Translations and contradictions: on making a difference and critical distance

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Abstract

This paper argues that simple dissemination models do not work and that arguments about evidence-based policy and practice are based on inadequate understandings of science. One of the strengths of close-up research, with its emphasis on depth and understanding, is that it can identify why things are as they are and by extension when we identify wrongs seek to challenge them. Based on a critical realist understanding of normativity there are no good philosophical reasons for not connecting research and practice. The paper suggests, however, that making a difference is fraught with contradictions and tension and that the translation from research to action is far from straightforward since agents (ourselves, students, and teachers) confront situations not of our own choosing. The paper explores this dilemma by analysing the Formations of Gender and Higher Education Pedagogies project undertaken by Penney Jane Burke and colleagues and by reflecting back on some of the authors own efforts to make a difference based on research projects conducted with Jacqueline Stevenson. The Formations of Gender project was based on a participatory methodology and produced resources for teachers and is an excellent example of close-up research aimed at making a difference. However, there is a tension between the advice for teachers and the conditions under which staff find themselves practicing. In our own work our critical stance on employability was in tension with our suggestion that students could draw on their extra-curricular activities as a way of building and consolidating cultural capital. The problem and paradox was that in effect we were saying to students become better neo-liberal subjects, bring more areas of life under surveillance as part of the narrative of the employable self, so re-instantiating the position that we had criticised and deconstructed at the beginning of the research. Our translations into what we hoped were usable staff and student texts, as part of ‘making a difference’, recommended that which we had been at pains to critique. There is an inevitability about these moves, but at the same time as exploring the slippages of translation and loss of criticality I want to defend notion of praxis as theoretically informed change for critical social purposes. This involves a view of making a difference and research that moves beyond thinking of research as a discrete act and invokes the significance of corporate agency and the possibilities of acting collectively.

Introduction

The arguments for why evidence based approaches which rely on simple dissemination models do not work are well rehearsed. Many versions of ‘evidence’ rely on models derived from medical science and the outcomes from gold standard randomised controlled trials which are then disseminated based on a systematic review of the literature (Evans & Benefield 2001, Clegg 2005, McLure 2005). The whole point of experimentation, however, is that constant conjunctions are produced in the closed conditions of the laboratory whereas professionals operate in open and messy systems. What really matters is knowing why something works. Understanding the nature of explanation requires a more sophisticated ontology and epistemology of science that goes beyond mere Humean regularity (Bhaskar 1978,1986). Even if one is forgiving of the evidence-based movement in medicine (and there is much to recommend it) the idea of the gold standard as a model for education (and the social sciences more generally) it is fatally flawed. Non-trivial experimentation in higher education research is virtually impossible on ethical and methodological grounds and where programme evaluations have been done we find that somethings work in some circumstances and not in others (Tilley & Pawson 1997). Ray Pawson (2006) has developed a much more sophisticated model of evaluation based on understanding the underlying mechanisms involved rather than on programme evaluations. The challenge of this work is the theoretical resolution involved in identifying what such mechanisms might be. I have criticised systematic reviews done in higher education for their failure to achieve this (Clegg 2005). One of the functions of close-up research with its emphasis on depth and understanding is an attempt to explain why things are as they are and, where we identify wrongs, ceritis paribus how we might change them. The underlying impulse for much research and scholarship, particularly that inspired by feminist, post-colonial and other radical frameworks, is to change things for the better. Andrew Sayer (2011) has convincingly argued (again contra-
Hume) that there are good philosophical reasons why we can and should make the move from states of affairs to normative conclusion – in other words derive ought from is.

The problems we face in close-up research making a difference – the theme of the conference – are therefore not primarily philosophical as, as I have argued above, we have sophisticated accounts of why we can and should make the move from research to practice. The difficulty, as close-up research on organisational change so amply demonstrates, is that change is mediated through complex cultural channels and that impact is unlikely to be linear. In higher education these mediations involve disciplinary and departmental cultures and shared memories and stories about how and why innovations have been tried in the past and have or have not worked (Clegg 2006). Passive dissemination models rarely work and strategies of involvement and dialogue are a necessary, if not sufficient, condition for the implementation of change as Murray Saunders (2014) argues in his think piece. Most academic development and change strategies have been developed based on this need for engagement. Much academic development work, however, has moved away from an orientation towards the individual teacher to attempting to work at the institutional level and reconfigure rewards and disincentives for good teaching as it at this level that the contradictions of the system are played out. This has uncomfortable consequences for the identity of those academic developers who would see themselves as critical researchers because institutional and national level priorities have often resulted in managerialist responses and pressures rather than on the praxis models invoked in some academic development writing (Grant 2007). Academic development is a particular case, but I want to argue that even where research is close-up and designed to yield insights into practice, and even where written and face-to-face dissemination has been designed to engage directly with practitioners and/or directly with students, problems of translation and loss of criticality haunt our efforts to make a difference. The topic shifts as it moves from research writing into guidance for practice if, as nearly always the case, the conditions under which efforts at improvement or change are attempted remain essentially the same. In conditions not of our own choosing assessing the scope for real change is difficult, and of course saying well I really wouldn’t want to start here, while often true, is not likely to either inspire or engage practitioner actors and policy makers. Making a difference inside a system inevitably involves a compromise whereby a bracket is effectively placed around the things which are not under the control of the particular actors in concrete situation. As Margaret Archer (2012) has recently argued The reflexive imperative in late modernity late modernity has not liberated us from structural constraints as some theorists of ‘individualised individualism’ (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim 2002) have suggested rather we are confronted with an intensification of morphogenesis at both cultural and structural levels presenting us with ‘contextual incongruity’ which she argued predispenses subjects towards meta-reflexivity. This contextual incongruity confronts both us as researchers and those we are researching as we struggle with problems to be solved in everyday life in our attempts to realise projects which matter to us. This paper will explore some of these tensions through analysing projects explicitly designed to make a difference and in revisiting some of my own and Jacqueline Stevenson’s research which was designed with change in mind. The dilemmas and contradictions of translation into action are both practical and intellectual and making a difference involves consideration of both structure and agency. Ironically our explanations are often better at accounting for why desired changes did not come about rather than being able to make the claim that they did.

Translations and contradictions

Much close-up research starts from radical premises and is based on commitments to social justice. An excellent recent example would be the work of Penny Jane Burke and her collaborators on Formations of Gender and Higher Education Pedagogies (Burke et al 2012) undertaken in the context of concerns for widening participation and fairer access. The methodology was explicitly designed to involve the participants and with making a difference in mind:

The project took a participatory methodological approach, which involved methods of qualitative data collection about HE teachers’ and students’ experiences and perspectives of HE pedagogies (through in-depth and detailed interviews) and of their practices (through observations of classroom practice). Additionally, the project sought to enhance participation in consideration of pedagogical relations, experiences and practices through a range of participatory methods including workshops, forums, seminars and discussions. The research was designed to create dialogic spaces of reflexivity in which HE teachers and students critically discussed and reflected on their pedagogical experiences and practices in a wider social context that explored the relationship between HE pedagogies, complex inequalities and exclusions at the micro-level of classroom experiences and the significance of identity formations in shaping HE pedagogies and spaces. (Burke et al 2012, 3-4)
The dissemination activity included extended discussions with other staff and students not directly involved in the project. In addition to traditional academic outputs the project also produced resources for teachers which summarised findings, explained concepts, suggested further reading and most importantly asks questions which challenge staff to think about their own teaching and notice the ways in which their assumptions and those of their students may be at variance and also to be aware of the variability of student responses in the class room (Burke & Crozier 2012). It is an exemplary piece of close-up research aimed at making a difference. But I am struck by a contradiction. In the conclusions to the main report they note:

Many of the lecturers expressed a deep sense of disempowerment in terms of increasing workloads, high levels of institutional expectation not least connected to the marketisation of HE and the rapid pace of change in HE policy. Widening participation presents rich pedagogical opportunities but also complex challenges. Institutions and policy-makers at the national level must acknowledge these challenges and support lecturers. (Burke et al 2012, 56).

There can be no gain-saying the need identified in the last sentence but there is ample evidence that this is not happening indeed the highly sophisticated understanding of pedagogy and widening participation which the project so brilliantly explores are being undermined by the policy shift to reframe the agenda as simply one of fair access. Even this low level aspiration is unfilled as Vikki Boliver (2013) has demonstrated. There is a slippage therefore in the translation of the research findings into practice both at the level of policy, where the conditions for the realization of the full meaning of widening participation are being undermined, and also at the level of pedagogy. The questions addressed to teachers are ones that they can individually reflexively process but if the conclusions of the report are accepted having reflected many staff will feel powerless to act on their insights in all but small ways. The real contradictions of the world in which students and staff find themselves constrain and limit the translation of research into practice. This problem of translation is also evident in the resources for teachers, which carefully navigates between outlining the deeply embedded and often structural dynamics of inequalities in the operation of race, gender and class and the questions addressed to the teachers. Having noticed the teacher inevitably confronts the limits of individual reflexivity and indeed were she to follow up on the suggested readings the limits of individual agency might become even more apparent. None of this is in any way a criticism of the project which is exemplary – but it is to suggest that the connections between even brilliantly conducted close-up research and making a difference is a hard road to navigate and one which requires something beyond individual agency.

There is a further conundrum in relation to making a difference because in conditions not of our own choosing the emergent strategy for change may stand in direct contradiction with the espoused critical stance of the researchers. Examples of the paradoxes we faced in this respect were research projects on extra-curricular activity and on student futures (Clegg et al 2010, Stevenson & Clegg 2011, Stevenson & Clegg 2012, Stevenson & Clegg 2013). These projects, like the project above, were framed within a normative commitment to widening participation and were directed at exploring and enhancing the cultural capital of students who come into higher education with different resources than those traditionally valued and associated with high market value. In terms of our theoretical orientations we were also wary of the way the idea of cultural capital can become a deficit model (Clegg 2011, Yosso 2005). In looking at extra-curricular activities we wanted to explore what got valued by staff and students and also how students understood the range of activities they undertook outside their formal course. These included paid work, caring and other responsibilities as well as the usual list of activities that can be undertaken by putative campus based fulltime students such as sporting, cultural, volunteering and other traditionally valorised accomplishments. We found that what was recognised as legitimate extra-curricular activity was highly gendered (care counted for little in the eyes of both staff and students outside particular instances for example in female dominated health professions) and that routine employment, often undertaken by less privileged students, was also down played. Our research grappled with the extent to which students, in order to construct a story of themselves into an employable and fulfilling future, could rescript an account of their capabilities and what they gained through their engagement with activities outside their course. The research was critical of the employability agenda and its framing in the context of neo-liberal understandings of the self. The paradox for us, however, was that in the activities we were involved in in trying to make a difference and help students we were in effect endorsing the elaboration of the sorts of self envisioned by the neo-liberal supply side economics of which we were critical (Clegg & Stevenson 2013). So while at one level we could maintain the critical distance necessary for academic work contradictions emerged when faced with our passionate commitments to diversity and equity and desire to help students realise their own life projects.

Our strategies of engagement, like the ones employed in the Formations of Gender project included working directly with staff as part of the research process, producing small colourful booklets aimed at students and staff often designed with students’ involvement, and direct face-to-face engagement and discussion, all things that might could be thought of as constituting good practice and designed in good faith to make a difference (egs include Stevenson et al 2010, Sealey et al 2012, Pool et al 2009). In effect, however, we were saying to students.
become a better neo-liberal subject, bring more areas of life under surveillance as part of the narrative of the employable self, so re-enacting the contradictions that we had criticised and deconstructed at the beginning of the research. We were also confronting the dilemma of espousing the notion of valuing activities such the learning from paid work when we know that the sorts of employment that gets valued is increasingly only available to the more privileged students while the work available to those students who have to work to live is undervalued and that the hours some students are working are detrimental to their degree achievement. While in academic writing it is reasonably easy to maintain critical distance and point out nuances and contradictions in translating this into usable guides this critical voice is more difficult to sustain. The critical parts of the commentary in the booklets are in tension with our exhortations to staff to pay attention to the different stories and modes of reflexivity students exhibited and to help them to articulate the benefits of participation more clearly for, among others, employers. It is not that the texts were uncritical, we consciously tried to make them so, but that much of what we were recommending rested on a level of resource that was not available to most of the staff who were our target audience. For example many of our recommendations involved more intensive interactions with individual students since one of the aspects of interviews that had moved us was that students told us they had never been able to articulate their aspirations in this way before as this was their first experience at university of a one-to-one conversation with an academic. We know, however, that this sort of being-with time is under pressure from the demands of research productivity and now the requirement that we evidence the impact of our research. This is especially onerous in higher education research since showing impact in relation to our students’ lives doesn’t count in the British research selectivity exercise the Research Excellence Framework (REF). We faced the same dilemmas as the *Formations of Gender* project in recommending strategies which research indicates are increasingly difficult to implement because of lack of resource and support. Lacking the ability to change the circumstances of practice we are all too aware that we are in danger of recommending a sort of hyper-performativity to both teachers and students.

**Concluding thoughts**

The paradoxes I have outlined are not capable of textual resolution. Indeed as I have indicated navigating our way through the world is getting harder not easier if Archer (2012) is correct about the nature of accelerated morphogenesis. Autonomous reflexivity, the rational self-interested reflexivity that underpins social mobility becomes harder to sustain as uncertainty increases. My conclusions are not simply ones of despair, however, since it seems to me even more important to analyse the contradictions of the systems we find ourselves in and to attempt an honest accounting of the limitations of our own work. Making a difference and even ‘research impact’ as understood in policy should never become just so stories. We need to be judicious, therefore, in thinking about agency and in delimiting the possibilities of a situation. While I have been critical of the extent to which teachers can exercise their powers in changing their pedagogic practice this does not mean that they have no scope for practicing in more careful and attentive ways. I have written elsewhere about the importance of kindness in pedagogic practice (Clegg & Rowland 2010) and there is a rich steam of Frierian scholarship about the significance of the commitments and actions of teachers (eg Darder 2007). Students also possess agency and negotiate the employability agenda and the possibilities open to them. Indeed what is remarkable in the projects reported on above is students’ abilities to form commitments to their own projects even when they recognize that the adversities they face. The resilience of students and the development of agency is a significant theme in higher education scholarship. Jenni Case (2013), for example, is doing important work on conceptualising student agency and she builds on data from students who have faced some of the most difficult backgrounds in the South African context. Much of this work is underpinned by a critical realist understanding of agency and the significance of embodiment and emotion and second order elaborations that are further articulated and expanded through our internal conversations in coming to commitments about the things that matter to us (Archer 2000). It is worth noting, however, that working from a feminist post-structuralist position Penny Jane Burke and other scholars draw very similar conclusions from their data (Burke 2012). We are impelled to think about emotion and commitment by virtue of our own commitments to making a difference.

Making a difference in the larger sense, however, also depends on the identification and indeed participation in larger networks and the development of what Archer (2000) calls corporate agency people who gather together to promote particular causes. She suggests that faced with contextual incongruity what we will increasing see is the rise of meta-reflexivity as ‘the dominant mode of internal deliberation’:

> The key to its experiential core is that *far from the social order being internalized or normalized, it is peculiarly problematized* for those who come to practice meta-reflexivity. (Archer 2012, 207)

While Archer does not directly explore this possibility it seems to me particularly fertile ground for the articulation of alternative projects not only at the individual level but also in relation to new social movements. I
want to defend a notion of praxis as theoretically informed change for critical social purposes and a view of making a difference and research that moves beyond thinking of them as discrete acts. But in order to this we need to create and support networks that can sustain possibilities for change. There is reason to think that change can and does happen and that collective action can have an impact. One social justice story that we can point to is that at undergraduate level at least women who had been excluded from higher education for the better part of the first half of the twentieth century now make up over fifty percent of undergraduates in England (Leathwood & Read 2009). Their entry into higher education and the social movements they participated in were in part responsible for transforming knowledge across the social sciences. This is not true everywhere and when we look at the intersections with race and class the picture looks much less rosy, nonetheless, quite fundamental shifts have taken place. Projects like the Formations of Gender and my own work could not have taken place without prior feminist scholarship and struggles, and we were also actors in those struggles. So change is possible, and as well as conceptualising research as close-up we need also to look at connections both intellectual and organisational - making a difference involves collective acts. Inevitably our attempts to make a difference will fall short of our aspirations but the idea of research that does not aspire to make a difference is incongruous. As Sayer (2011) points out in his study of lay normativity human beings are essentially evaluative in their relationship to the world and that includes our practice as researchers as much as in the rest of our lives. Making a difference involves evaluation and is about values and ethics:

We need to go back to basic concepts of value, reason and human being if we are to make progress across this difficult terrain. If my arguments hold much water, then they suggest not only a different way of understanding normativity and ethics in life, but a fundamentally different conception of social science. (Sayer 2011, 22)

This brings me full circle to the introduction because if we are to aspire to making a difference in our research then we need a different understanding of social science and a commitment to praxis as an irreducibly socio-material activity.

References


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