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Year 2 Learning Review

Introduction

It's good to write this at the end of an intensive period finishing my project and writing the project report. That has created a distance, in particular to the formal content of the workshops, so what shines through now is, I assume, what made the most lasting impression on me.

I divide what I've learned into two areas:

- what has come directly from formal learning: the workshops (including pre-reading) and interactions with my tutors.
- what has come from preparing and writing papers, from carrying out my project and from interactions with my fellow students.

Formal learning is a convenience term. AMSR is anything but a formal learning environment, so I use this simply to mean those aspects of my learning that were led by our tutors.

I have not structured this report into those two areas, as several of the most interesting subjects crop up in both of them. I have tried to make it clear what came out of the formal learning and what from elsewhere.

The focus is on Year 2 but some of this is of necessity valid for both years.

I begin with two overall themes, which I suppose fit more into the second category.

“Je ziet het pas als je het door hebt”

Johan Crujff was not only a great footballer but also the author of many aphorisms, insightful if of dubious grammar. The quote above translates freely into “you only really see something once you realize what it is”. That, moments of suddenly realizing what something you've always seen actually means, represents what for me is probably the key aspect of two years of AMSR.

I don't mean to suggest that there was nothing fundamentally new for me. Almost everything was new in one way or another. Action research in particular has been and will I think continue to be a major source of new ideas and inspiration for me, not to mention a sanity check on my practice. There is so much more on the subject I can learn – and will have time to, after my final work has been submitted. But even action research is, as I described in my Learning Paper 3 and my Project Report an answer to a question I have had for many years. It's an answer that clarifies things I sort of saw but failed to realize what they were.

The same phenomenon applies to my own work during this time and in particular from Learning Paper 3 onwards. Time and again the scales have, so to speak, fallen from my eyes. I suppose one could equally well call it serendipity – discovering things I wasn't consciously looking for and being just about smart enough to realize what they meant.

Actually that's probably the main reason I opted for this particular master's – the feeling that I would learn things I didn't know I didn't know.

My Back Pages

Continuing with quotes, I was reminded recently of Bob Dylan's song My Back Pages. The hook of that song is the line "But I was so much older then, I'm younger than that now". What Dylan means is that there is a period in one's youth where everything seems simple. We are very busy with being adults (at last). There are, seemingly, straightforward answers to every question. One embraces as certainties things that really aren't. Dylan, in the song, is claiming that he's got beyond that and is now effectively younger, less learned.

I can thank AMSR that this has happened for the second time in my life.

It's not so much particular claims I would have made or simplistic certainties that have been challenged – more the feeling that the world is so much larger than I thought it was, that my own thinking is much broader and that the range of actions at my disposal is far greater than I imagined. And I have from time to time been challenged on a personal level – how well I was living the values I claimed to espouse. So yes, in that sense I'm younger than I was two years ago.

Gender and Power

Gender and power are closely related topics (as are race, sexuality, class, age...) in the sense that power tends to operate with a gender and race (amongst other things) bias. This theme really started with Gill Coleman's session on Paradigms (and assumptions about behaviour) at Schumacher in Year 1.

In the pre-reading for Workshop 5, I found Fletcher's (1998) "Feminist reconstruction of work" very valuable – not easy to read but rewarding. She made me think about how gender relations operate in a work setting – to the disadvantage of all, because if the relational is constantly underplayed, we are unlikely ever to deal effectively with complex problems. We will just attempt to resolve them with simple, measurable, project-manageable solutions – a form of reductionism that typically delivers only someone to blame. With hindsight I could recognize these patterns in my own various workplaces but had never quite understood what had been going on before. In terms of power, rank and influence this way of work is particularly disadvantageous to women but is in the interest of no-one who wants to do meaningful work well.

This paper was also, for me, the most useful on the overall topic of Workshop 5: The Nature of Work. For the most part the other reading on that topic told me little I didn't know.

I was also very impressed by another paper, by Gaventa and Cornwell (2008), on Power and Knowledge. This too was not easy reading but there are simply times when one

needs some academic rigour and the challenge of trying to understand the more complex thoughts of influential figures. I also found it helpful that these ideas were related back to, for me, more familiar figures like Gramsci and Freire and also that the context of the paper was (participatory) action research. And, as it happens, these ideas tied in nicely with Fletcher's paper, which I read afterwards.

The highlight of Workshop 5 for me was Gill Coleman's session on Power and Critical Theory. In a remarkably short time she provided insight into some of Lukes' and Foucault's key ideas. A bunch of things fell into place for me. I always knew the answers I had to the workings of power were inadequate. I knew that what I would now call Lukes' first dimension was only part of the story but I'd never properly understood its limitations. My superficial knowledge of Gramsci had brought me close to the third dimension. Somehow dimension 2 had completely passed me by, which is strange, as I realize now how often I've seen that control of the agenda in action. Foucault in particular on the social construction of power was a complete revelation and another example of one of those things I'd seen but not understood.

All of that made me much more aware of what was going on around me in ordinary life situations – spotting patterns including my own complicity in constructing them. I wrote about these in a couple of informal exchanges with fellow students. It was then interesting and at times surprising to see how others now looked at their own behaviour in this context and how their doubts about themselves were different to what I might have expected (it's not appropriate to be specific here). Another lesson. Another pointer to things I shall pay more attention to - living life as inquiry.

We returned to this topic at Workshop 7 with a session from Gill Coleman and discussions led by other students. Clearly it had struck a chord with many of us, as there had been a lot of exchanges via email in between workshops. Gender was the aspect that came up the most but there was also some discussion around how minorities are sometimes disadvantaged by an apparently democratic process, what the rule of the majority actually means and indeed what effective democracy might be. My only regret is that we never had the chance to discuss all this in depth but I know it's part of various people's projects, so perhaps we'll find a way once everything has been submitted.

Off topic but relevant to my theme of being challenged in my own assumptions was Tim Malnick's session at Workshop 5 on "The Right Livelihood". This interactive session confronted us (me at least) with the difficulties of stepping out of one's work/livelihood comfort zone into the uncertainty of somewhere one thinks one would rather be. I couldn't help wondering whether I shouldn't have been ready earlier to make that transition. In fact I once did – many years ago - but somehow allowed myself to slip back into the known and safe, despite all its frustrations. Coming out of this, as I have noted in my project report, was what brought me to AMSR. Staying out of it is, I hope, something I will take with me from AMSR.

Action Research and Practical Work

Writing both my Project Brief and the Learning Paper Brief (aka Methodology) taught me a lot about AR. For the first time I had to sit down and think about what was involved in doing an AR inquiry. What would I actually do, who would be involved, how would I

involve them, what sort of action research would that make it, what did I need to be able to show to demonstrate that I was really doing AR, how would I show my evidence etc.? Now this was still theoretical but it made a difference to how I carried out my project, both in terms of what I planned and how I evaluated what I had done as I went along.

Another result of the research for those two papers was that I began to see that there were many flavours of action research but also that the extent to which the difference between flavours was acknowledged varied widely in the AR community. This could have thrown me into a panic and I recall discussions in my learning group about what all the differences might be – even down to a growing confusion about what exactly 1st, 2nd and 3rd person AR actually was. For some reason it all actually put me at ease. It seemed to me that there were some key features of what AR should be that everyone agreed on, in particular that the action researcher does not do research *into* others but *with* them and that the researcher is part of the inquiry – not some external observer. All these flavours were for me just methods and approaches that could be applied (and often combined) according to the needs of the inquiry and the number and nature of the participants and their participation. I hope I'm not wrong but it at any rate saved me a lot of going round in circles

In terms of formal learning three things in particular have stayed with me. The first was a paper by Richardson and St. Pierre (2005) on writing as an inquiry method. I suppose this appealed to me, because writing is mostly how I do my reflection, so by writing about an experience I'm also inquiring into my own reactions to something. I also liked the insistence on not writing *boring* papers. By making writing a creative process, we open ourselves up to emergence. At least that has been the case with my recent writing including in particular my Project Report.

The second was Margaret Gearty's (2014) paper and her session at Workshop 6 on Learning History. I liked the combination of story – creating it (a form of presentational knowledge, I would argue) - and then drawing the conclusions from the created story (propositional knowing). Both parts are participatory. This method is something I want to make use of as I continue with my work post-AMSR. I may even be able to incorporate it in my work environment. That has nothing to do with sustainability but it would be good practice.

Lastly there's appreciative inquiry, which was both pre-reading for and a topic for sessions at Workshop 7. It's yet another option one can adopt depending on the situation and has clear advantages in situations where people aren't comfortable being critical or where the atmosphere is already negative. It made me think of a project I had done at work that might have gone a good deal better if I'd used appreciative inquiry.

I was very taken by the work of the Skip Garden, which we visited during Workshop 5 and by the Cardboard Citizens theater group (Workshop 7). Both of these projects are anchored in communities and are both fundamentally participatory. Cardboard Citizens in particular is like an ongoing action research project and very much in the spirit of Paulo Freire. I like the practicality of both, their manageable scale and scope delivering change (or at least the will to) where I think it's most needed – amongst people as citizens.

Before leaving this section I want to mention two things. One is the inspiration and ideas I got from Rob Poynton's sessions on improvisation at Workshop 7. I came away with a whole bunch of ideas for things I could try out in participatory contexts – doing stuff I never realized I could do. The second is the inspiration I got from my fellow students: their tales from the field, their projects and challenges, their provocations and a special mention for Sana Tawileh's collaborative blog project Walk The Talk, in which Giselle Genillard and I also participated. It showed how easy it can be to collaborate and produce something, if people are open in their approach.

My Project and other papers

My project focuses on Walking and Music as cultural practices that may contribute to achieving a more sustainable world. Various themes have emerged from it, which I expect to pursue beyond AMSR.

Embodied knowledge

I suppose it should be obvious that embodied knowledge is (should be) an important part of walking (and running) and music. Intellectually I would always have agreed but it was only by carrying out the inquiries in my project that this became a lived reality for me. For that I must thank a couple of my fellow students, who helped me (by example) see how much more I could notice. That in turn led me to look for relevant sources in the literature on my practices.

This reflects itself in what I have written in my project report – in part through becoming more aware of what I was sensing and in part by consciously adding tactile elements to my investigations. I paid more attention to what was happening under my feet. I started exploring what things around me (trees, earth...) felt like – and noticing differences. I became more aware of how my body reacted to the way my surroundings affected the rhythm of my movement – positively or negatively. I paid more attention to what pieces of music were doing with my body – from altering my breathing to making me get up and dance. I'd probably always have considered dancing noteworthy but had never understood that reaction as knowledge.

I came across several sources that considered the embodied experience of walking or running. Surprisingly I found nothing in relation to music. Academic studies seemed only interested in emotional responses to music – perhaps because they all came from the field of psychology. In fact in writing my Literature Review, I discovered that the most inspirational material on both practices came from outside the academic field - mostly from literature, whether fiction or non-fiction.

I discovered something about my own embodied knowledge in a less comfortable way, when I developed a slipped disk earlier this year. To be precise I discovered how little I had been listening to my body and what it was trying to tell me. This wasn't purely physical. I had taken too much on, kidding myself I could handle it all. Sometimes the result was that I let people down, so I took on even more to make up for it. And I didn't listen to my body warning me until it became a serious problem. Apparently I only listen to my body while I'm running. So now I have learned the hard way. I've drawn conclusions I guess I was trying to avoid. Some things just aren't that important.

Emergent Themes

Several new ideas emerged during the process of carrying out my project, writing my report and presenting the work at Workshop 8.

I discovered at Workshop 8, that presentational knowledge gleaned from lived experience can to some extent reach people in a similar way to the experience itself. Obviously it's different. It's not their experience and the embodied aspects are pretty much ruled out but the experience of seeing/hearing the presentation can, it seems, be valuable in and of itself – and awake an interest in investigating for themselves. I've described this in more detail in my project report and shall not repeat it here. The point is that this suggests additional opportunities for action in the future.

My research into the topic of Enchantment (also discussed at length in my report) brought me to a school of philosophical thought that goes under the general heading of New Materialisms. This is a very pluralistic school and manages to connect earlier work from Epicurus, through Marx and various phenomenologists and postmodernists to Foucault, feminist and queer philosophies. Where it converges is in a desire to reintroduce the material as a force determining the behaviour of societies (human and non-human). These are very much engaged philosophers. Their concerns range across all aspects of both sustainability and responsibility. Material for them goes way beyond the purely human (and usually economic) concerns of earlier materialism. It grants agency to any material, biological or not. Not merely the planet but the whole cosmos is seen as being alive.

In many ways this connects directly to the work of Bateson and his take on "mind" and thus brings me back to enchantment. I find something irresistible in the idea of a universe in constant movement (vibration) and this has been reflected (quite literally) for me in some experiences I've described in my project report. In turn (and with thanks also to Gill Coleman) it's got me reading Bateson again, in particular his thoughts around art, beauty and grace and their relationship in turn to the natural world. I don't yet have any idea what I want to do with this in terms of my work in the world but I'm certainly going to investigate more deeply.

A theme that emerged out of participants' reflections on some of the inquiries in my project and also in some of the sources that inspired me is "home" or "coming home". I only really spotted it whilst writing the report and it seemed like it might be important, so I looked into it more, discussed it with some people and asked myself how it fitted in my own experience and reflections. This too I've discussed in more detail in my report. I see "home" as a concept, a feeling, something/somewhere you can "come home" to that isn't just in one place or even necessarily any place at all. Most importantly it's something you can belong to, that matters to you, that is worth defending. I have this idea that if people perceive the planet that way (starting with their own bit of it), they may be more inclined to want to defend that. Here too I don't yet know how I will use this but it came to me from other people (not just books), I could imagine including it in inquiries involving my two practices, Walking and Music.

Those are my pointers to the future. Now to follow them.

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