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Key concepts for the insider-researcher

> ## Key points
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> **A most important aspect of work based research is the researcher's situatedness and context. Within this, the unique perspective of the researcher inevitably makes a difference to the research. An understanding of the critique of insider research, along with the specific issues that often arise for insiders, such as the need for sensitivity towards colleagues when undertaking research, appears in this chapter. The development of the self and the potential impact that insider research can have in a particular organization or professional sphere are emphasized.**

An important aspect of work based research is that it is within the researcher's own work practice. The concept of 'social situatedness' originally put forward by Vygotsky (1962), and situatedness in terms of learning developed by Lave and Wenger (1991), is that the development of individual intelligence requires both social and cultural influences, and the multiple perspectives needed for understanding are provided by context. Situatedness arises from the interplay between agent (you, the researcher), situation (the particular set of circumstances and your position within it), and context (where, when and background). Organizational, professional and personal contexts will affect the way a piece of research and development is undertaken. In the organizational context, the culture and structure of your work situation and the actions and thinking of colleagues are likely to shape your work. When researchers are insiders, they draw upon the shared understandings and trust of their immediate and more removed colleagues with whom normal social interactions of working communities have been developed.

Some people take learning very seriously, not only as a phenomenon to be studied, but as a way of living. Antonacopoulou et al. (2005) expanded on this to show that learning may become a part of working life and that working and learning are both integral parts of life's journey. The term 'lifewide' is also a concept that recognizes the 'non-formal' and implicit learning that occurs within work based contexts as social action environments and the continual development of oneself (Alheit and Dausien, 2002). Lifeplace learning is another term that has been introduced and linked to work based learning (Glasgow Caledonian University, 2009) and which situates self, work and learning within a whole life setting.

From your professional life, professional bodies, partner organizations and colleagues will have an influence and from your personal life, family, career goals, values, principles, financial security and so on will all be relevant to how you choose your interests, your research topic and the way you undertake your research. All of these influences, from the individual level to the organizational and professional background, must also be placed in the wider context which will have a bearing on your project through international networking and other influences, market forces and cultural background. As a work based learner undertaking the project as part of a programme of study, another layer needs to be added to these individual and contextual issues. This comprises the influences of the educational institution requiring an academic underpinning to your work based research project. Figure 1.1 illustrates the influences and contexts impacting on work based projects.
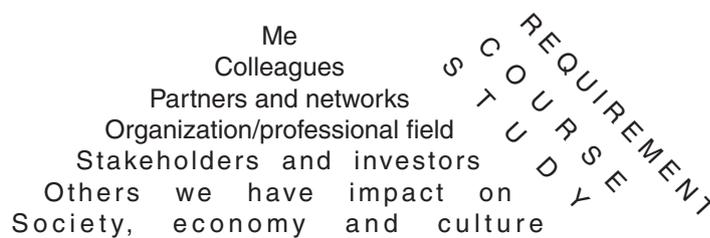
Me
Colleagues
Partners and networks
Organization/professional field
Stakeholders and investors
Others we have impact on
Society, economy and culture

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Figure 1.1 The influences and contexts impacting on work based projects

The context and purpose of work have consequences for the value and use of knowledge. The way universities have constructed paradigms concerning knowledge (see Chapter 7) and the systematic (research) process by which new knowledge is created and judged are shifting to better reflect the nature and complexity of the information society in which we now live (Barnett, 2000). Crucially, contemporary societies involve work roles that are subject to change; jobs for life are a thing of the past and lifelong learning implies continually developing oneself into new and varying positions (Antonacopolou et al., 2005).

What makes an insider-led work based project?

As an insider, you are in a unique position to study a particular issue in depth and with special knowledge about that issue. Not only do you have your own insider knowledge, but you have easy access to people and information that can further enhance that knowledge. You are in a prime position to investigate and make changes to a practice situation. You can make challenges to the status quo from an informed perspective. You have an advantage when dealing with the complexity of work situations because you have in-depth knowledge of many of the complex issues. This is vital when exploring a problem or issue in a detailed and thorough way. Amongst the complex issues that insiders can often go some way to understand are the tensions between the specific and the general. Some work issues are beset with paradox and ambiguity, but an insider is often able to unravel and comprehend such intricacies and complications.

Reed and Proctor (1995: 195) identified 'idealised' criteria for practitioner research in health care that has relevance for insider-researchers in a range of settings:

- a social process undertaken with colleagues
- educative for all participants in the projects
- imbued with an integral development dimension
- focused upon aspects of practice in which the researcher has some control and can initiate change
- able to identify and explore socio-political and historical factors affecting practice
- able to open up value issues for critical enquiry and discussion
- designed to give a say to all participants
- able to exercise the professional imagination and enhance the capacity of participants to interpret everyday action in the work setting
- able to integrate personal and professional learning
- likely to yield insights which can be conveyed in a form which make them worthy of interest to a wider audience.

When reading about research in general, it is important to remember that the scale of a work based project is likely to be relatively small. The nature of your project is likely to be something quite specific that is making an improvement, suggesting something new and creative or perhaps evaluating a particular practice. Work based research concerned with specialized practice may not bring about results that transfer exactly to another similar situation. In university research practice, this has been an issue of debate. In work based research, we cannot assume that one work situation will be the same as another, but we can make what Bassey (1999: 12) has called 'fuzzy generalizations'. These are generalizations that arise from the particular research project and may have some general application in a similar context. Predicting easy solutions to diverse and complex issues involving a range of people is not realistic. Work based research may not transfer exactly to another situation, but it involves the application of research which has usefulness and

application to a particular situation. It has usefulness to the community of practice and to the individual researcher, and it has the potential to generate theory. It embraces complexity and can be empowering and innovative, saving time and money by making improvements.

A compelling rationale for insider-researchers is to make a difference in a work based situation in which they have a range of investments. To have this impact at national, regional and local level or in your own organization, you may need evidence. Work based research can provide this evidence to influence policy and decision making, and can also make a difference to individual practice.

Work based research undertaken by an insider can be constrained by funding, resources and opportunities because of location, internal politics and so on. These constraints are a feature of real time, real world projects that may sometimes be overcome by, for example, changing the focus of the project. Other challenges of insider research can be the conflicts of interest between workers and between worker and organization. The guidance given in Chapters 3, 4 and 5 should be helpful in making these considerations. Do not forget that, as an insider who is immersed in work, it is possible to fail to see the obvious and you need external feedback on what you are doing.

As an insider-researcher, you are going through a learning process. Reflection upon current practice, evaluation of your research work against university criteria and the adoption of a reflexive approach to your work are crucial aspects of the learning of work based projects. Self-development in this area requires you to understand your professional self in relation to your personal self. Having to build effective relationships between your professional occupation and the university and justify your work, achievements and intentions to critical audiences in work and academe can promote greater self-belief, wider acceptance amongst peers, intellectual skills and a commitment to continuing self-development in the context of your work. The self-management of the insider-led work based project is a prime means of inducing self-managed learning. Debates about the learning process itself are of particular importance, because of the growing awareness of the role of high-level personal or 'soft' skills and qualities in professional work (Eraut, 2004).

If you are party to a learning agreement or contract as part of your university course (see Chapter 6), your work based project is usually endorsed by someone in the professional field who knows about your area of work. They can confirm that the project you are undertaking is likely to have worth to the organization or professional field. Your goal when deciding on a research project is to find a project that adds value to your work situation, that you feel a commitment to undertake and that also has academic value.

It is worthwhile considering the literature on change in organizations, and the growing field of literature on reflection, particularly professional reflection at work. We do not discuss the literature on organizational change and change management in this book, but it may be an important source of information, depending on the kind of project undertaken. Chapter 9 provides a discussion of reflection that is vital to a practitioner contemplating a work based project.

Engagement with your community of practice

There is clearly a need for insiders to have a particular sensitivity to colleagues; for example, consulting colleagues about your research and informing people what you are doing is a matter of courtesy, especially if it is likely to affect their roles. After all, people usually work in teams so the success of your project is likely to depend on others, their input and their willingness to act upon your project's recommendations or changes. Where you undertake your work based project may also be your critical community, that is, the place where you get and give feedback about your ideas and your work. Your professionalism and respect for colleagues will sustain you in your practice community.

Sensitivity to colleagues extends to the organization or professional field to which you are contributing. You should show by your actions an acknowledgement of the culture of your community of practice. You will need to show that you have respect for the values of the organization, its purposes and ways of doing things and to show the relevance of your project, what has been termed its 'fitness for purpose'. It is advisable to pay attention to effective communication which is likely to include consensual techniques for enlisting others' support and opinions, empathetic understanding of the colleagues who are your participants and their needs, demonstrating care for others, and being approachable and good humoured.

Due to the familiarity of these relationships, addressing the ethical issues of insider research discussed in Chapters 3, 4 and 5 is not straightforward. Examples of challenges include:

- 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 organization 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.

Making an impact from the inside

Raelin (2008) recognizes the growing body of evidence suggesting that work based projects may prove immensely beneficial to the long-term success of companies. Nixon (2008) demonstrates that engaging in reflection at work and undertaking insider-led research can make significant contributions to work practices.

You will need to give due consideration to the positive impact the project can make and, of course, any possible negative impact. Making an impact on practice can involve your practical action at work as well as your research

abilities. Encouraging the results of your work based project to be taken seriously by colleagues and putting them into practice is part of the project's implementation strategy which needs to be thought through at the outset.

Your insights as an insider are valuable because of your depth of knowledge, but you should also demonstrate that you are critical of your own work and understand a range of perspectives. It is usually the case that every perspective has its weaknesses, but one may be preferable to another and you should give reasons that are compelling (including research evidence) to substantiate your views. It is important to monitor your research processes and also the reaction to your work from those whose opinion you value. Action to implement the findings of research may be taken during or at the end of the project. If you want to put the results of your research into practice in your own community, it will be important to take a balanced view and recognize the opinion of others. See Chapter 13 for further discussion on implementation.

Rights and responsibilities of an insider as a researcher

As an insider in your professional field, you have expertise and experience that gives you an advanced level of knowledge of issues in your area of practice. As such, you have the right to be acknowledged as a practitioner of good standing. To some extent, as a researcher, you have to take on the tradition of what is accepted as good research practice in your professional area of research. If you are able to combine these two roles well, you will be a successful insider-researcher.

You should be aware that several research traditions can put forward a criticism of work based projects in relation to their use of insider-led research. This is because of the issue of the subjective nature of researching your own practice, where there may be a lack of impartiality, a vested interest in certain results being achieved and problems concerning a fresh and objective view of data. Do not forget that all research is subject to criticism, as both criticism and critique are considered good practice in discussions about research. The criticism has some validity, and because of this it is vital that gathering data as an insider is given careful attention, especially concerning questions about insider bias and validity (Murray and Lawrence, 2000: 18). It is important to state and give due consideration to these aspects of insider research. There are many steps an insider can take to guard against bias in the work, for example careful attention to feedback from participants, initial evaluation of data, triangulation in the methods of gathering data and an awareness of the issues represented in the project.

The criticisms and general critique of insider research is balanced against the value of work based projects. Insider-led, work based projects are approached from the perspective of bringing about contributions to practice that are informed by underpinning knowledge. The purpose of the project is to bring

about actual change, either during or at the end of the research project, and constitutes a particular constraint to researchers as they are working within systems where there are limits to research practice and change. You need to access particular insider information, inform and bring about significant changes to practice. There is usually a right time and place for innovation to be introduced. The success of projects may be in some part due to insider-researchers' ability to negotiate around systems and practices with creativity and ingenuity. You are the primary agent of control and the exercise of this agency within critical academic and professional environments is the basis of the impact that the project can have upon you and your workplace or professional area.

Your challenges are, to some extent, set in the demanding context of having to justify achievement and progress to critical partners in the wider profession and the less familiar world of academe.

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