“HOW, WHEN, WHY” – A COMPARISON OF TWO ACTION RESEARCH METHODS TO EXAMINE THE HIDDEN TONES IN ANNOTATION FEEDBACK

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ABSTRACT

This recent study broadly confirms earlier conclusions in which action research findings identified that annotated feedback on student assignments carried an unfavourable lecturer tone and, because of which, failed to motivate the student as a learner. It was important to take the action research process further to show how tone is so easily manifested in annotation. By subverting the feedback process, annotation was read as marginalia in temporary isolation of the assignment and tone was easily identified. Two different action research (AR) studies were carried out by researchers to examine the same issue. One study examined annotation using participatory action research (PAR) (Marshall et al. 2011), while the other study utilised action research using semi-structured questionnaires (McNiff et al 2003). This paper demonstrates how the chosen methodology can either support or restrict action research if the methods are considered ill-matched to the study. It also demonstrates the importance of triangulation. Therefore, the paper is as much about methodological process as it is about findings relating to annotation.

Key words annotation; action research; participatory action research; student feedback
INTRODUCTION
Following an earlier study, in which hand-written student annotation feedback was examined, results identified that annotation was viewed favourably by nursing students in a higher education institution. A statistical range of answers however showed one exception; where the tone of annotation undermined student confidence and failed to motivate the student as learner. In nursing, due to the translation of theory into practice informing clinical competencies (NMC, 2008), it was important to find out why and how annotation carried a degree of tone which was considered unhelpful. The authors’ were using annotation in practice and decided independently of each other to examine its structure, content and its effects on student learning (Ball, 2009; Ball, 2010). Both of the authors’ primary purpose was to enhance their own knowledge and subsequent practices of the feedback process (Boud, 2007). As a result, over the course of this paper the authors’ have tried to incorporate as much personal experience into the text as possible (Kemmis, 2010).

Action Research
In higher education today the ground rules for feedback are well-established and guided by the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (2006) benchmark statements. Policy generally reflects a global set of values, including equity, accountability, transparency, equal opportunity, anonymity, and validation (Altbach et al. 2009). The rationale behind such standardisation is unarguably sound, leading to a teaching and learning context in- and through-which good and fair practice can be maintained (Altbach et al. 2009). The integrity of the learning experience is supported, and the nature of staff-student relationship is preserved (QAA, 2006). However, the top down quality promoting structures would be largely rhetorical if it were not for self-efficacy principles underlining practitioner led enquiry (Bangs & Frost, 2012).

Action research in education is one such approach. It is an evolving and flexible approach that encourages practitioners’ to question aspects of their own practice (Somekh & Zeichner, 2009). With the aim of challenging restrictive paradigms problems identified through action research are mostly located within a practitioner’s own field of work (Somekh & Zeichner, 2009, Jove, 2011). In turn the enquiring process it fosters promotes the capacity to learn through the uncertainties of practice and inter-subjective experience (Kemmis, 2006). This process enabled the authors’ to question their own pedagogical practice of annotation facilitating reflection on the nature of practice, not just as an investigative one, but also as a developmental process (Kemmis, 2010). Self-efficacy and self-determination creates a stronger sense of ownership that requires an active practitioner engagement for innovation (Bangs & Frost, 2012). In this respect the action research process identified new ideas, new ways of doing things and relational awareness between those involved (Kemmis, 2010).

Annotation
The term annotation refers to any marks, whether a sign, symbol or text added into the marginalia or above and below a line of text (Ball, 2010). It is ‘a note added in explanation’ (Collins, English Dictionary, 2007, p65) and as such involves the ‘act of associating one
piece of information with one (or more) other piece(s) of information’ (Cole et al. 2010, p3). It is therefore a method of expanding the meaning of the text by engaging directly with it on the page. In higher education, annotation practice generally refers to feedback (whether handwritten or digitally) by the lecturer onto the student’s draft (formative feedback) or marked assignment (summative) (Ball, 2009). Annotation appears to be somewhat different however in terms of both actual practice and underlying policy (Regan, 2010). Whereas feedback is well-regulated, annotation is more nebulous and haphazard in practice (Ball, 2010). Indeed, compared to feedback returned on front-sheeted templates, annotation appears to be a multifarious and careless ‘writing-as-I’m thinking’. This is the nature of annotation where a more embodied gloss is given in the moment of interaction so that it is less mechanical and more organic than traditional feedback. It therefore appears to resist the application of any practitioner ‘manual’ to suggest how it should and does work (Ball, 2009). This may be why since 1965, prior to the authors’ own work, only eight papers were located on hand written annotation and why the need for analysis of annotation was identified.

Evidence-based findings on annotation use within nursing education are now in the academic arena with recommendations. However, what has not been reported is the difficulty that can be encountered when researching certain multifarious topics. The authors’ independently carried out action research studies on annotation with very different outcomes which is reported here. Using the examples from the two studies the paper argues that including a process evaluation inevitably improves the action research methodology alongside reporting findings (McNiff, 2010).

BACKGROUND

The research process for the two studies, referred to as A and B are outlined in detail in figure 1 below. Discussion is developed in relation to both AR studies, but particular emphasis is placed on study A. This was due to study B elucidating (formative) annotation feedback findings through semi-structured questionnaires (McNiff, 2010). In contrast, study A employed participatory action research (PAR) and lecturers’ themselves identified their own issue of tone in the summative feedback given to students’. Each author approached enquiry from the same perspective – asking questions relating to annotation along with style, content, and decipherability. However different methodologies were used for extracting information and were six months apart. Although the projects were undertaken independently, the authors’ collaborated on completion of both studies and data-shared for the purpose of this paper, making it possible to examine the importance of different methods in terms of process and final outcomes (McNiff, 2010).

Figure 1 outlines the two approaches taken by the authors with study A placed to the left of the graph and study B to the right. Both studies were each carried out over two semesters and comprised 8 research stages. They differed at stage 4 (data capture) and at stages 7 and 8 (planning and action). For the purposes of this paper, stage 9 is introduced and a comparison of both A and B methodologies is made.
1. Identifying a problem;
   Study A & B follows the same mid route unless otherwise stated

2. Decide what kind(s) of evidence was needed to evaluate actions

3. A review of current literature, policy, practice on annotation

**Study A**

4. One-to-one semi-structured interviews with an expert participatory group (n=5) who had analyzed a random sample, 20% of approximately 200 scripts

4. PAR (participatory action research)

5. Evaluation of the action undertaken using the evidence collected

**Study B**

4. Distribution & analysis of 2 semi-structured questionnaires (students n=600) (lecturers n=112) (author**)

6. Analysis and Reflection

7. Plan
   (Study A)

8. Action and recommendations
   (Study A)

Comparison of both methods
   (Study A)
IDENTIFYING A PROBLEM (STAGE 1)
There was an obvious desire to understand more about the feedback process, particularly
to understand the tonal aspect of annotation, and how its information was received and
transmitted by students to enhance future learning (Munn-Giddens et al. 2008). Finding
answers to pedagogical uncertainty meant unpacking a range of more fundamental
contextual questions that related both to the motivational drives of staff and students’
acceptance of change (Jenkins, 2010). This was precipitated by organisational revision
imposed from the top down rather than revision evolved at a grass roots level (Bang &
Frost, 2012). This involves the notion of practitioners’ intrinsic autonomy to act at this
level (Kemmis, 2010). For staff, particularly, constraints on time emerged and marking the
host text meant marking the page of every assignment in addition to writing a separate
summary of feedback. Moreover, many staff had little or no experience of annotation which
added to more time constriction and apprehension. For students’ their issues were less
about implementation and more about receiving and interpreting annotation feedback
comments (Lui, 2006).

LITERATURE REVIEW (STAGE 3)
For the literature review, search terms were action research, annotation, assessment and
feedback. The annotator’s presence can influence the student’s interaction with their text,
causing them to evaluate their original writing differently (Ball, 2010). Multiple readings
can be made of one text, but how the essay is read by the lecturer has the greater impact on
the student through the feedback given (Ball et al. 2009). Time constraints or the quality of
the assignment means finding supportive prepositions (Juwah et al. 2004) particularly with
increased skill mix due to HEI widening participation initiatives (Lui, 2006). It is vital
therefore that the tone of annotation is conceptually understood so that any negative
effects are minimised and the positive effects emphasised (Diyanni, 2002; Ball, 2009).

ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS
Ethical approval was gained from a formal internal university process. Both authors faced
different dilemmas when approaching ethics. Study A had to ensure that the participatory
group of lecturers felt supported and had confidence in the researcher to act as facilitator
in the PAR process and honestly report their perceptions about annotation (Marshall et al.
2011). In study B care was taken to design the semi-structured questionnaires neutrality
(McNiff, 2010). During the analysis phase, in both studies, data was anonymized and
routinely checked

STUDY B--DATA COLLECTION AND FINDINGS (STAGES 4 & 5)
Data collection and findings represent stages 4 and 5 in both studies. Study B will be
reported first followed by study A. Combining the strengths of both approaches in
triangulation, GAR and semi-structured questionnaires (with spaces left for additional
comments) were used to capture data. At stage 4 of study B, questionnaires were
distributed to all undergraduate nursing students’ across the three years (n=600). Thirteen
completed student questionnaires were returned, representing a response rate of less than
2.17% of the total possible sample. Given the low return, the student findings are only
briefly discussed here as they were not viable to inform stage 6. Staff questionnaires
(n=112) were distributed to all nursing staff and 22 completed questionnaires were returned, representing a response rate of 19.64% of the total possible sample.

**STUDENT QUESTIONNAIRE FINDINGS**

The student questionnaires elicited a poor response rate (n=13). The response rate may indicate that there is still much to do in encouraging student-led evaluation of any new quality-driver initiatives. Overall, although the student response was negligible, there was consensus in most areas. Students said that annotation gave them:

- Confidence with their next assignment
- Acted as a guide for their development
- Helped them deal with any over-descriptive tendencies
- Enabled them to reflect on positive points
- Showed where improvements could be made
- Helped them improve on future work
- Identified where marks were gained or lost
- Identified strengths and weaknesses
- Indicated that annotation improved critical and writing skills
- Increased reflection
- Heightened awareness of learning outcomes by comments being linked to assessment criteria

**STAFF QUESTIONNAIRE FINDINGS**

Findings demonstrated that lecturers (n=22) wanted to provide annotation that stimulated learning and self-assessment, provided informative, relevant, clear, concise, sensitive, balanced communication and challenged misinterpretation. When asked what the disadvantages to the student were, lecturing staff replied:

- Depends on the quality – whether comments were insightful, relevant, supportive or theory-building
- Depends on the quantity – too much is overwhelming; too little doesn’t offer value
- As staff it was easy to identify weaknesses, not as easy to comment on strengths
- Negative or destructive comments
- Students risk misinterpreting feedback comments
- Annotation may be too technical and full of jargon
- Depends on the working relationship and power dynamics of the student to the lecturer
- May de-motivate students, and affect their confidence in their own ability
- Students focused solely on the annotated feedback
- Fostered dependence on feedback
- May not fit in with the student’s learning style

Annotation enabled students’ to locate essay strength or weakness - indicating directly where work was of good quality, or could be improved. Findings supported those of Porter-O’Donnell (2004) who suggests that as a means of facilitating learning at source, annotation
as a tool has scope, purposefulness, visual impact and appropriateness. The response rates from both student and lecturer questionnaires were positive if not conclusive.

**Study A Data Collection and Findings (Stages 4&5)**

A random sample of 200 undergraduate post-qualifying nursing scripts (n = 40 / 20%), were selected and examined for versions of annotation. The expert group each read and analysed the marked essays for types of annotation that included differences and similarities in content and approach. Semi-structured questions were based around findings from the literature and policy review. Interviews were undertaken with the expert group on a one-to-one basis. Although the participants were experienced lecturers, they observed that even with the most neutral annotation such as telegraphic statements, exclamation marks and underlining, a tone could be identified, revealing the possible frustration of the marker to the reader.

An example of annotation comments is given in figure 2 (re-written onto a fake essay to protect the identity of the student; the handwriting of the original marker is also changed). The annotations mirror exactly the original script in terms of what was written and where they were placed. The question “why” is asked eight times on one page, and, while such an example was not uncommon they are not in existence now that annotation guidelines have been set in place, it highlights the underlying tone of some annotation. While the script provides less telegraph statements such as question marks and more analytic idiom, it still has a resonance of tone (which is different to negative comments that set out to be potentially harsh).

Outside the context of the marking process participants could see comments in a more transparent way, due to the fact that annotation was isolated and examined as marginalia. Being outside of the marking process is something that should resonate with the student experience in a number of ways. Students read their essays after a time lapse, often on their own away from the university setting and may read the feedback as a separate narrative to their essay. The impact of annotation tone is borne out in the following lecturer responses as they became aware of the phenomenon:

- “When marking you don’t think comments are unfriendly or unconstructive, but in isolation there is a difference”
- “Annotation has changed me, I’m now always asking myself – have I been clear?”
- “Tone seems to be the startling revelation for me”
- “You can see irritability in lecturers marking. Exclamation marks can be perceived as being negative.”
- “Lots of scribbles and writing is quite shocking really, it looks aggressive”
- “I’ll look at annotation in a different light, which goes back to tone. An exclamation mark feels like the anger of the lecturer”
By subverting the feedback process and reading the annotation in temporary isolation of the essay, the presence of an obtuse supplementary meaning was observed that added a tone, but how can a marker be critical without inculcated critical tones, obtuse or otherwise? Until that phenomenon can be made manifest lecturers risk providing little support for students, hindering rather than facilitating progress.


**DISCUSSION**

Study A could not answer the above question because it had very specific aims and objectives. It was imperative therefore to take a research approach designed to examine participant’s experience as a data resource – this was largely to acknowledge that people affected by a problem are in the best position to understand and suggest solutions (Jove, 2011). By being complicit in one’s own study, it was easier to confirm if annotation contained an intrinsic tone or if, indeed, annotation was a technical problem for individual markers (Kitson, 2008; Jove, 2011). By engaging in this type of discussion, the participants could open the communicative space between practice and setting and examine the norms of the institution while looking at how the researcher was affected by the practice being investigated (Kemmis, 2010). This meant that very real statements about emancipatory transformation could be recorded, taking the private experience of the participants into the public domain – eschewing the esoteric discourse for a more enabling exoteric feedback process.

*Contemporary Change*

Higher education institutions in the United Kingdom are experiencing a time of unprecedented change in relation to university fees, competition and consumerism (Austin, 2012). This means that the effects of globalisation and national policy promote strategies for students’ to act as partners in the management of their own learning (Austin, 2012). However, students’ are often overlooked in the design of teaching approaches, curriculum and courses (Bovill et al. 2011). A key challenge is to develop studies where staff can participate and develop together in a participatory way (Oral, 2012). The findings in this paper are encouraging. PAR stage four particularly extended the range and type of knowing to include experiences, values, sensitivity and perceptions (Reason & Bradbury, 2008). This led to lecturers’ gaining greater understanding of student perspectives after a time lapse had occurred between handing in and the return of essays.

PAR reports information that might ordinarily be left in the margins (Soltis-Jarrett, 1997). Here, it provided a structure in which to explain a cathartic experience (Reason & Bradbury, 2008) where participants’ became aware of the cultural processes positioning them, the outcome of which could not have been predicted (Kemmis, 2010). Because the participants’ had been placed inside rather than outside the research framework, it meant participating in a far more exposing and reflexive process (Kitson, 2008). Being comfortable as researchers and bringing ideas to light is different to being implicated in the research findings. Isolating the essay from contextually and culturally embedded feedback practices (Argyris & Schön, 1992) made annotation more transparent.

**CONCLUSION**

Among the observations arising from reflective analysis, the personal narratives PAR methodologically narrates privileges a revealing discourse that might otherwise remain undisclosed (Oral, 2012). Although data extraction and validity was inconclusive from study B, weakness in the rigour of the questionnaires or researcher novitiate inexperience might have hindered findings. Equally, however, it may have been that searching for objective data may have been secondary to extracting subjective data, which better suits
the purpose of PAR (Kemmis, 2010). Annotation is an organic momentary response that engages in a participant manner with the host text. It could well be that PAR drew so much more data and personal-transformation due to its characteristic likeness to annotation as a participatory analysis. In examining different forms of annotation on student assignments, PAR facilitated a subjective self-examination in which a critical and reflective account of practice could be undertaken (Oral, 2012). These observations reflect many of the issues about which educative practice should be profoundly concerned, namely the preparation of students’, so they are versed in the rigour of academic scrutiny without adverse criticism (implicit or otherwise), and tutelaged by supportive mechanisms (Bovill et al. 2011). However, what this paper has shown is that by matching the right method to the subject, a complementary and valuable means of capturing information was generated with positive outcomes for both students’ and staff.

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