) to say, ‘I told you so’. However, the ongoing public success of many of the projects and the seniority of the program’s sponsors helped to allay these fears. Nevertheless, the year-long cycle of activity often did not provide enough time for adequate theorising; hence the project was conceived specifically to explore the theoretical dimensions of our work.

Many participants in our action research projects, especially women, found it difficult to make the transition to treating themselves as theory generators, as actively engaged in producing knowledge. Some of this was because of their inexperience with any form of research, reflected in the skewing of women’s participation towards the lower ends of academia and as general staff. The dominant norm of intellectual activity remains that of the solitary male, engaged in scientific or laboratory work; work that does not fit within this unspoken but nonetheless prevalent norm finds out how widespread the norm is even within those working in different paradigms and discourses. Taking the generation of theory seriously was thus a large step for participants. It worked to escape the cringe mentality about new universities’ self-comparisons with more established research universities.
Most practitioner action research projects, during their life and in their reporting, tend to theorise about the focus of their practice—theorising 'in situ'—that is, in the site and on the site of the practice being investigated. Such theorising is usually valuable for the participants of the project and, where it is written up or otherwise communicated, to others in similar situations. There is a great deal yet to be understood about such situated knowledge and theory work.

During the life of the action research projects, all engaged in some reading and literature searching, in order to improve their practice and understand the issues at stake in their practice. For example, the mentoring project was able to draw on recent feminist literature on issues in peer mentoring as distinct from hierarchical mentoring as a way to conceptualise students working with other students. Ideas for training of student mentors came from community development activities as well as the mentoring literatures in organisation development, human resources management and professional development and training. The project was well documented, for evaluation, academic and for policy purposes, requiring the mentors, the mentees and the management group to develop their ideas and explanations on the advantages and problems in mentoring. Since the introduction of the student mentoring pilot program in two schools of the university, the project has been mainstreamed to cover first year students from all Faculties and extended in scope to cover distance education students and, most recently, postgraduate research students. Those responsible have also been involved in taking the learnings from this setting through conference presentations, journal articles and by introducing mentoring in other sites, include allied health professionals in rural areas.

This kind of theorising is reasonably well understood, although not always accomplished with the level of outcomes from the project given as an example. However, the theorising I want to consider in more detail is that which occurred after the group of action research projects were completed. The dimensions of theorising here explored can be said to be still 'in situ', in the sense of being on/in the 'same' site. But the specific connections to the practice were removed temporally. That is, the theorisations were being produced after the time-frame of the projects, and occurred by intersecting with other projects. This intersection of projects from the same institution allowed us to look for similarities and differences, and also encouraged an intersection with different bodies of bodies of literature which would not have necessarily appeared relevant to any specific one of these projects during their life.

The theorising during a project was tied quite tightly to the focus area of practice. We imagine that there may well be occasions when a single project of the kind explored here may well make a major contribution to the theory of practice in that field. This was not, however, the case here. Most of the projects, while innovative in the particular setting, were largely extending or building on practices already in existence, or an innovative practical way of performing an existing function such as orientation week programs in a university. They were also carried out largely by people for whom theory-generation was not a customary activity, and were thus somewhat limited in their consideration of the theoretical possibilities involved in their projects. In addition, much theorising has occurred about action research as a methodological approach (Kemmis & McTaggart 1988, Carr & Kemmis 1996, Noffke 1997) or, as noted above, about the particular case studied. Action research has thus been understood as a form of activist problem posing and problem solving, with broad ethical, epistemological and political framings. Most reported projects finish with the pragmatic ending of the linked action and reflection cycles.
The theoretical work occurring after these particular projects was more generative at a different level of abstraction which then enabled data within each project to be interrogated in a different framing as well as providing links across projects. In exploring the scope of the finished projects to develop a further ‘layer’ of theorising, there is the possibility of contributing in a small and speculative way to the literature of action research. This paper begins such a project. We do not see it as ‘meta-theoretical’ work but rather secondary data analysis with new kinds of questions. In the process, further contributions to the case-specific data were also generated.

The use of similarities and differences in surfacing theory

From our experience, we found that the practice of looking for both similarities and differences across projects was most generative in helping us to move to higher levels of abstraction and in filling out the kinds of project detail illustrative of the issues under discussion. Looking for either similarities or differences we found not so useful; rather our work moved between the two in a reflexive and dynamic process.

We commenced by considering common themes which had already been asked of all the action learning projects:

1. What did your project learn about its topic?
2. What did it help to understand about the university’s management of change processes?
3. What did your project find out about action research?

The first question, while initially expected to demonstrate more about differences among the projects, generated a great deal of commonalities as well. For example, at a further level of abstraction, three of the projects dealt with first year student experience (Mentoring, Health Science and Orientation) and swapped readings on first year experience across projects. A number of general staff were involved in each of the projects and contributed significantly to the development of actions for the projects, providing a tangible demonstration of general staff participation in decision-making, the focus of the remaining project. This added a further dimension of thinking to that project which had tended to focus mainly on formal university procedures for decision-making and not on the project-specific innovations as a means to participate.

In answering the second and third questions, a number of similarities in terminology emerged as used in the four projects. This lead to further clarification and enabled identification of common ‘themes’ for exploration across the projects. The themes which emerged after some initial discussion of each project were:

- university as ‘community’
- interweaving the social and academic first year experience
- innovation in a new university

However, in treating these as themes, our emphasis was on surfacing differences as well as similarities among the projects. The processes used in the group drew strongly from post-structural and feminist analysis of binaries, often using the differences among projects to bring to the fore unspoken assumptions about a term or use differences of meaning of the
same' term to explore emerging definitions. In the next sections of the paper, I illustrate some of the ways in which the group worked to theorise different elements of our emerging and revised understandings across the projects.

**Interwoven social and academic dimensions of university life**

One of the 'themes' which emerged early was that of first year experience. With three of the projects overtly concerned with this topic, and some participants with organisational responsibilities for orientation and student mentoring, this focus was expected to take considerable time. What emerged from working among the projects, however, was a further delineation of the nature of university experience as more than 'adding' in a social dimension to the academic base line which was expected to be the norm. It was realised that many of the ways in which social activity was brought into the university were presented to 'sweeten the pill' of academic life, and not as an integral part of life at the university. The institution seems to assume that people 'live' mainly as rational beings, with occasional need to 'let off steam' or to deal with some 'personal' crisis, hence the raison d'être for organisational units such as the Student Union or the Careers, Counselling and Health Unit.

We began to unpack our assumptions of the role of student and worked towards defining a need for a complete university student identity to be supported by the university, by paying adequate attention to the intersection of social and academic matters in all aspects of all sub-units of the organisation. For example, orientation programs are largely seen as supporting social matters, while a first year health science course would be expected to concentrate largely on academic matters unless personal crises occurred. The personal would be added in later in such a course, as a deviation from the norm, according to how we understood the university. Similarly, academic matters were not seen as the province of the orientation staff. In both cases, the necessary interweaving of a complete identity which included both social and academic dimensions was not officially sponsored in the university's normal ways of doing things. Yet the projects worked well precisely because they did not presume this separation. Student retention rates increased; student–staff relations improved and, in some cases, there was evidence from students of familiarity with the university in ways which had clearly not been evident in previous years. The issue for conceptualising the student had ramifications for the organisation as an institution. We began to see how our own assumptions about who did what work and how different parts of the university related also kept in place the differentiations which present the student (and staff) as compartmentalised.

**University as 'community'**

The notion of 'community' as primarily about increased and intensive communication in face-to-face settings was interrupted by the introduction of distance education students to another phase of the student mentoring project series. Much of the work we read about community, even that informed strongly by post-structural theory (for example, Iris Marion Young 1990) did not provide much assistance in understanding community as 'virtual' or 'distributed', and even the materials on distance education seemed not to explore these dimensions, being more concerned with technology or instructional design. From our (developing) perspectives, community could be seen as the capacity to cross constructed boundaries, for example those between campuses, general–academic, on and off campus students, staff and students, academic and social activities, neo- and experienced researchers. The creation of community, then, became defined not as an 'object' to be
described but as a process in continual construction. The analysis of participants and potential participants—as well as of barriers to change in the university—led to a significantly redefined theoretical position with which to describe the projects and their importance.

Underpinning many of the issues central to each of the projects, we found assumptions about an individual–community binary which we explored by comparison and contrast with the other projects, each time disinterring new forms of the binary and pushing our definitions further. The boundaries of each project for analytic purposes were seen to be contained or constrained by the ways in which the university organisationally was segregated, with few opportunities for groups from different ‘positions’ to work together on projects. This was seen as a central problem of promoting innovation, and in particular as reifying divisions among people as ‘natural’ and normal.

As a number of the participants in our project were interested in issues of community, this became a central issue for our discussions, one which was able to draw not only on the different projects but also on the different theoretical and disciplinary orientations of a psychologist, a social worker, a health worker and academic, an educationalist, and an administrator. The theorising which emerged interrogated many of the previous ways of exploring community among the group, and led to some significant discussion about both the need for redefining the term and the need to remain open to having the boundaries of the definition up for scrutiny.

**Innovation in a new marketised university**

Many institutions, whether business, public sector or tertiary education have engaged in restructuring their organisations. One of the outcomes of this for many people has been a perception of the enormous amount of time spent on restructuring at the expense of work able to be achieved on other tasks. In addition, although much of the restructuring is promised under the rhetoric of flexibility and innovatory approaches, many workers, including those in universities find the reverse has occurred. Instead of greater capacities to influence action or to develop new practices, the emphasis on standardised forms of accountability and performance review, coupled with technologies of strategic plans, has resulted in less innovation and risk taking in organisations. The Action Learning Program at CQU was specifically directed towards providing a safe space for innovation. Of course, for a number of staff, this proved to be too great an additional burden of time, especially if their section had been hard hit by restructuring. Nevertheless, the space to take risks was approved by senior staff, sponsored by supervisors and projects were asked to nominate mentors who could help them to negotiate the shoals of innovatory projects within the university.

Each of the projects found that the institution was rhetorically in favour of innovation but organisationally too much into surveillance of boundaries of organisational units to be able to sustain such a rhetoric in practice. This may, of course, be a result of the newness of the restructure and the need to operate within new boundaries. Nevertheless, the problem of how innovatory capacities are to be built into an organisation remains an important one to address.

Reading about the pressures on universities (for example, Marginson 1996) enabled us to see our own university in a wider context, and the significance of our suite of projects as potentially a site of innovation, although relatively marginal to the university as a whole. Our interest in innovation does not appear to be central to most efforts to restructure universities
or other public sector agencies; within business corporations, innovation is tied to product redevelopment, and the organisation needed to do that redevelopment, rather than to the dynamics of the organisation itself (see also Gee, Hull & Lankshear 1996). The higher level of abstraction encouraged by the move to understand universities as universities, rather than CQU as a specific setting, enabled the reflexive turn to re-interpret our new university.

**Surfacing theory**

The efforts to develop theory in our action research projects used several approaches, as the discussion of the emergent themes above illustrates. In summary, we worked with three different starting points to sharpen our questions, to raise other interpretations from those we already understood and to build shared perspectives on our explanations. These included:

- project to project comparison
- structured reading
- writing

The project–project comparison mainly brought to the fore common terminology which was differently interpreted or supported new questions to be asked, requiring a different framing of issues. The structured reading usually emerged as a topic from project–project comparison but then was used to frame different questions and explanations in relation to the topics and the interpretation of findings from the projects. Writing also, as a relatively linear product, tended to identify cul-de-sacs in the explanations which had developed to date, much more than discussion alone tended to do. The groups’ commitment to writing to share knowledge was also treated as a means to develop theory. Writing is thus not merely a record of existing knowledge but a means to generate and specify the kinds of shortfalls in knowledge produced.

As noted above, theorising across action research projects tends to operate at a different level of abstraction than theorising within projects. By this, we do not necessarily mean that projects are more able to be generalised to other settings or issues, but that the kinds of explanations which hold together different projects tend to operate at more abstract levels; they relate differently to the specific practices under examination in any individual project. However, what can also be seen is a movement back into project-specific theorising that arose precisely because the terms in which it had been conceived earlier had been disturbed. It is hardly new to suggest that similarities and differences are important in the analysis of data and the generation of theory. Here I have presented some examples of our work in this vein as a way to explore the practice of theorising in and around action research projects. Theorising appears to some, particularly those neophyte in research, as an almost magical activity. Yet it is also something taken for granted in research practices, and rarely examined except in epistemological or philosophical texts on research. The practices of everyday theorising are thus rarely made open to examination. In specifying some of our practices in generating better explanations or theory, we have also found new starting points for a further generation of action research projects, which may well also contribute to re-theorising aspects of research in a new university.
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