ABSTRACT

This chapter is constructed as a reflective professional narrative coming from the context of public and private continuing professional development in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. The authors start the text by making explicit their involvement and alignment with the rationale of Exploratory Practice, within the broader horizon of language Teacher Development (Allwright, 2001). The text establishes a theoretical dialogue with Reflective Practice, Action Research and Exploratory Action Research, considering them as recent trends in teacher education and other possible modes of Practitioner Research (Allwright & Hanks, 2009). The authors expand on Exploratory Practice as a paradigm that foregrounds inclusivity, ethics and criticality. Examples of Potentially Exploitable Pedagogic/Professional Activities (PEPAs) and Potentially Exploitable Reflexive Activities (PERAs) will be shared by showing that they result from integrating the ‘work for understanding’ with regular pedagogic activities or broader educational practice.

FIRST THINGS FIRST

It suddenly struck us that we have recently run a highly challenging six-week course on Exploratory Practice with a group of twenty-one students, sixteen in-service English teachers and five translators. In retrospect, we think that maybe most teachers were suffering from burn-out... We had been warned by other colleagues that most of these teachers would resist or refuse to reflect on their own teaching...
practice and pedagogic contexts. They also had expressed that they did not wish to read more about Exploratory Practice!

Initially, we were shocked, to say the least. This had never happened to us in more than twenty years! But we accepted the challenge and decided to listen very carefully, attentively, deeply, not only to what they had to say and to what they were willing to talk about but also to how we would react to their attitude. We always do so, but this time, we had two unusual puzzles – “Why are the teachers in this group reluctant to talk about their teaching? What is going on with them in their contexts?”

So, we decided to start the course by addressing this very issue and approached the situation explicitly. We told them about how this was a new experience for us. We even asked them to trust us... We substituted some of the readings and took the focus off Exploratory Practice in pedagogic contexts, adjusting the course to their needs by respecting the desire of the majority. We repeatedly gave them examples of how Exploratory Practice can also help understand life outside the classroom.

As the course went on, we made enormous efforts to understand the group and worked in every possible way for them to try to understand themselves and each other.

Taking advantage of the fact that we would be co-teaching all the sessions, we invited them to form two groups according to their inclination to reflect on either pedagogic or non-pedagogic contexts. We think we built a strong feeling of trust by offering them, based on the Exploratory Practice principles, the chance to reflect on whatever context they wished to.

(Excerpt from an e-mail sent to some members of the Rio EP Group.)

Subverting the order of a conventional text, we start by presenting the ‘case’ of an especially challenging group with whom we have recently worked. We wish to construct this text as a personal professional reflection that resonates with our previous experience in public and private in-service English teacher education in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil and our thirty-year involvement and alignment with the rationale of Exploratory Practice (EP). We situate this form of Practitioner Research within the broader horizon of language Teacher Development (Allwright, 2001) as we define it and articulate it theoretically to Reflective Practice (Zeichner & Liston, 1996), Action Research (Nunan, 1990) and the more recent proposal for Exploratory Action Research (Smith, Connelly and Rebolledo, 2014).

We then present what we did in this specific case vis-à-vis what we have been doing over the years along with the theoretical background of Exploratory Practice that has inspired our principled teacher education practices. We explain how we have systematized the Exploratory Practice module within the Specialization in English Language course, a Diploma level course offered at the Pontifical Catholic University of Rio de Janeiro (PUC-Rio), Brazil. Taking a broader reflective stance, we relate our experience to wider socio-cultural, critical and ethical issues to highlight the human and non-technicist attitude that we value in teacher-learner development. Collegially written to understand a context-specific situation, this text portrays how the involved practitioners worked for deeper understandings of their lived experience. It was intended to be an illuminating ‘case’ of personal professional reflexivity. Another sign of the intended textual subversion is to start by recreating the atmosphere of EP workshops, in which the theoretical background and methodological design do not precede the work to be done but are interwoven to support the reflective posture being adopted.