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***Totems and Taboos: Risks and Relevance in Research on Teachers and Teaching***

**Exploring Challenges of Engaging Teachers in Action Research**

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**Abstract**

With the current emphasis for greater autonomy and self-direction in teacher education, practitioner research has attained considerable prominence in relevant literature as a valuable form of professional development and a credible alternative to traditional approaches to educational research (Carr and Kemmis, 1986; Day, 1999 Elliott, 1992; Kincheloe, 2003; Stenhouse, 1975; Whitehead and McNiff, 2006). This paper is concerned with *collaborative action research*. It examines the highly complex relationship between university-based researchers and teachers in the course of the collaborative journey. It is grounded in my experience as a co-facilitator/researcher in a large-scale collaborative action research project involving a university in Hong Kong and 76 teaching professionals from 24 Hong Kong secondary schools from 2006-2007. The paper is a *self-study* of the collaborative journey from the facilitators' perspective exploring the multiple strategies we adopted to support teachers and why. The paper examines the challenges of nurturing a 'pleasurable, challenging and mutually empowering' partnership within the constraints of collaboration between educators inhabiting different professional cultures (Somekh, 1994).

Key words: *Collaborative action research; facilitation strategies; challenges of co-inquiry*

**Introduction**

*Contextual Background*

In collaborative action research (CAR), it is argued that facilitators play a crucial role in providing teachers with the right tools (a support structure) to carry out school-based co-inquiry (Elliott, 1991; Ponte, 2003; Stringer, 2004). Stringer (1999) argues that fundamental difference

between action research and traditional research approaches is the “action-oriented approach” of CAR:

To engage “subjects” as equal and full participants in the research process...it commences with an interest in the problems of a group, a community, or an organization. Its purpose is to assist people in extending their understanding of their situation and thus in resolving problems that confront them. (Stringer, 1999, p.10)

I developed an interest in conducting action research during my time as a secondary school teacher in Hong Kong in 2003, when I joined a newly established school as the English panel head. Faced with the challenges of developing a progressive English curriculum for the school and having to mentor a small team of beginning teachers, I carried out action research with my colleagues to improve classroom practice. Although I had a very trusting relationship with my colleagues, I observed from this experience that collaboration involves issues of power and control, and it is not easy to create the ‘full and equal’ partnership as stated by Stringer (1999). I was uncomfortable that my colleagues at the time depended so much on me to facilitate the project because they saw me as the initiator, the experienced teacher and group leader. Since my first action research experience, I have realised that facilitating action research is a highly complex process because (i) action research is not common practice within the teaching profession in Hong Kong; (ii) Hong Kong teachers work in a highly hierarchical and bureaucratic organizational structure (iii) and this work structure is not conducive to collaborative learning (Li et al, 1999; Tinker-Sachs, 2003). Since leaving the teaching profession in 2004, I have continued to pursue an understanding of what it means to ‘facilitate’ and ‘support’ partners in collaboration so that it is ethically sound, mutually empowering, and leads to change in practice for educational improvement.

In September 2006, I joined a university team who are investigating ways to build the English language assessment confidence, skills and knowledge of junior secondary teachers in Hong Kong. I negotiated to be a co-facilitator in this project to improve my understanding of facilitating action research in a Hong Kong milieu and to extend my professional knowledge in facilitating future action research projects. This paper makes an important contribution to my own development as a teacher educator, educational researcher and facilitator of action research. By sharing our experiences of this collaborative process, I hope other educators in a similar context can relate in part to some of our experiences.

### **The Study and Research Question**

This paper aims to explore what strategies are used by university facilitators of action research to engage teachers in co-inquiry in a Chinese social-cultural setting and what are the underlying reasons for choice of strategies.

I will address the research question using data drawn from a series of semi-structured interviews in the mode of spontaneous conversations (Kvale, 1996) which I conducted with my colleagues during significant episodes in the first part of the CAR process. Kvale (1996) argues:

The research interview is an interpersonal situation, a conversation between two partners about a theme of mutual interest. It is a specific form of human interaction in which knowledge evolves through a dialogue. (Kvale, 1996, p.125)

The spontaneous conversations follow ‘an unwritten script’ and this ‘openness’ allows the interviewer to follow up answers and stories told by the subjects (1996, p.124). The conversations with my co-facilitators allowed me to understand the facilitation process from their perspective. The interviews were taped on a digital recorder and later transcribed. I will also draw data from my own research journal and documentary data collected as part of the project.

### *Context and Participants*

Hong Kong's education system is currently undergoing major reforms in response to the political and social changes brought about by increasing globalization in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The reforms are an effort to raise standards, and increase the accountability of teaching and learning. The spectrum of reforms is very broad and will eventually transform the entire curriculum framework for Hong Kong's primary, secondary and tertiary institutions from the current 5+2+3 academic structure to a new 3+3+4 structure from 2009<sup>1</sup>. Reforming the academic structure entails many changes which will have far-reaching implications for the entire community. The introduction of a school-based assessment (SBA) <sup>2</sup> component to Hong Kong Certificate of Education Exam (HKCE) for English Language in 2007 will reshape existing assessment practices and beliefs. The overall aim of the changes is to enhance validity by shifting towards a broader assessment of learning, enhancement of learning, engagement with learners during assessment, and involvement of teachers in the assessment process. To enhance capacity for change, the Hong Kong Government is funding different projects to support schools in implementing changes stipulated by curriculum reforms.

The data in this study have been drawn from the *Quality Education Fund<sup>3</sup> Aligning Assessment with Curriculum Reform in Junior Secondary English Language Teaching Project* (QEF Project), a CAR project between the University of Hong Kong and 24 secondary schools. The goals of the QEF Project are to build English language assessment confidence, skills and knowledge of S1-3 English language teachers, and to research, develop and disseminate a collection of language assessment resources. The Project aims to prepare teaching professionals in handling challenges brought about by education reforms in Hong Kong. In the context of this study, I am a co-

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<sup>1</sup> see [www.emb.gov.hk](http://www.emb.gov.hk)

<sup>2</sup> see [www.http://web.hku.hk/~sbapro/](http://web.hku.hk/~sbapro/)

<sup>3</sup> Established by the Hong Kong SAR Government in 1998 to finance projects for the promotion of quality of education in Hong Kong

facilitator and I am working closely with another colleague in the facilitating team. We are supporting seven teams of teachers in one sub-group. The teachers are divided into five research sub-groups related to *school-based assessment: Feedback* (7 school teams); *Interactive Assessment* (7 school teams); *Peer Assessment* (1 school team); *Grouping* (2 school teams); and *Task Development Group* (7 school teams).

The project has the following features:

- 76 teacher volunteers from 24 secondary schools.
- 9 facilitators with strong interests in assessment for learning and action research.
- Teachers were given ‘menus’ to choose their own action research topic.
- Each school team has 2-4 teachers working together
- Ongoing support provided at the University (forums and workshops) and at the schools.
- The group leader oversees the whole project and provides ongoing support for facilitators and teachers.
- A project manager and a team of research assistants to assist teachers with data collection in schools.
- Teachers will disseminate data at a Teacher Conference in November 2007.
- Joint authorship of academic papers at the end of the project.

### **Why Collaborative Action Research?**

In the literature advocating CAR it can be seen that the facilitator plays a critical role in the process as a *catalyst* for initiating change ( Burns, 1999; Carr and Kemmis, 1986; Cochran-Smith and Lytle, 1990; Kemmis and McTaggart, 1988; Nunan (1990); Richards, 2003; Kincheloe, 2003). According to Whitehead and McNiff (2006) the role of the facilitator in action research is to support the teachers by providing intellectual and emotional support, advice, resources and

pathways to accreditation. In our project, we are studying the practice of teachers implementing assessment reform in Hong Kong classrooms *in collaboration* with the teachers. In our project we have been working closely with the teachers helping them to identify a research focus; plan the research; undertake appropriate data collection; data analysis and eventually apply their new understanding into practice; a “process of defining and redefining the corpus of understanding on which their community or organization life is based” (Stringer, 1999, p.11).

It is argued by advocates of action research that the process of decision making should be a joint endeavor between the partners to form a democratic partnership (Burns, 1999; Carr and Kemmis, 1986; Cochran-Smith and Lytle, 1990; Grundy, 1994; Elliott, 1991; Kemmis and McTaggart, 1988; Stenhouse, 1975; Stringer, 1999). To achieve this, literature suggests facilitators have to *play down* the ‘expert’ and ‘instructor’ roles to formulate a “flat” (non-hierarchical) research organizational structure to promote equality. However, despite a growing number of studies exploring CAR as a mode of professional development for in-service teachers, there is limited literature offering insights into how facilitators actually engage and support teachers in the research process. This paper contributes to the existing literature by exploring how external facilitators construct a *scaffolding structure* to support first time teacher researchers. There are few studies explicitly addressing the complexities of facilitating collaborative action research as a large team.

### *Challenges of Collaboration*

Collaborative action research is defined by Stringer (1999) as a way to improve professional life by sharing diverse knowledge and experiences as a community (Cochran-Smith and Lytle, 1990; Stringer, 1999). In the study conducted by Thorne and Qiang (1996), they observed that teachers who participated in action research in China were generally motivated by the experience, but it took time before the student-teachers in their project gained an understanding of action research;

*what it is* and *what it is for*. Thorne and Qiang (1996) explained Chinese teachers' resistance to action research was because they were unfamiliar with the notion of "reflective teaching" compounded by a lack of understanding in educational theory. This may be because in China, as in Hong Kong, a professional teaching qualification is not a prerequisite for entry into the profession.

In a case study examining why there is lack of action research in Hong Kong, Li et al (1999) argued that there is an isolated culture of teaching where open communication and discussion among colleagues is rare due to subject-based ideology and departmentalism. In Hong Kong the culture is for teachers to work alone within their area of expertise. Li et al (1999) argued this is because there is a strong professional-bureaucratic dichotomy in Hong Kong's education system where administrators make professional decisions for teachers. This they argue is counter-productive to professional development and school reforms. They explain:

Hong Kong school administrators do not regard professional development as significant as technical support in school improvement and effective teaching... In-service retraining is perceived as the best way to equip teachers for change and individual development. These beliefs, we perceive, tend to devalue professional development and embarrass the efforts of teacher self-empowerment through reflection and personal theorizing (Li et al, 1999, p.38)

In our project schools were encouraged to participate as a team (3-4 teachers of junior forms) and we also encouraged teachers to keep their colleagues and principals informed of the research progress. The project leader and manager both believe the majority of the teachers joined the QEF Project because they want to improve assessment practices in their schools. We recognized that teachers will need support with carrying out the action research as most of the teachers indicated in the questionnaire they have little or no experience of conducting classroom studies. As a team

we shared a common belief: that we want to facilitate teachers to do research, but not to do it for them.

### *Crossing Cultural Boundaries*

Hu (2002) argues care has to be taken when introducing educational innovations developed in totally different social, cultural and economic settings. In Hu's (2002) study examining cultural resistance to pedagogical imports in China, he identified a host of constraints faced by innovators which includes: lack of necessary resources to support change; big class size; limited instruction time; teachers' lack of language proficiency and sociological competence; examination pressure, and cultural factors.

According to Holliday (1994), conflicts in curriculum innovation projects are inevitable because the educational environment is constructed from a variety of interconnected cultures. He explains:

The project itself is a cultural entity interacting with target professional-academic, classroom, and institutional cultures. Whereas the target cultures constitute an established ecosystem, the project culture is a temporary newcomer which brings an intrusion of change. (Holliday, 1994, p.111)

According to Holliday (1994), it is less misleading and more useful to understand the cultural conflicts (between newcomer and host) in terms of what he calls "professional-academic cultures" than "national culture profiling" (1994, p.111). Holliday (1994) points out such "relationships are extremely complex whether working across a national culture divide or within the same national culture" and many problems in collaboration are caused by researchers underestimating the difficulties (1994, p.113). Tinker-Sachs (2003) conducted a three year collaborative action research with primary teachers in Hong Kong. In the report of the

study she highlighted the following constraints: *school curriculum not conducive for innovative teaching; differing expectations among the researchers; and inadequate support given by the university researchers*. Tinker-Sach's (2003) findings support the argument put forward by Somekh (1994) that "collaboration is always fraught with difficulties and complete equality is probably impossible to achieve in any partnership" (1994, p. 365). In Somekh's (1994) collaborative study with schools in the UK, she found the following strategies useful as a 'code of practice' to guide facilitators:

- Address teachers questions with equal seriousness
- Ask 'real' questions (without preconceived answers)
- Recognise gaps in knowledge as partners
- Learn together as partners

Somekh (1994) argues that it was not easy achieving all these principles in her experience of facilitation, but the team placed particular importance on the issue of 'honesty'. She argues to ensure the relationship is not "fraught with difficulties" collaborators have to feel they can speak truthfully if they are experiencing problems in the relationship. A support system needs to include ways in which participants can express discontent or even anger. Somekh (1994) argues harbouring these emotions can inhibit meaningful collaboration. Stringer (1999) suggests establishing a 'code of conduct' or a protocol to guide facilitators and teachers when problems arise.

Somekh's (1994) uses the metaphor "inhabiting each other's castles" to represent the relationship between teacher-researchers in her collaborative learning framework. She argues each participant constructs their world (castle), and this individuality in the partnership should be valued.

However, at the same time we can also learn a great deal by “inhabiting” other teachers’ castles through collaborative research. In this comment, Somekh sums up the essence of collaboration:

Collaboration is about celebrating differences and strengthening one’s own sense of identity; and at the same time it is about developing knowledge and understanding of the other so that movement between the two castles is pleasurable, challenging and mutually empowering. (1994, p.373)

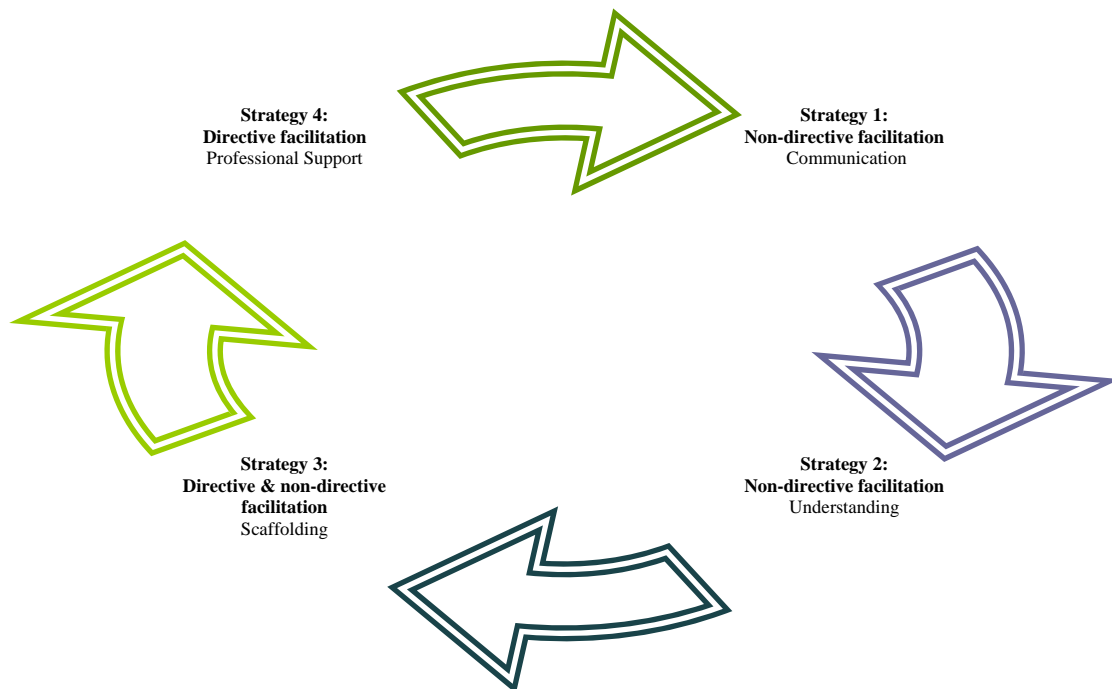
### *Facilitation Strategies*

There are currently no studies explicitly examining strategies employed by university facilitators or the type of support framework needed by teachers to carry out collaborative action research models within a non-Western cultural setting. It could be argued what that constitutes as ‘support’ may vary greatly from culture to culture and most relevant studies have been undertaken in Australia and the UK. We need to consider how teachers working in a Chinese culture will understand the *language* of collaborative action research? Language used in the Australian or UK examples of CAR, notions such as ‘facilitator’, ‘facilitation’, ‘critical friend’, ‘collaboration’ and ‘joint ownership’ may not be understood by teachers working in different social-cultural settings.

In Kember et al’s (1997) study examining the diverse role of the critical friend in supporting educational action research projects, they identified 12 different roles as important facets of the “critical friends” they include: *financier, project design consultant, rapport builder, coffee maker, mirror, teaching consultant, match maker and deadline enforcer*. In this study, I will refrain from identifying the specific *roles* as Kember et al did in their study because I have found it impossible to accurately ‘slot’ myself into ‘a role’. I also feel uncomfortable confining myself to a set of labels because the data clearly show that we have to play multiple roles, and certainly more than the 12 identified by Kember et al (1997). Furthermore, I have observed these roles are not fixed,

but continually *evolve* during the course of the action research journey. Thus I have adopted the broader term ‘strategies’ to avoid labeling and confining ourselves to a ‘role’. I have identified four broad strategies ranging from non-directive to directive in our approach. The four macro strategies which emerged as major themes were: *communication*; *understanding*; *scaffolding*; and *professional support*. The team valued *ongoing dialogues* with the teachers within their sub-group (*communication*); we also *actively listened* to their concerns (*understanding*); we recognized we have to provide them with *sufficient support* in multiple forms (*scaffolding*); and we have to *intervene* if the action plan is not working (*professional support*). It can be argued that these 4 macro-strategies *guided our overall facilitation approach*; they reflect how we supported the teachers during the critical initial stages of the project. I have illustrated this process in figure 1:

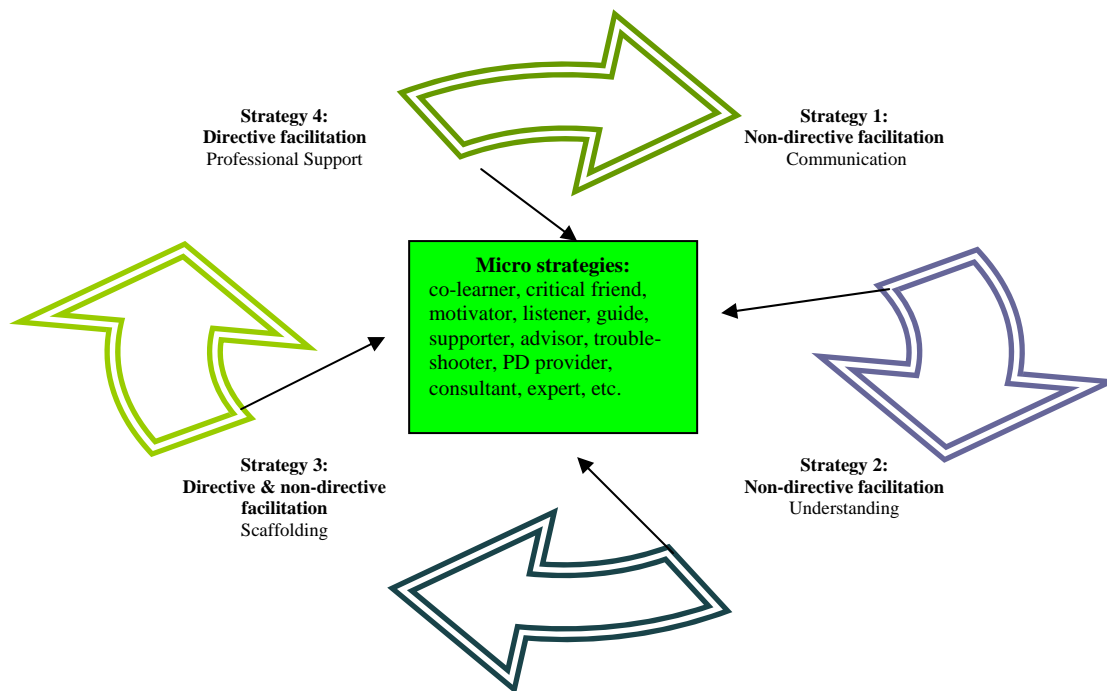
Figure 1: Macro strategies as a cycle



Furthermore, the strategies often operated *simultaneously*; for example the support process began with effective communication when we talked to teachers in our group, to find out where they

were at in terms of the research cycle, what problems they were experiencing before we could determine how to support them (directive or non-directive mode). So strategies 1-3 worked in hand-in-hand, and strategy 4 was adopted only as a last resort. Kember et al's (1997) discrete roles are useful metaphors for understanding individual facilitator's interactions with teachers at a micro level. I have illustrated the relationship between the identified macro strategies and the multiple micro strategies in figure 2. Although I have identified some of the micro strategies (roles) adopted by the facilitators (see figure 2), I would like to stress the parameters for these 'roles' are much broader than the 12 roles identified by Kember et al (1997). The roles were dependent on our individual philosophy, personality, existing relationships with the teachers, and the prevailing social context:

*Figure 2: Macro & Micro strategies as a cycle:*



Macro strategies 1-3 are most commonly recommended in CAR literature as ways to build a democratic and equal partnership. They are the roles closely associated with what Stenhouse (1975) describes as 'critical friendship'. Macro strategy 4 (interventionist mode) is perceived to

be undesirable because it reinforces the hierarchical power structure of the partnership even when literature recognizes equal partnership is probably impossible (Somekh 1994). Kemmis and McTaggart (1988) argue intervention can create circumstances under which project control is taken out of the teachers' hands and "elevate the person intervening to the status of someone with superior knowledge to impart potential participants in the action research process (p.201). They explain:

It is common for 'outsiders' to be involved in the organization of action research, providing material and moral support to action researching teachers. The relationships established between outside 'facilitators' and action researchers can, however, have a profound effect on the character of the action research undertaken. To varying degrees, they influence the agenda of issues being addressed in the action research process, the data-gathering and analytic techniques being employed, the character of reflection, and the interpretations reached on the basis of the evidence generated by the study.

(Kemmis and McTaggart, 1988, p.201)

Kemmis and McTaggart (1988) are critical of 'technical action research' and argue it is 'inauthentic' and 'non-emancipatory' because such studies lead to improvements from the viewpoints of the outsiders. They propose an alternative mode 'practical action research' in which the facilitator's role is purely Socratic "to provide a sounding board against which practitioners may try out ideas and learn more about the process of self-reflection" (Kemmis and McTaggart, 1988, p.203). Although direct intervention is in conflict with the epistemology underpinning Kemmis and McTaggart's (1988) notion of the facilitator as a sounding board (non-intervening role), with the support of the data in the QEF Project I shall present my understanding of why intervention was used to support the teachers at the *planning* stage of the action research cycle. I shall now present my understanding and a rationale for the strategies adopted to address the second part of the research question.

### **Strategy 1: Open Communication**

Facilitation strategies which are grounded in facilitators' understanding of social-cultural influences seem to be most effective. This understanding allowed the facilitating team to work around the cultural constraints so that we can 'empower' teachers to do what they can within their own school settings (Stenhouse, 1975). Upon closer examination of the Chinese language, we find terms such as 'facilitation', 'critical friend', 'collaboration' and 'joint ownership' do not exist in the Chinese language, at least not an exact translation. For example, the English word facilitator is used for lack of a suitable translation in Chinese. In our first meeting with the teachers we were tentative and careful about how we presented the notion of 'equal' partnership. We encouraged a free flow of ideas and provided a safe space for discourse and rapport building. We also selected language sensitively, not bombarding teachers with academic jargon used in action research literature. Communication was conducted with respect and sincerity. In my journal I noted how one facilitator introduced the notion of action research to the teachers in our first meeting with them in December 2006:

I noticed how she has chosen her words carefully, using language teachers will understand. She is being sensitive and I can see she is responding to the body language of the teachers and listening to the audience. She acknowledged their anxiety in participating in the project and addressed their concerns clearly. She stated the objectives of doing action research and the high amount of support and flexibility which will be included in our model. Teachers were provided with opportunities to ask questions formally during the presentations and informally over afternoon tea. The informal setting made the 'bonding' natural and collegial. (Research journal, December 2006)

Facilitators do not want to be perceived as being 'pushy' or 'over bearing'. Even when teachers were slow in responding to the project, encouragement was given in the forms of gentle reminders and personal phone calls. We avoided setting deadlines. One facilitator explains:

From the perspective of ideology, I am open-minded. I am responsible for the structure of the project because it is similar to a number of projects I have done in the past. I find it works well where you have broad common parameters, common guidelines in terms of efficiency, getting things done, but sufficient freedom and autonomy within the sub-areas of the project for people to develop their own particular ways of working...*we have to put ourselves in their shoes (teachers), how can they manage this, what's realistic, what can you possibly manage when you have a class of 40 students and some of them will only have 35 minutes periods.*

(QEF Project Facilitator 8<sup>4</sup>, December 2006)

This 'real world' understanding of what teachers can realistically manage as research partners is fundamental in relationship building. We have to have realistic expectations and not demand more from the teachers than they can manage. This understanding is achieved through a process of open communication and careful negotiation. This facilitator also comments on the importance of open communication in nurturing partnership:

We seem to be in closest email communications with the teams (teachers). You talked about co-learners, this was exactly what my co-facilitator and I believe in and that is actually explained to the teachers; that we want to learn with you together and learn from you, and that's what she emphasized in the very first meeting with the teachers, the first time we co-facilitated a session (forum) as group leaders. We tried to keep it as open as possible, we tried to go from where they are at, but the constraint is that we don't know enough about their schools, so we rely a lot on them to tell us what they think is happening in their schools (constraints/ problems). It's limited in a sense, because it all comes from them and we need to keep asking them questions. Plus most of them at that

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<sup>4</sup> Numbers are used to identify different voices within the team. The numbers do not correspond to the sub-groups.

point didn't have the topic crystallized concretely in their minds, so a lot of email communication, such as asking them what they think they are trying to do...

(Facilitator 3, QEF Project, April 2007)

Email communication has been of great benefit in facilitating collaborative action research by providing facilitators with a useful tool to discuss and clarify ideas with the teachers. The emails are useful as a way to document the research journey for further reflection and evaluation. The sub-groups with fewer teachers had an advantage in that those facilitators had more opportunity to individual time with each teacher. The data show those facilitators were able to talk, listen and respond better to the teachers' questions about the topic and action research. The strategies adopted were non-directive:

In one of the sessions, I talked with the teachers, posed some questions and then I went and sat on my own in the other side of the room to give them some time to talk about their ideas in English or Cantonese. Just to give them a bit of time to consolidate as a group. I wanted to give them time to think and have time to pause for thought. It also allowed them to discuss in Cantonese (if they want) and to explore whether what we have discussed is actually do able in their school. It also gave me a chance to think. Before I met them, I didn't know what stage they were at, what they wanted to do. That seemed to work quite well. Just to give teachers and me some space to think.

(Facilitator 9, QEF Project, March 2007)

We just had a chat, I talked to them about the topic and one teacher was interested and asked me some questions, sometimes we shared with each other our experiences (teaching experiences). Before I joined HKU, I was a teacher as well, so everybody has some experience of the topic! Later, the teacher said what's most relevant for them to do in the research... so I said fine. I helped them by putting their ideas into a context. They

came up with a topic, but my role was to help them move the topic forward. I got them to think about how to investigate this topic. For example, getting them to think about what types of students can be involved in the research/topic, just general details related to the research process.

(Facilitator 7, QEF Project, March 2007)

It can be seen that within smaller groupings, it was easier for facilitators to adopt the role of the active listener. Questions were used by facilitator 7 and 9 to elicit contributions from the teachers, which were valued and acknowledged.

### **Strategy 2: Shared Understanding**

Elliott (1991) states what facilitators must not do in CAR is ‘hijack’ teachers’ ideas in collaborative research. Active listening can help teachers to talk through their ideas as a way to clarify their own understanding of their ideas or questions. This facilitator describes the importance of listening as a way to *understand* the teachers:

I was trying not to overload the teachers with too much information, while at the same time being directive and as supportive as possible. Teachers had minimal knowledge, so I wanted to give them enough input...I discovered when they came to the second session, a lot of them didn't really get the right concept of what the topic is and it was only through the interactions with them that, in little groups, that we helped them understand a bit more and we allowed them to say what they thought it meant, let them continue until a point where this is it and this is not it, that we came to some collective understanding.

(Facilitator 3, QEF Project, April 2007)

The interview data with all the facilitators reflect how we all shared a view that teachers should be given as much autonomy as they are ready for, but with an understanding that if teachers want

more direct support, we will provide it. This was one of the shared principles by all the facilitators in the team, we wanted to offer teachers an opportunity to improve assessment practices and learn how to do this through action research within a broad and flexible framework. One facilitator viewed autonomy as an important factor in nurturing collaboration that will be mutually beneficial for everybody. Within this model, teachers do not have to follow one track to reach their goals, they can choose multiple tracks and our role is to help them when they face a stumbling block along the way:

My ultimate goal is to improve assessment practices in schools and its action research in that teachers can negotiate their own focus. We haven't said to them right we want you all to look at x or y, we want you all to do the same action plans. Perhaps it would have been easier doing it that way, but it would have been very limiting in terms of focus and ownership of the action research. And in a way that would have been self defeating as they might not do what you have planned anyway, so I think you might as well get them (teachers) to do what they are really interested in anyway and get them committed to doing it. (Facilitator 9, QEF Project, April 2007)

The comments from this facilitator show some of the constraints of conducting CAR in our social-cultural context and the importance of *understanding* teacher diversity within a group:

In the forums, a joint understanding was built up, the action plans, the plans were formulaic and teachers were copying the sample ones and teachers not taking ownership. Some saw it (action research) as an assignment for a course, rather than seeing it as their project...Teachers lacked ideas. They have fixed ideas about research, and not clear about action research. It takes time and some only turned up for one forum, they were so enthusiastic during meetings, but sustaining interest beyond the forum is difficult. One group of teacher has a dominant member who wants to take the project by the horns, but

we need to encourage shared ownership of the project. (Facilitator 4, QEF Project, March 2007)

The findings of a questionnaire conducted with teachers in the third forum before the first cycle of the action research revealed participants' diverse understanding of action research. A challenge for the facilitators was addressing teachers' knowledge gaps and finding ways to co-construct shared understanding as a team. All the facilitators in this Project had a high *awareness* and a shared *understanding* of teachers' knowledge gaps in carrying out school-based research.

However, as we got to know the teachers better, we discovered that some teachers were experiencing practical constraints in conducting the two cycles of research. The interviews with the facilitators showed we identified a wide range of concerns including: teachers' minimal knowledge about action research (e.g. planning and data analysis); the demand of time and effort required in the process; finding time for meetings; apprehension related to the quality and relevance of research. These problems are consistent with my previous experiences of collaborating with teachers in other action research projects in Hong Kong. Teachers who are confronted with practical constraints are more likely to develop psychological barriers, which can discourage them from repeating the experience. For teachers who are used to working alone, the notion of opening up our private world for all to see our imperfections can be a daunting one. This is supported by Stenhouse's (1975) argument that the barriers to research are usually psychological, and that this fear of examining the self will not disperse without proper social support (e.g. school culture, facilitation) such as creating a non-threatening learning environment for prospective teacher researchers. Within my sub-group, my co-facilitator and I ensured there was flexibility in the action plans to accommodate unexpected changes. I learnt that we have to be sensitive to the changing circumstances of the teachers. Understanding, sincerity and compassion are important principles in facilitating action research.

### **Strategy 3: Strong Scaffolding**

Learning to do and learning to facilitate action research can be complex processes (Elliott, 1991; Ponte, 2002). The complexity is deepened by teachers having to master several skills and actions *all* at the same time in carrying out research. These factors were identified by both Elliott (1991) and Ponte (2002) in their extensive studies of collaborative action research (CAR) with teachers in the UK and Holland. In collaborating with colleagues and external facilitators, Elliott argues action research requires teachers to adopt “learning” in the mode of “active production of knowledge” that is manifested within a community of practice (Elliott, 1991, p. 10). A feature of collaborative action research demands a process of collective learning; teachers learning with ‘another’; be it a student, a colleague or an external facilitator.

One of the remarkable features about the construction industry in Hong Kong is its reliance on bamboo canes to provide scaffolding for modern buildings. The metaphor of the *bamboo scaffolding* can be used to describe the ‘fusion’ support framework co-constructed by the participants in the QEF project. Interviews with my co-facilitators showed their awareness of the need for more ‘hands on’ support at the initial stages of the research process because of the teachers’ uncertainty about the direction of research. There were times when we felt uncertain how to reach out to our partners:

I felt quite uncomfortable during the first forum because I felt first I was teaching in a way I don’t usually teach, such as using a Power Point and out of my comfort zone and the dynamics between the groups, no connection and lots of silent period. I was a bit worried about how everyone would become cohesive with each other in the research teams in schools and with the university and how each school team would react to one another, I was really quite worried about that.

(Facilitator 5, QEF Project, March 2007)

The challenge for facilitators is assessing the 'right' type of support to help teachers get started in their own action research at school. Another issue as perceived by facilitator 5 is motivating and sustaining interest in the project. Scaffolding strategies shifted from non-directive such as questioning to directive such giving comments to help teachers improve their action research plans:

I gave the teachers lots of information on the topic, examples of research plans, surveys and all sorts of materials. We did a few tasks (in the workshops), even with data analysis, even though they might not have to go into that. Before the interview, there were several emails going back and forwards. They sent their research plans and I made comments, quite tentative about it because you know I am not used to doing this sort of thing and I sent my comments to , I was saying things like what do you think (to co-facilitator), do you think this is too much, too little. I don't want to force people to do things they don't want to do! My co-facilitator would then comment and I would send teachers the email and my co-facilitator would follow up with a phone call. I think those phone calls, that personal input has really helped make all of the groups really gelled with us, the relationship between HKU and the school and the research team in each school, I think the phone calls really made a difference...It's not a question of you and us, but a question of we are co-investigating this together!

(Facilitator 5, QEF Project, March 2007)

This facilitator points out the right kind of scaffolding emerged as a result of careful negotiation with co-facilitators and team members. The support system was not a linear, but a cyclical process of negotiation between the facilitators and the teachers. The importance of negotiation was also identified by Magyer and Mayer (1998) in their study of CAR. They identified an important 'support' feature of CAR is the process of multi-level negotiations between co-researchers. They point out that the role of the facilitator is a multi-faceted one, in which we are

“change agents and teachers of action research, we are resources and personal support persons, as well as facilitators, and critics, as well as researchers on our own action in the research process” (Magyer and Mayer, 1998, p. 487).

The QEF Project has a large facilitating team. In terms of facilitation, this factor significantly enhanced the support we experienced as a team and how we extended that support to the teachers at the 24 schools. A large facilitating team provides teachers and facilitators with *multiple layers* of facilitation (support) during the research process. The project leader and the project manager act as *bridges*, mediating and negotiating between the partners as a consultant and mentor. A comment from the project team leader:

I am the catalyst for getting things moving and the place where the buck stops. I see myself as someone working collaboratively with the research team...open to suggestions and comments from other people. I encourage people to initiate ideas, so once the project is underway, I see myself as being the facilitator, perhaps trouble-shooter, rather than the boss as such. I see myself being available 24 hours a day, seven days a week.”

(QEF Project Leader, December 2006)

This additional layer of facilitation provides researchers and teachers with a safe space to focus on the action research. The frontline facilitators can seek additional support from the ‘back-up’ team when needed. The support of the project leader extends to that of a mentor to coach and guide facilitators who are inexperienced in collaborative action research.

#### **Strategy 4: Appropriate Professional Support**

Stringer (1999) states that the characteristics of collaborative action research are: it is *democratic*; *equitable*; *liberating* and *life enhancing*. But how do we apply such principles in a social-context where action research is not common practice within the teaching profession? In our project, the teachers had about three months to complete the two cycles of action research. We found we had

to provide a wide range of support (both non-directive and directive) to mobilise and motivate teachers. The teachers also depended on us to provide them with the relevant research expertise:

I think teachers come in knowing you are supposed to be have research expertise, have experience in assessment and they to have something that they can react to...giving them options, but choices within options...You cannot stand up in front of a group of Hong Kong teachers these days and talk to them as if outside the real world. You have to say to them look we understand that you'll have all sorts of problems, constraints, things that are unexpected.

(Facilitator 8, QEF Project, December 2006)

Professional support (directive support) was given to the teachers in the mode of forums. Three sessions were arranged to help teachers with the action research planning process. Teachers were slowly introduced to the idea of action research with ample input of *what* it is and *how* it is carried out provided by the academic team. Workshops for the five sub-groups were organized for teachers to ask questions. In the QEF Project, teachers were free to choose their own sub-topic area within the umbrella topic of School-based Assessment. During the research cycles, facilitators also visited them at school (twice) to discuss data and problems which emerged during the course of the research process. In between the face-to-face meetings, facilitators maintained close contacts with the groups via email and phone calls. In this following comment, one facilitator explains why she had to shift from a non-directive to an intervention mode during a meeting with the teachers to discuss the draft plan. She explains:

I listened to the teacher talking about his plan, I realised that the teacher had no understanding of what action research might be. Just not grasping anything, so we (facilitators) asked small gentle questions that were intended to raise awareness of 'what can you achieve these goals by?' ...As the session went on, I became more and more, well, *lecture mode* I suppose you could say, it was nearly all me trying to explain goals of

the project, how action research works, and why it might work and what you can expect out of it and not expect out of it...it was hard and it took a long time before there were several 'Eureka' moments when you could see the teachers' eyes light up because a small idea has made its way in."

(Facilitator 1, May 2007)

The process of providing the right kind of support at the right time is a time consuming, but an important part of the process. This facilitator provided the teacher with appropriate professional support to help the teacher stay on track. She comments on the mutual benefits of this intervention:

There were three important discovery moments...basically I was responding by saying 'what I might do would be'...and then the teacher verbally re-did his research plan and it was very different. So there had been 'stuff' happening all through that hour or so. We came away and we felt that wasn't at all what it was supposed to have been, we weren't sharing with them as (equal) participants, but we did help them by *moving their thinking forward* and we have heard from them since and they are doing fine. (Facilitator 1, May 2007)

Effective facilitation comes from understanding teachers' discrete needs and we should respond in an appropriate manner: as a co-learner, guide, trouble shooter *or* a critical friend. Rather than confining to playing just the one role, we adopted a broad parameter of facilitation strategies. We moved freely in a loop; shifting to a directive mode when we sense partners are floundering and moving back to a non-directive role when they are comfortably on track.

### **Discussion and implications for further research**

The notion of critical friendship was first discussed by Stenhouse (1975) when he recommended another person who acts as a partner to a teacher to give advice as a friend. Stenhouse (1975) defines the critical friend as 'another' who can help the teacher to develop reflective abilities

during action research. Hatton and Smith (1995) state that critical friendship is “to engage with another person in a way which encourages talking with, questioning, and even confronting, the trusted other, in order to examine planning for teaching, implementation, and its evaluation” (1995, p.41). Their arguments suggest a ‘critical friend’ should engage their learning partners in critical dialogues throughout the action research process so that the teacher can *talk* about the research and *be heard* in a critically constructive manner. Arguably when facilitators become trouble-shooters they *are* playing the role of the critical friend. We have extended Stenhouse’s (1975) definition to suit our needs; using the collective stories from the facilitating team, I have illustrated how critical friendship can be both directive and non-directive. But any intervention is conducted with mutual respect and within a trusting relationship.

By exploring the critical relationship between the teacher-researchers and external facilitators in CAR, I have identified the multiple functions facilitators play to engage teachers in action research. The paper explored how the facilitator has to expand the facilitation scope to accommodate cultural and contextual diversities of participants, beyond a set of preconceived roles and labels. I have presented 4 macro facilitation strategies adopted by the facilitators in one CAR project in the Hong Kong social-cultural setting. The arguments presented are aimed to illustrate that action research facilitators should not be inhibited by the roles stipulated in the literature, but to conceive precepts most suitable to your own professional and national culture.

Elliott (1991) who has conducted extensive collaborative research with teacher educators in the UK and at the Institute of Education in Hong Kong, observes that teachers find collaboration with colleagues difficult because the major values embodied in the professional culture of teachers are namely those of privacy, territoriality and hierarchy. To address this, I have identified how a collaborative action research model was constructed with a broad spectrum of support to meet the social contextual needs of the teaching professionals within our project. Rather than limiting

ourselves to what has been done in the previous studies, we adopted strategies to suit our needs within the Hong Kong teaching professional context. We communicated with our collaborators to reach a mutual understanding of what might be workable and achievable within the context of our partnership. We adopted *multiple routes* to facilitate co-inquiry, crossing professional boundaries to “inhabit each other’s castles” (Somekh, 1994). Both Somekh’s (1994) and Elliott’s (1991) observations suggest collaboration is complex. The challenge for teachers is shifting from an individualistic notion of professional learning to a collective one; the challenge for facilitators is providing the right amount of support at the right time. In this paper I understand the data presented have contextual constraints, but I hope action research facilitators in a similar social context can relate in part to the findings.

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