Improving personal voice in academic writing: an action inquiry using self-reflective practice

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This paper describes the author's experience of using self-reflective practice within an action inquiry in order to improve both her personal practice in engaging in academic writing and her work as a teacher educator. As such, the study could be viewed as an example of simultaneous first- and second-person action inquiry. The focus is on the expression of the author's voice in academic writing with specific reference to the use of the passive and active voice and the first person pronoun 'I'. The reflective process illustrates the author's considerable uncertainty about personal voice, while supporting an emerging understanding of her own writing practice and her role in relation to supporting student writing. It is suggested that self-reflective practice can uncover some of the complexities of this writing and educational phenomenon and the social processes in which it is situated. A dual font approach is adopted with italic font used to present personal reflection.

Keywords: action inquiry; self-reflective; personal voice; academic writing; academic literacies

Prologue (June 2008)

I am Anna wife, mother, sister, friend, teacher, lecturer, supervisor and doctoral student. I am the daughter of two doctors, niece of three doctors and cousin of many more. I am also a 'failed medical student' and occasionally wonder if this experience of failure is the driving force for this doctorate. On bad days, when I'm staring at a blank computer screen trying to write, I wonder why I am doing this… sometimes it seems like I'm searching for a consolation prize. But I love working with teachers, particularly supporting and supervising their research. I can relate well to the Vygotskian idea of 'a cognitive apprenticeship model of teaching and learning in which the teacher models, scaffolds and coaches the student' (Diezmann, 2005, p. 445) but I know I fall down as far as providing 'a writing role model as an active researcher and publisher' (Diezmann, 2005, p. 445) goes. This is the final module of the EdD and I'm still having huge difficulty finding my own voice as a writer. Feedback on my assignments includes "you need to own the material… more 'I' less 'the researcher'"…"your conclusions could be stronger and more authoritative…less passive voice". I subsequently applied this recommendation for more 'I' to a quantitative assignment and was pulled up for this. And, if I'm to be honest, seeing that big 'I' in print on a student's assignment has made me uncomfortable and may have affected my marking.

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> This thing about the passive voice is a real conflict for me. I really am convinced that it's a very powerful writing mode and suggests academic rigour and strict adherence to method. I use it a lot and I know I have definitely encouraged students to use it in their writing. However, I'm becoming increasingly aware of real paradoxes around this and I laugh wryly at Germano's description of the writer aware of their limitations, fearful of expressing an opinion and hoping no one will notice their presence, "taking refuge behind the curtain of the passive" (2005, p. 21). Am I, like Heaney, trying to "save face and whatever you say, you say nothing" (1990, p. 79) or, is it simply that I'm afraid that I have nothing worth saying?

Introduction

[1] In an analysis of perspectives on student writing in higher education, Lea and Street (2006), contended that students need to master a range of writing styles and practices, adopt these as appropriate, and understand the meanings and identities they convey. Drawing on previous research (Lea & Street, 1998), they presented a typology of approaches to the teaching of academic literacy, namely study skills, academic socialization and academic literacies. While acknowledging that the approaches overlap, they argued that, in contrast to study skills and academic socialization, which focus respectively on the acquisition of a set of generic linguistic skills and on acculturation into disciplinary discourse, an academic literacies model

> is concerned with meaning making, identity, power, and authority, and foregrounds the institutional nature of what counts as knowledge in any particular academic context… views the processes involved in acquiring appropriate and effective uses of literacy as more complex, dynamic, nuanced, situated, and involving both epistemological issues and social processes, including power relations among people, institutions, and social identities. (Lea & Street, 2006, p. 369)

As such, this definition takes account of parallel discourses regarding what counts as knowledge, and the nature and meaning of the social processes and relationships in which academic literacies evolve. Viewed in these terms, the process requires students to become fluent in a range of writing genres, understanding the complex and nuanced meanings evoked by each and switching between writing modes as appropriate. As a part-time postgraduate student in two higher education institutions over the decade 2000–2010, I grappled with differing and sometimes discordant practices with regard to aspects of academic literacies such as the use of the first person. As a lecturer, it has been my experience that many students also struggle with this concept and often seek simplistic ground rules. The action inquiry on which this paper is based was conducted between June and August 2008. The purpose was to investigate my use of the first person in my own writing, and the impact of this on my supervisory practice in supporting graduate students.

The purpose of this paper is to report this interweaving first- and second-person action inquiry (Torbert & Taylor, 2008), and in so doing illustrate how self-reflexive practice can uncover some of the complexities of academic literacies (Lea & Street, 2006). For clarity, a dual font approach as exemplified by studies by Geraci and by Crotty reported in Dadds & Hart (2001) is used, with personal reflection in italics. Following the completion of my doctoral studies in November 2010, the paper was first drafted in the autumn of 2011 and submitted for peer review in December 2011. While drawing upon my experience in the supervisory relationship with students, it is not within the scope of this paper to explore the associated social processes,

identities or power relations in which the teaching and learning of academic literacies is situated (Lea & Street, 2006).

A framework for action inquiry

I was mindful of the challenges this research would present because at the time of the study I had no previous experience of action inquiry or of reflective writing. Hence, to scaffold and lend structure to this inquiry, I adopted the following framework of seven questions developed by Whitehead (1993) and modified by McNiff & Collins (1994) (both cited in McNiff, Lomax, & Whitehead, 1996).

(1) What is my research focus?
(2) Why have I chosen this issue as a focus?
(3) What kind of evidence can I produce to show what is happening?
(4) What can I do about what I find?
(5) What kind of evidence can I produce to show that what I am doing is having an impact?
(6) How will I evaluate that impact?
(7) How will I ensure that any judgements I might make are reasonably fair and accurate?
(8) What will I do then?

The processes engaged in through the action inquiry are outlined using this framework in two stages. First, questions 1 and 2 are explored below (Action Inquiry: Stage 1) under the heading 'Context' because they relate to the identification of the research focus. Later, questions 3–8 are addressed in the main body of the paper under Action Inquiry: Stage 2.

Although the first- and second- person inquiries were interwoven and conducted simultaneously, for clarity, these are presented in parallel under the sub-headings Personal writing and Supervisory practice. However, it should be noted that because the focus of attention was shifting throughout the inquiry both headings do not appear under every question in the framework. Hence, the focus of the action, analysis and reflection for questions 1, 2, 4 and 8 is on personal wring only, on supervisory practice regarding question 7 and on both dimensions for questions 3, 5 and 6.

Following a description of the context for the study (including an exploration of questions 1 and 2 of the framework), the rationale for a self-reflective action inquiry is presented; the approach is situated within the broader action research genre, literature relating to personal voice and reflective practice are briefly reviewed and pertinent ethical considerations are discussed. Next, stage 2 of the action inquiry is described using the framework questions 3–8. Following this, some conclusions are drawn regarding the personal learning outcomes, perceived benefits and limitations of the inquiry, and possible directions for future action inquiry cycles are identified. The paper concludes with a final reflection on the experience of engaging for the first time in practitioner research involving 'reflection on and in' (Schön, 1983, p. 278) the practice of academic writing.

Context

In 2004, I took a position as lecturer in the special education department of a college of education in Dublin where I had completed first a postgraduate diploma and

then a masters in special educational needs on a part-time basis between 2000 and 2003. At masters level I had conducted surveys of teacher, assistant and principal perceptions of the role of the special needs assistant, and a series of interviews with pupils, their parents, teachers and assistants (Logan, 2006). Prior to this I had worked as a primary school teacher for 15 years. I enrolled in the EdD programme at Queens University, Belfast where I studied part-time, completing five taught modules (2005–2008) and a doctoral dissertation (2008–2010). In one of the EdD modules, I critically reviewed an assessment policy for which I am responsible, and became interested in aspects of the socio-cultural nature of assessment namely power and control in the tutor/student relationship and the ways in which both tutors and students interpret the process (Gipps, 1999). This work highlighted for me the gap between the theory and practice of assessment and the real potential for conflict between explicit knowledge about assessment expressed and applied through 'espoused-theories' and tacit knowledge (Polanyi, 1962), and ideas about assessment effected through 'theories-in-use' (Ecclestone, 2001; Price, 2005).

Having had difficulties finding appropriate ways to articulate my voice in assignments for the EdD, I started to think about how I might apply this theoretical framework to voice in academic writing. Much of this understanding seems likely to be 'tacit' in nature and, by implication, unarticulated. Therefore, in conducting the initial action inquiry, I hoped to unpack my 'tacit knowledge' of how I articulate my voice in writing with a view to improving my own writing practice and my practice in supporting teachers engaged in research and writing.

Action Inquiry: Stage 1

1. What is my research focus?

Personal writing. Having experienced a hunch that there are contradictions in my understanding of 'voice' in academic writing, I wished in this action inquiry to systematically reflect on and evaluate the implications of this for my personal writing practice as a doctoral student and as a teacher educator. My concern was to become 'mindful in the moment' (Tremmel, 1993, cited in Leitch & Day, 2000, p. 188) by engaging in a critical 'conversation with myself' (McCarthy, 1994, cited in McNiff et al., 1996, p. 21) as I reviewed my previous writing and wrote this paper.

2. Why have I chosen this issue as a focus?

Personal writing. My interest emerged from an awareness of my reluctance to use the first person 'I' in academic writing. I believe that this reflects my uncertainty about the status of the voice of the practitioner researcher in academic writing and my subsequent discomfort because I suspect that my practice is undermining my beliefs and values (McNiff et al., 1996).

Action research and action inquiry

While the terms 'action research' and 'action inquiry' are often used loosely and interchangeably, this study is understood as an action inquiry (Torbert, 1981, as cited in Reason, 1998) within the broader action research genre. Carr and Kemmis (1986, p. 162) defined action research as 'a form of self-reflective enquiry undertaken by participants in social situations in order to improve the rationality and justice of their own practices, their understanding of these practices, and the situations in which the practices are carried out'. Writing of the development of

personal educational theory, Whitehead conceptualized action research as emerging from experiencing a 'living contradiction', a hunch that one is not living one's values fully in one's practice (McNiff et al., 1996, p. 48; Whitehead, 1993, p. 6). From this perspective this inquiry emerged from a desire not only to improve my own practice as a writer but also to 'live my values more fully' as a teacher educator. My hunch was that my reluctance to use the first person 'I' reflected some personal uncertainty about the status of practitioner knowledge (Carr & Kemmis,
1986). Thus, while I might espouse the value of teacher knowledge of praxis and encourage teachers to bring this professional knowledge to bear on theory, I might be denying these values in my own writing practice.

While agreeing that action inquiry studies personal practice and the understanding and outcomes of that practice, Torbert (1991, as cited in Reason, 1998), suggested that the difference relates to the temporal dimension of the study. Contrasting the action research cycle of analysis-planning-acting with simultaneous attention to reflective thought and analysis, he contended that

> action inquiry does not start from this separation of analysis and action, this separation of mind and body, this linear approach to inquiry. That is not to say that such off-line reflection is not useful, but simply that action inquiry is based in a holistic understanding that also tries to act and inquire at the same time [emphasis in original]. (Torbert & Taylor, 2008, p. 241)

Arguably, action inquiry is therefore particularly appropriate to a study which focused on, and was simultaneously conducted in, and through the act of writing. Furthermore, because of the dual focus on my own writing practice and my work supporting student writing, the study seemed to lend itself to Torbert's conceptual understanding of first- and second-person inquiry conducted simultaneously on oneself and in relation with others.

Many students in higher education may not only struggle to understand and engage with a body of academic knowledge, but may also experience difficulties in acquiring and utilizing successfully the language of academe (Read, Francis, & Robson, 2001), perhaps because many of the conventions of academic literacy are rarely made explicit, or because understandings of what constitutes academic literacy seem to be highly contested (Diezmann, 2005). In relation to the use of the first person pronoun, Lea and Street (1998) found that even within the same courses, individual tutors had different expectations about when or indeed if this was appropriate. Students may opt not to express their opinions in their writing because of a lack of confidence or because of a fear that lecturers may penalize views, which are at variance with their own, and their reluctance may be compounded by issues of authority and power in the student/lecturer relationship (Read et al., 2001). Similar conclusions were also drawn by Lea and Street (1998) who contended that even students with considerable relevant prior vocational experience may choose to eschew personal knowledge.

Traditionally seen as one of the hallmarks of academic writing (Germano, 2005; Kamler & Thomson, 2006), the use of the passive voice, particularly in qualitative and ethnographic studies, has been criticized as perpetuating 'the myth of silent authorship' (Charmaz & Mitchell, 1977, cited in Woods, 1999, p. 54). Somewhat paradoxically, the passive voice serves both to 'conceal agency' and to claim an authority based on collective knowledge of a discipline. The passive also acts as a

buffer both between reader and writer and between the writer and their ideas, and is therefore weaker and less likely to engage the reader's attention (Germano, 2005). Writing in support of practitioner research in critical care nursing, Fulbrook (2003, p. 229) argued passionately in favour of using the first person pronoun 'I', contend- ing that the use of phrases such as 'the author thinks' in writing about a critical per- sonal experience is not only distracting for the reader but also renders the writing
'inarticulate and juvenile'. Furthermore, Fulbrook contended that writing in the first person implies the personal knowledge is valued, a particularly cogent argument in favour of its use in continuing professional development more widely.

Reflective practice

Traditional positivist approaches to research grounded in 'technical rationality' may be neither sufficient nor appropriate for the kind of problem-finding (Leitch & Day, 2000) and problem-stating (Adelman, 1993) which are necessary preliminaries to investigating and improving practice in the 'swampy lowlands' (Schön, 1983, p. 43) of education. In the context of increasing awareness of the complexities of classroom life, reflection and reflective practice have come to be seen as a means to harvest teachers' craft knowledge and to support their personal and professional development, improve practice at classroom and school level, and as an effective antidote to over-prescription of curriculum and pedagogy (Leitch & Day, 2000; Rodgers, 2002). Critically reflective practice has the potential to support metacognition, improve problem-solving and allow unarticulated or unconscious knowledge to be uncovered and utilized (Kerka, 2002).

Distinguishing between 'reflection-in-action', which occurs simultaneously with the action, and 'reflection-on-action' which is retrospective in nature, Schön (1983, p. 49, p. 278) contended that reflection-in action can overcome professional 'overlearning' of tacit knowledge and understanding and therefore support the practitioner in surfacing and challenging institutional and personal customs and habits. I decided to use reflective journal writing as a means to organizing, reviewing and reflecting on my work (Cooper & Stevens, 2006), a means to 'hold still the action', an opportunity to revisit automatic patterns of behaviour which characterize my writing practice (Holly, 1989).

Ethical considerations

This action inquiry was conducted in accordance with the Revised Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research (BERA, 2004). Aware of my dual role as researcher and lecturer, I needed to consider the extent to which this might impinge on others (BERA, 2004) in particular the students whose work I was assessing while I was reflecting on my own writing practice. I was mindful that, in engaging in critical reflection on an aspect of my assessment practice, I needed to apply the assessment criteria fairly to the students' work. My colleagues supported me in this by agreeing to critically review my assessment practice as we jointly assessed and graded theses. As an additional safeguard, I used pseudonyms, treated the students' work confidentially and did not use direct quotations. For Etherington (2004, p. 8) 'writing about aspects of our lives can become a healing endeavour (whether for research purposes or otherwise) that strengthens our connections with our body, mind and spirit through sharing our experiences and newly discovered self-knowledge'. However, I was aware of potential risks to the emotional well-being of

the researcher engaging in critically reflective practice which can have a detrimental impact on personal and professional identity (Yip, 2006).

Action Inquiry: Stage 2

3. What kind of evidence can I produce to show what is happening?

Personal writing. The process of reviewing and redrafting one of his published papers led Diamond (1993) to new understandings of the construct of 'voice' and led him to conclude that he needed to 'still my over-dominant professor voice and to speak for myself'. I hoped to gain similar insights by revisiting six completed EdD assignments and feedback on these. I read all the assignments in hard copy, looking for instances of my use of the passive and active voice and reviewed each assignment electronically using the 'find' facility to audit the extent to which I used the first person 'I' and 'the researcher'.

Reviewing my first assignment, I was particularly surprised that I did not once use the first person, given that this was a report on a small-scale evaluative study I had conducted with teachers in the school where I had worked. However, I used the passive voice liberally as in 'a question was omitted', 'teachers were not asked', and 'the consent of each participant was sought'. I used 'the researcher' when I was referring to ethics, writing about the research design, drawing conclusions and describing what I did. Some of these usages now strike me as ridiculous such as 'the researcher considered the use of structured observations', 'the researcher is circumspect in drawing conclusions', 'the researcher hoped to achieve', and 'it appears to this researcher'. Tutors applied the red pen liberally to these and advised using 'I'. My sense is that this was the tradition I was accustomed to in writing for my masters and I also imagine that, as discussed by Germano (2005), I was trying to lend some kind of authority to this early writing. I then decided to review my masters thesis discovering that I had used 'I' only in the declaration and the acknowledgements but had used 'the researcher' 23 times. In retrospect, it was clear that I had been applying the conventions I had used successfully in the masters programme. Viewed in terms of the typology presented by Lea & Street (2006), I was adopting a study skills approach assuming that my literacy practice would transfer from the context of the masters to the doctoral programme.

In my second and third assignments, I may have over compensated for this, using 'I' three and 12 times, respectively, and 'the researcher' only twice. In both assign- ments I was describing quantitative research projects and in my third assignment, my use of 'I' was noted and considered inappropriate by a tutor. In this instance, my approach seems to have been grounded in an academic socialization (Lea & Street, 2006) model of acculturation based on which I assumed that I would be able to apply newly acquired ground rules across genres and disciplines within the doctoral programme. In the remaining three assignments, I was surprised that I used 'I' only twice in total and 'the researcher' only in a generic sense rather than to represent myself as in, 'the implications for the researcher are considerable' and 'the need for the researcher to engage reflexively with their data'. Retrospectively, I wonder if this was 'playing safe', an indication of a subconscious awareness of the inadequacies of the study skills and academic socialization models I had been applying?

However, perhaps the single most striking finding from this review is that, in every assignment to date, I have used the passive voice at least once (and sometimes as many as three times) on every page. In evaluating my work, two

tutors felt that I needed to 'own the material' more and advised less use of the passive. As I read back over the assignments and considered how I would edit them, there are instances where I shudder at the pomposity they suggest: 'piloting was employed', 'it was necessary to recode'. At the same time there are many instances where I would continue to use the passive form as in: 'it is often assumed that', 'it has been argued that the experimental paradigm is underpinned by' and 'each of these themes is outlined separately below'.

Supervisory practice. Initial journal entries recorded at this time while I was reading students' theses also confirmed my discomfort at seeing 'I' in print and, my preference for the passive voice.

> (June 2008) As I write this I can hear myself saying to students ... "I delivered the questionnaires to the teachers"... " is there another way of saying this without using I? Consider using the passive voice".... And "there's the rub"! I've discovered a complete inconsistency, indeed hypocrisy in my practice. On the one hand I am actively discouraging students from using the first person while at the same time I'm reasonably happy to use 'I' sparingly when describing my actions, at least in a research paper.

4. What can I do about what I find?

Having identified these specific issues as my focus, I began to unpack these by engaging in a systematic and critical self-reflective evaluation of my practice. During this phase of the inquiry I was 'reflecting-in action' as I was writing this paper and reading three masters theses. I began by writing McCarthy's (1994, cited in McNiff et al., 1996) triad of questions namely 'what am I doing? why am I doing it like that? and how can I improve it ?' in my research diary. I then used these questions to focus and guide my internal dialogue as I critically and systematically reflected on the processes I engaged in while writing this paper and reading the theses.

Personal writing. Reflecting on when, how and why I choose to use the passive voice, I identified two somewhat distinct categories of usage. In the first of these my intention seemed to be to intentionally distance myself from the action as in 'the questionnaires were distributed to' and 'it was considered appropriate'. In the second, choosing the passive form seemed to be related to how general or specific I wished to be. Thus, I chose to use the passive voice when writing in broad terms as in 'co-teaching is defined as' or, 'In these Learning Support Guidelines a high priority is placed on'. In contrast, when the focus was narrower or more specific, I opted to use the active form as in 'the selected studies exemplify' and 'the use of this narrative approach constitutes'. From this vantage point I find my intentionally distancing use of the passive excruciatingly pompous and I sense that I will be wary of writing in this way again. The second type of usage seems more complex in that if my decisions are based on how specific or general I wish to be, this seems very arbitrary.

5. What kind of evidence can I produce to show that what I am doing is having an impact?

Personal writing. During this phase I continued to engage in critical reflection on and in my writing practice using McCarthy's (1994, cited in McNiff et al., 1996) internal dialogue framework. Thus, by monitoring the processes I engaged in as I

wrote, I tried to demonstrate, and subsequently evaluate, the impact on my understanding of the process and the extent to which my thinking may have changed over the course of the inquiry (McNiff et al., 1996). Reflecting as I wrote, I looked for changes in the ways in which I articulate my voice in my academic writing, my use of the passive and active voice and the extent to which I am happy to use the first person 'I'.

> (August 2008) As I draft, redraft, edit, rewrite, redraft this paper, I'm feeling quite confused. In the last paragraph alone, I have used 'I' nine times and 'my' six times. Paradoxically, the traditional empirical, researcher part of me feels quite pleased that I have outlined precisely what I did/felt with no room for ambiguity and I am happy that, in this instance, reporting in the first person is direct, precise, informa- tive and effective. That said, it's worth admitting that, in earlier drafts there was a lot of hiding behind the ''curtain of the passive'' (Germano, 2005, p. 20)…. ''It was hoped to engage in consultation'', ''it was possible to illustrate the process'', ''the impact of this action inquiry is evaluated below''. I notice a tendency to distance myself from the action in other ways by using linguistic forms such as ''this phase involved continuing engagement in'' or ''a review demonstrates''. Perhaps, my initial reluctance to use the first person forms stems from a desire to lend a wider significance to my writing (Kamler & Thomson, 2006) and that might also explain my felt need to reference other authors, even when engaging in self-reflection! (That's a first- I usually have an aversion to exclamation marks in formal academic writing).

Supervisory practice. At this stage, I had also read each of the three theses twice. In the first reading, I reflected on my thoughts and feelings using McCarthy's (1994, cited in McNiff et al., 1996) internal dialogue framework, trying to interpret my responses to the writing rather than evaluating the quality of the work per se. Then, in the second reading, I applied the criteria to evaluate the theses, highlighted what I perceived as the strengths and weaknesses, drafted reports and assigned tentative grades and marks for discussion with my colleagues who were co-marking the theses.

6. How will I evaluate that impact?

Personal writing. To evaluate the impact of this self-reflective inquiry on my writing practice, I continued to reflect on the processes I engaged in and the thoughts I experienced as I wrote. It is evident that I have used the first person extensively in this paper, a trend that is hardly surprising given the nature of the inquiry. I have also used the passive voice, albeit much more sparingly than in earlier assignments and primarily in providing signposting for the reader and in critiquing literature. The experience of framing and writing the inquiry in the personal has been a liberating and transformative experience and has certainly left me better able to bring the personal voice into my writing.

Supervisory practice. McNiff et al. (1996) contended that practitioner researchers need to consult with those on whom the action is having an impact and who are therefore in a position to gauge whether the situation has improved. In this action inquiry, the focus was entirely on the development of my thinking, it was not possible to consult with students and it could be argued that, during this initial self-reflective cycle there was little if any impact on either students or colleagues. Nonetheless, while I was reflecting I was also assessing students'

work and so I felt it was my responsibility as a researcher to highlight this for my colleagues who were jointly assessing the theses and to seek their support as critical friends. First, I asked them to monitor and critique the ways in which I was assessing the theses, being especially mindful to critically review the extent to which I was assessing the work in terms of the written criteria and not placing undue weight on other issues, particularly the substantive issue of voice. Both agreed to do this, and one, Pat also agreed to act as a critical friend as I shared and discussed extracts from my reflective journal with her. (Pseudonyms are used throughout).

7. How will I ensure that any judgements I might make are reasonably fair and accurate?

Supervisory practice. My discussion with Pat took place immediately after we had read and jointly assessed the two theses.

> (3rd of July 2008) (reading Aisling's thesis)
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> I'm struck by the immediacy of her constant use of 'I' over three pages when she describes the procedures she followed in gaining access to the site and negotiating with the participants … My thinking is that here it is preferable to using 'the researcher' or a passive form … more powerful, engaging, storied, more voice … and I think it strange that she has chosen to use the passive voice when describing what she observed in the classroom. In discussing her findings and making recommendations, Aisling uses the passive voice regularly with tentative modalities of the type "could be given" or "might be considered" and although my thinking is that this is appropriate, I wonder is this because these are the kinds of linguistic forms that I would use and advised at the formative stages?
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> (4th of July 2008) (reading Maggie's thesis)
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> Immediately I'm struck by the fact that Maggie uses only 'the researcher' and the passive voice in her thesis and 'I' appears only in the acknowledgements. Why is this? She writes "the researcher welcomes …." Has she got this from me? During a tutorial I clearly remember saying to her that the passive voice was a useful device. Is she playing safe, giving me what she thinks I want to read? Or would she write in that way regardless? Would her writing be more powerful if she wrote in the first person? In supervising her work, I never remember feeling that her writing was distant or doubted her authority in her work. In fact I strongly suspect that I wouldn't have noticed any of this were I not writing this paper. And, regardless of the fact that the style is not personal, she tells a good story and engages the reader.

After we agreed the reports and marks for the theses, I asked Pat to consider how she felt I had interpreted and responded to the use of passive and active voice and the use of I in the students' writing.

> (8th of July 2008) (meeting with Pat)
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> Pat recalled something that I had said during a supervision meeting several months ago but interestingly, I'd forgotten. She says we discussed Maggie's use of 'I' and 'the researcher' and remembered that my viewpoint was that she would have to make decisions about this and that I was quite adamant that I wouldn't edit her work and suggest changes either way. She also recalled that during earlier

meetings to review the students' work, I had felt that Aisling needed to avoid sweeping statements of her opinions and back up her assertions with reference. I think it interesting that I did not refer to this in today's discussion. Pat spoke of "Aisling's obvious passion for and investment in her subject coming across very strongly" and I agree that in her writing she managed to convey the strength of her personal conviction. Pat also said that when she was reading Maggie's work she wished that similar passion would come through, saying "come on Maggie, light my fire about this".

This really left me wondering had I short-changed Maggie in some way and speculating about whether she might have used a more personal style had I, as her supervisor, been more open to this at the time.

8. What will I do then?

Personal writing. I view this self-reflective action inquiry as the first phase of an on-going spiral of cycles of research about academic writing. While the focus in this initial first-person phase was on my own practice and thinking, subsequent cycles of second and third-person action inquiry could fruitfully involve dialogue and inquiry with colleagues and/or students. Engaging in reflection on my own practice has made me more mindful of the value of engaging teachers in reflective enquiry into their professional practice in order to uncover their tacit knowledge of, and thus improve, their practice. I also hope that in the future I will be able to work collaboratively with colleagues exploring understandings of voice in academic writing.

Benefits and limitations

While the aim of this action inquiry was to improve my writing by reflecting on, 'looking squarely in the face' and thus 'de-mystifying' my practice' (McCammon & Smigiel, 2004), the outcomes of engaging in this self-study have been more far-reaching than I initially envisaged. Like Cooper and Stevens (2006), I now appreciate the inherent value of keeping a reflective journal in helping me to cope with the demands of my professional life and in continuing to learn and develop through engaging in and recording internal conversations with myself about my practice. While previously I may have paid lip service to the value of reflective practice, this inquiry has made me very aware of the benefits for all professionals and I am therefore more committed to encouraging and supporting teachers to engage in reflective practice both in teaching and research. Finally, writing this paper has led me to a rich body of research using innovative and powerful approaches such as narrative, fiction, fable (Dadds & Hart, 2001) and drama (McCammon & Smigiel, 2004; Taylor, 2004). Although mindful of the kind of challenges such approaches may provide for the academe (Dadds & Hart, 2001), I see their real value and potential and hope in the future to be more open to such approaches in my own research and more able to support and guide practitioner researchers wishing to work in such ways. Paradoxically, however, engaging in the process has heightened my awareness that, although I may have a 'deeper' knowledge than before, this remains a 'thoroughly partial understanding … we know more and doubt what we know' (Etherington, 2004, p. 10).

A very significant limitation of this research arises from the fact that this is an individual inquiry and there was little opportunity to engage in the kind of 'joint and reciprocal social action' envisaged by Adelman (1993, p. 21). The trustworthiness of the inquiry would have been greatly strengthened had it been possible to involve

colleagues more fully in monitoring and critically evaluating the conduct of the inquiry. In this regard, criteria such as those developed by Marshall and Mead (2005) would have provided a useful template. A key criterion is the extent to which the work is sufficiently reflexive whether there is 'sufficient "showing", speaking from experience, to evocatively accompany and illustrate "telling", talking about the inquiry' (Marshall & Mead, 2005, p. 235). In addition, for Etherington (2004), the impact of the work on the reader is also important and derives from the writer's willingness to engage emotionally (Leitch & Day, 2000) to work at their 'learning edge' (Marshall & Mead, 2005).

> (August 2008) But, just now I'm not happy to ask my usual critic, proofreader and friend to read this and give me some feedback in terms of his response to the paper. I did consider just giving him an edited version minus my reflective pieces but I can't really see any validity in that.

Conclusion

Conducting and reporting this action inquiry has been a challenging and complex process. At the outset, my focus was firmly on a pragmatic concern with improving my practice, my aim to find answers to the tricky question of when using 'I' was appropriate. In the process, however, the focus has developed to include a concern with uncovering the tacit knowledge, which underlies the ways in which I write. This shift in focus might be considered to represent a development in the theoretical framework underpinning the inquiry, moving from a 'technical' model of action inquiry, focused on efficient practice towards an 'emancipatory' model with a focus on revealing and freeing the practitioner from the learnt habits and traditions which often guide practice (Grundy, 1982, cited in Leitch & Day, 2000). Moreover, the process of conducting this self-reflective inquiry into my personal writing practice leads me to concur with the conclusions of Lea and Street (2006) regarding the need for expansive models of academic literacies to conceptualize and support student writing practices.

In the process of reflecting systematically and rigorously on the processes and thinking I engage in as I write, I have made a tentative move towards bridging this gap 'between my intellectual work … and myself as a person' (Heen, 2005, p. 264). Along the way I have had real concerns about the value of this and experienced nagging doubts that this was self-centred and solipsistic. However, my hope is that this initial 'introspective' (Leitch & Day, 2000) action inquiry will lead to future collective action inquiry conducted in collaboration with the support of 'friends willing to act as enemies' and of 'friends willing to act as friends' (Torbert, 1976; Marshall
& Reason, 1993, cited in Marshall & Mead, 2005, p. 237).

Epilogue

> (August 2008) So what is this academic/scholarly/doctoral writing that I'm supposed to be aiming at? I'm afraid of failure, afraid of getting things wrong, convinced that someday someone will blow my cover, discover that I'm an imposter in academia, that I haven't got what it takes. Pursuing this doctorate is I suppose one way of trying to prove that I have some of the currency of the academy; a little bit of knowledge perhaps, and some skills. Then, if I can only manage to write with some authority, convince the academy that I might have something to say; someday someone might decide that I can be called a doctor.

Note

1. Since writing this paper, the author has successfully defended her doctoral thesis and was awarded the degree of EdD in December 2010.

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