

# **DCU Research Ethics Committee Guideline Statement on Insider Research**

## **Introduction**

Insider research is the term used to describe research in which the researcher has a direct involvement or connection with the research setting. There are challenges for the researcher related to interacting with one's own peers, colleagues and study participants (e.g. students) which must be addressed. Never forget that you may be working with these people long after the research project is completed. The researcher also has a responsibility to the people involved in the research and for ensuring high quality research. Of particular importance is addressing the power relations, and of addressing the potential for bias in the research. In relation to bias, there are many steps an insider can take to guard against bias in the work, for example paying careful attention to feedback from participants, carrying out an initial evaluation of data, ensuring triangulation in the methods of gathering data and being aware of the issues represented in the project.

## **Overall Sections**

- 1. Definitions of insider research**
- 2. Challenges of insider research**
- 3. Responsibilities of an insider researcher**
- 4. Responsibilities of a teacher researcher**
- 5. Ethics**
- 6. Quality measures**

### **1. Definitions of insider research, action research, practitioner research**

Insider research is the term used to describe research in which the researcher has a direct involvement or connection with the research setting. Insider research means that the researcher shares an identity, language, and experiential base with the study participants (Asselin, 2003). Such research contrasts with traditional notions of scientifically sound research in which the researcher is an 'objective outsider' studying subjects external to his/herself (Denzin and Lincoln, 2000).

Brinkmann and Kvale (2005) advise that when conducting interviews, research ethics are as important as methodology, and one must be aware of the power dynamics at play in requesting study participants (e.g. colleagues at all levels) to be involved in the research. It should be acknowledged that just because the researcher can access people, or information about people, in order to conduct research, it doesn't mean that they should do so – at least not without consideration of the ethical implications. At the same time, it is important to acknowledge the contribution that insider research can make to an organisation, service or

community. There is a growing recognition that work-based projects may prove immensely beneficial to the long-term success of companies (Raelin, 2008). The Higher Education Academy in the UK published a 'Work-Based Learning Impact Study' (Nixon, 2008), which shows that insider research can lead to the exchange or generation of new knowledge (in the workplace).

**Action research**, in its strict sense, refers to research that uses a cyclical, action-reflection model to investigate and attempt to make change in an organisation (Noffke & Somekh, 2009). Many people think that any intervention in a situation is action research. However, in an action research approach it is expected that there will be cycles of action/reflection, where insights from the reflection on action will produce further rounds of actions.

Organistic action research sees the inquiry process as having value in itself where the focus is less on the outcomes and more on "what is being learned, and how the process of inquiry challenges values and ways of working and enacts a transformation of being" (Reason and Bradbury, 2001 in Coghlan, 2003, p.455). A mechanistic-orientated action research is instrumental with research framed in terms of managing a specific change or a particular problem (Coghlan 2003).

**Participatory action research (PAR)** is a form of action research in which professional social researchers operate as full collaborators with members of organisations in studying and transforming those organisations (Greenwood et al, 1993).

With regards to action research, Herr and Anderson (2005) express the view that the researcher may adopt a position as either an insider or an outsider, depending on the type of action research. The authors believe that what is important is the collaborative nature of the relationship between the researcher and the participants. Positionality within action research has been represented by Herr and Anderson (2005) as a continuum on a scale of 1 to 6, where the location of the researcher on the insider–outsider continuum is linked to a research approach ranging from 'the insider engaged in self-study' to 'the outsider researching the insider'.

Scale 1= Insider (researcher studies own self/practice).

Scale 2= Insider in collaboration with other insiders.

Scale 3= Insider(s) in collaboration with outsider(s).

Scale 4= Reciprocal collaboration (in-sider/outsider teams).

Scale 4= Outsider(s) in collaboration with insider(s).

Scale 5= Outsider studies the insider. [Adapted from Herr and Anderson (2005)]

**Practitioner research** is research carried out by practitioners themselves and involves a process of discovering and framing questions about the practitioner's own work, collecting data, and analysing data to answer the questions.

**Teacher research** can be 'practical inquiry' which is relevant to the teacher's local context or 'formal inquiry' which contributes to the general knowledge in the field of education (Raphael et al, 1999).

**Self-study research** in the context of teacher education is considered an appropriate approach for inquiring into one's own beliefs and practices and as a way of contributing knowledge to the field of teacher education (Dinkelman, 2003).

**Interview Research** and the power of asymmetries in interview relationships is highlighted by Kvale (2008) who proposes that the power play of this interaction be made transparent by presenting the method of an investigation, so that readers may ascertain the potential effects of the power play on the knowledge reported (p. 496). The power dynamics involved in requesting colleagues at various levels to be involved in research is further discussed by Costerly et al, (2010) in 'Doing Work Based Research' (Chapter 4 'Privilege, power and politics in work based research').

## **2. Ethical issues for Insider research – Benefits and Challenges**

The following ethical challenges in insider research have been identified by Costerly et al (2010).

- negotiating access to your own work situation as an area being researched and securing consent for the research to take place
- promising anonymity and confidentiality to your own colleagues
- possibly challenging the value system of your organisation or professional field in some way
- interviewing your own colleagues
- managing the power implications of your work and your positioning as a researcher and as a practitioner within your research project.

## **3. Responsibilities of an insider-researcher**

In relation to bias, there are many steps an insider can take to guard against bias, for example paying careful attention to feedback from participants, carrying out an initial evaluation of data, ensuring triangulation in the methods of gathering data and being aware of the issues represented in the project. This is facilitated by an ability to be open, authentic, honest,

deeply interested in the experience of one's research participants, and committed to accurately and adequately representing their experience. There is a responsibility to understand where the researcher is positioned and to explore how their status may affect the research process and its outcomes. In relation to this latter point, Costerly (2010) emphasises the importance of articulating one's own perspective or premise clearly; "Your insights as an insider are valuable because of your depth of knowledge, but you should also demonstrate that you understand alternative perspectives" (p. 33)

#### **4. Teacher Research**

Pecorino, Kincaid, and Gironda (2008, p. 9) identify questions that educators should ask themselves when they experiment or conduct research in the classroom.

The questions are as follows;

1. Am I causing harm to my students?
2. Am I providing benefit?
3. Am I fulfilling my professional obligations as a teacher and a researcher?

Question one asks that we treat others with respect and dignity, and refrain from harming them, regardless of our 'status' in the relationship. With regards to question two, as guardians, educators are obliged to act in the best interests of their students, that is, to promote effective learning, and to fulfil the requirements of educational institutions regarding democratic citizenship. Question 3 refers to our obligation as researchers and experimenters, to maintain a commitment to responsible enquiry, and to the advancement of the profession of education itself.

#### **5. Ethics**

Barbour (2008) advises researchers (including insider researchers) to give careful consideration to the following questions:

- Research design: The ethical review process can be useful, in that it requires the researcher to take a critical look at their schedule.
- How to identify and approach potential participants
- What you're asking of participants
- Consent
- Reciprocity and remuneration
- Confidentiality and anonymity
- Impact on participants
- Engagement and participatory methods

- Impact on researchers.

## 6. Quality measure in Practitioner Inquiry/Research

In relation to 'quality assurance' of practitioner research, Groundwater-Smith and Mockler (2007) highlight key concerns in this area. Quality requires close interrogation in the following areas; 1. Evidence. 2. Purpose and 3. The Nature of Outcomes that are produced. So **Evidence, Purpose and Outcomes.**

### Quality of Evidence

Quality of evidence is underpinned by ethical principles such as informed consent; it also involves a desire to be authentic in engaging with the research process, such that evidence is collected with the intent not merely of celebrating that which is to be celebrated, but also developing an understanding of that which is more problematic. Groundwater-Smith and Mockler (2007) points to evidence collected under duress, evidence collected covertly, evidence that is not validated by triangulation and evidence that has not been debated as evidence that is invalid (p. 207).

### Quality of purpose

This relates to the ways in which practitioner inquiry endeavours are conceived and enacted. The questions being asked and the evidence being gathered as part of the research enterprise should emanate from the genuine and authentic concerns of those involved. Groundwater-Smith and Mockler (2007) assert that practitioner research fails the 'quality of purpose' test when it is implemented in a 'top down' way.

### Quality of outcome

Quality of outcome relates particularly to the balance of critical and celebratory stances taken in relation to practitioner research (Groundwater-Smith and Mockler, 2005, 2006, 2007, 2009). The role of practitioner inquiry is to problematise practice, to shed light on the more difficult aspects of work practices and to move well beyond celebration. An important outcome is that the knowledge that has been developed is acted upon. Knowledge must be put to good use (Groundwater-Smith and Mockler, 2007, p. 208)

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