

Exploratory Practice

These pages give an overview of Dick Allwright's 'exploratory practice' (EP) which he presents as an alternative to action research and traditional classroom research, both of which typically use conventional research techniques.

Why EP?

EP should be of particular interest to those who want to engage in professional development activities that do not compete with the need to conduct more traditional research, because it minimises the 'parasitic' nature of classroom research, 'parasitic' because conventional classroom research takes time and effort from the real learning and teaching activities.

Key Features of Exploratory Practice

Three fundamentals

- The aim of EP is to prioritise the quality of life of our learning–teaching environment above any concern for instructional efficiency.
- EP aims to develop our understandings of the quality of learning- teaching life instead of simply searching for ever-'improved' teaching techniques.
- EP recognises the fundamentally social nature of the mutual quest for understanding, in which both learners and teachers can develop.

Why work for understanding?

Dick Allwright, who has been central to the development of EP, says of the typical approaches to quality improvement:

We have been seduced by the prevailing 'wisdom' that participant research must essentially aim to improve the efficiency of [professional practice], typically by isolating practical problems and solving them one by one. We have largely accepted that such 'improvement' will be best achieved by the practitioners themselves, addressing their classroom problems as mainly technical ones, to be solved by the development of 'better' teaching techniques.

Allwright, 2003: 113–14

Allwright rejects this notion of the aim of practitioner research, focusing instead on the social nature of teaching and the need for all participants to be aware of the processes involved:

Working for understanding life in the classroom will provide a good foundation for helping teachers and learners make their time together pleasant and productive. It will also, I believe, prove to be a friend of intelligent and lasting pedagogic change, since it will automatically provide a firm foundation for any 'improvements' that investigation suggests are worth trying.

Puzzles, not problems

ibid p114

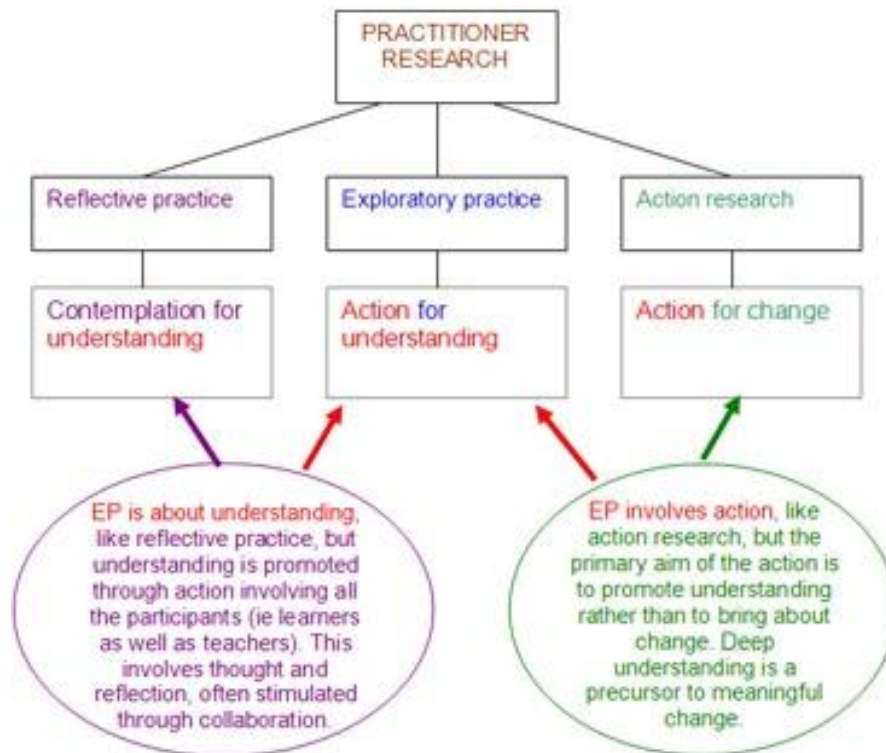
I advocate working with 'puzzles', rather than problems, partly to avoid the negative connotations of 'problem' (which may be seen as an admission of incompetence), and partly to involve areas of learning-teaching life that are not obviously 'problematic', but which we might well want to try to understand better.

ibid p117

But EP is for language classrooms

Although EP was 'initially developed as a coherent set of ideas about practices for language teaching and learning research', we (like Allwright) believe that it 'offers a set of principles for any sort of practitioner research.' (ibid p109).

Figure 1: How does EP relate to other approaches to classroom research and reflective practice?



How to do EP

Four steps

Note: these typical steps and are given only as a guide for getting started. They are not intended as a rigid prescription. The principles are more important than the steps.

- a The puzzle (cf identification and refinement of a set of research questions)
 - Identify a puzzle area.
 - Refine your thinking about the puzzle area (discuss with colleagues).
 - Select a particular topic to focus on.
- b The method
 - Find appropriate classroom procedures to explore it (eg, group work discussion, survey, role-play, diaries, poster session).
 - Adapt the classroom procedure to the puzzle you want to explore.
 - Use the procedure in class ('data collection').

- c Reflection and interpretation
 - Interpret the outcomes.

Implications

- Decide on implications and plan accordingly.

Adapted from Allwright, 2004.

The dual processes of EP

(Note: the two sets of processes given here are inter-related and often concurrent; a chronological sequence is not intended by the order in which they are presented).

The processes are:

- a taking action for understanding: this focuses on the processes themselves
 - bringing puzzling issues of classroom life to consciousness
 - thinking 'harder' with other practitioners (peers and/or co-participants) inside and/or outside the classroom
 - looking/listening - attending more intensively to what is going on, as it is going on
 - planning for understanding by adopting familiar pedagogic procedures to help develop participant understandings
- b working with emerging understanding: focus is on the content of the process
 - reflexively expressing and appraising personal/collective insights
 - unpicking and refining common notions of 'change'
 - discussing potential personal or collective moves
 - sharing personal understanding of processes as a way of supporting others and of inviting others to join the EP community of practice.

References

Allwright, D. (2003). Exploratory Practice: rethinking practitioner research in language teaching. *Language Teaching Research*, 7(2), 113–14.

Allwright, D. (2004). Developing principles for practitioner research: the case of exploratory practice. Paper presented for AAAL colloquium, Portland, Oregon, May 2004.