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Providing a framework for a ‘shared repertoire’ in a cross-national research project

by

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Introduction

There is currently a growth of interest and activity in the area of comparative cross-national partnership research. This is stimulated by methodological, ideological, political and economic developments particularly within the European Union where European Commission funding has supported numerous projects. Whereas the ‘old’ comparative education focused solely on large-scale quantitative projects to establish differences in educational effectiveness of different nations, the ‘new’ comparative research is developing innovative methodologies in order to undertake studies which take account of tradition, context and national and local education policy (Broadfoot, 2002a&b; Osborn, 2004). Both these forms of research, however, are subject to broadly the same set of methodological issues surrounding their effectiveness.

This paper describes some of the recent developments in comparative research, and the strengths and weaknesses (Osborn, 2004) which have been identified with these approaches, and considers developments in innovative qualitative research methods for comparative educational research (Crossley and Vulliamy, 1997; Webb and Vulliamy, 1999; Webb et al 2004). We then outline and discuss the methodology used in the *Creative Learning and Student Perspectives* (CLASP) Project, a study involving 10 European partner countries. Our discussion aims to contribute to methodological writing on comparative research and the use of ethnographic methods in this form of large-scale qualitative research. We conclude that the common adoption of an ethnographic methodology for the study was the main means of establishing and maintaining a ‘shared repertoire’ (Wenger, 1998; Somekh and Pearson, 2002) within the large inter-national team, though we did experience the same kinds of

difficulties and ambivalences identified by others' involvement in cross-national qualitative research.

Promises and perils of cross-national comparative educational research

Broadfoot (2002a) and Osborn (2004) distinguish between the 'old' and 'new' comparative research paradigms. In the 'old' tradition, characterised by such studies carried out by the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA) and by the Office for Economic Collaboration and Development (OECD), the aim was to measure the efficiency and value of education systems usually by the attainment outcomes of pupils, usually defined largely by one-off academic achievement (Osborn, 2004, p. 266). These types of studies employed quantitative large-scale survey methods and emphasised large-scale survey methods and socio-economic analysis at the expense of linguistic and cultural factors (ibid.). While such studies have contributed to evidence-based policies and international borrowing, they have also been the focus of sustained criticism. Goldstein (1996), for example, in a wide ranging methodological critique of this tradition argues that some of the differences in the educational systems may be related to cultural context. Osborn (2004) argues that the 'old' comparative tradition needs to be replaced by a 'new' tradition which aims to:

adopt contextual sensitivity when comparing educational systems. More specifically, it argues for the importance of seeking to understand, through cross-cultural comparison, the relationship between national context, institutional ethos and classroom practices in mediating the development of a learner's identity' (p.266).

Broadfoot (2002a) argues that it is the main aim of 'new' comparative research to 'make the familiar strange in different national contexts (p.6). And through comparative study of students and teachers in different national contexts to examine:

the taken-for-granted assumptions embedded in conventional discourse through the use of systematic explanations of similar phenomena in different cultural, geographic, social and chronological settings.(ibid).

This approach is needed, she argues, in order to provide knowledge for academics, politicians and policy-makers to understand the 'impact of economic and political pressures which make it difficult for countries to develop genuinely novel educational approaches' (ibid).

Of course, educational policy is a key area for comparative educational research. Comparative insights can be provided on how 'policy ideas are traded around the world and what determines their take up in different settings'. Understanding these issues and seeing what happens in different national contexts can provide 'fundamental models on which policy-makers can draw' (p.134). Comparative research in the 'new' tradition is, therefore,

concerned with the description and analysis of what happens in policy implementation. And what actually happens is the 'result of a series of interpretations and mediations in which initial aspirations and instructions are filtered through the understanding and values of many groups and individuals at different levels of the system who are responsible for implementing them' (Broadfoot, 2002b, p134).

Osborn (2004) argues for the identification and utilisation of innovative research methodologies which are required to develop the 'contextual sensitivity' of comparative studies and which aim to link systems, schools and individual learners through comparative study. This is important because the forms of teaching and learning described and analysed will, inevitably, be a 'function of the national cultural contexts and national educational traditions' in which they occur in specific localities. These studies, therefore, have a focus on 'individuals and groups of learners situated within a larger cultural context'(p.269). Cross-cultural; collaborative research within the 'new' tradition aims to 'contribute to a collective understanding of the inter-relatedness of the various cultural factors concerned and the danger of crude policy borrowing' (p.268).

Pepin (1999) and Tobin (1999) argue that comparative analysis can be a powerful tool in making the 'familiar strange and the strange familiar' in examining the taken-for-granted in our own national institutions'. In a study of pedagogy in five cultures Alexander (2000) 'used qualitative research to unravel further the complex interplay of policies, structures, culture, values and pedagogy' (Osborn, 2004, p272).

Osborn (2004) indicates a number of studies adopting innovative methodologies in this tradition. Crossley and Vulliamy (1997), for example, argue that case-study or ethnographic method can play a vital role in comparative education research, particularly that exploring the relationship between policy and schooling. These forms of case study provide comparative insights which can lead to theories about the process of schooling. Webb and Vulliamy (1999) and Webb et al (2004) have argued for and used ethnographic methods in a number of cross-national studies. Vulliamy (2004) has recently argued, though, that this form of 'new' comparative research, though still highly appropriate in the current context, may be under attack from globalising tendencies and competing research cultures. In a recent article Vulliamy (2004, p.261) argues that:

The processes of globalisation have been viewed by some as a major threat to the qualitative research tradition in education. Two main aspects of the impact of globalisation on qualitative research are addressed here. Firstly, it is argued that given the vital role of culture in mediating global policies at different levels, qualitative research still has a very important role to play. Secondly, it is argued that the

knowledge and information revolution associated with globalisation has created an increasingly positivist climate that represents both a challenge for, and a challenge to, comparative education as it is currently conceived--particularly in the UK. This is illustrated by the growing international interest in systematic review methodology and its associated privileging of quantitative research strategies, such as randomised controlled trials, in evidence-based policy.

Ethnographic studies, though, aim to 'shed light on the complex interplay of factors – personal, social and structural that influence young people's engagement with learning'. Whatever the promises offered by comparative educational research, there are also some perils. Both 'old' and 'new' comparative research traditions are subject to the same basic issues. Osborn identifies three main ones, they are as follows:

conceptual equivalence

Basically this refers to the issue of whether the concepts under study have any equivalent meaning in the cultures under study? For example, Osborn (2004) cites the example from her own comparative research project in which the team discovered that the concept 'accountability, and used by the English research team, has no equivalent meaning in French. The researchers in Somekh and Pearson's (2002) project all held very different conceptions of the notion of 'action research' for instance.

equivalence of measurement

Concepts may differ in the salience they have for the culture as a whole. For instance, French teachers found the notion of 'teaching style' problematic, and were not used to reflecting on it in an analytical way. In Somekh and Pearson's research the English team felt unable to establish the average age of the teachers in their study as it was considered impolite in English culture for the researchers to ask respondents for their ages.

linguistic equivalence

There is often very great difficulty in obtaining linguistic equivalence through translation. This is a large problem for questionnaire-based studies, of course. For example, the Russian language does not provide different verbs for 'teaching' and 'learning' (cited in Osborn, 2004, p. 270).

Establishing a project shared repertoire.

Somekh and Pearson (2002) use Wenger's (1998) concept of 'shared repertoires' to identify and discuss a fourth issue facing comparative research involving a number of cross-national

collaborators. Wenger's concept really embodies all three of Osborn's (2004) issues but the emphasis in its use is on shared culture, shared disciplinary tradition, shared ways of working. Shared repertoires include the 'routines, words, stories and actions that have been developed by the group in the course of working together' (Somekh and Pearson, 2004, p.489). While collaborative research in a large research team within one national culture can prove challenging, clearly, the building and maintenance of 'shared repertoires' is vital in the process of a large international research project involving partners from several nations.

The problem, of course, is how to develop a 'shared repertoire' within the project when project members come to the research with a considerable history and experience of other 'shared repertoires' developed within other institutions, research projects, disciplinary traditions, and national contexts.

A Theoretical and Substantive Focus

The first issue was conceptual equivalence of the term 'creative learning'. We avoided debate over the nature of creativity itself as we regarded this as a difficult and slippery concept and focused on creative teaching and creative learning for which we had developed a range of books, papers and articles, exploring its characteristics and features. New national discourses and policies relating directly to creative and more flexible curriculum programmes had been introduced in the last ten years or so in Denmark, England, Ireland, Portugal, Sweden and Scotland. These varied in extent, influence and character, for example: England had extensively incorporated creativity criteria across its national curriculum programmes and funded a national programme of arts and education projects and Portugal had designated part of the school week to student interests. Ireland renewed its commitment to child centred education albeit in an individualised form and focused at the same time on achievement levels but it added Social, Personal and Health Education and they elevated Drama from being a good pedagogical vehicle for learning to the status of a fully-fledged subject in its own right. Denmark had national programmes for youth and upper secondary age that encouraged integrated curriculum project work and looser and more flexible programmes had been introduced in Scotland where the New National Priorities included the encouragement of 'creativity and ambition'. In Sweden there had been a national new educational vision that described shared responsibility and a local appropriation of national policy declarations as central for education in the future and that emphasised an increase in delegated responsibilities to the learner (and the local arena more generally), self-determination and freedom of choice for the students who were to create their own knowledge. Control in Sweden shifted from steering by rules and directives to objectives and results and where new forms of human subjectivity are expressed as central to good learning. Learners were now described in national policy texts in Sweden as creative, self-reliant and discerning consumers

and producers of knowledge and it was the job of schools and teachers to eliminate all obstacles that stood in the way of them exercising these skills and capabilities to the full.

We were able to provide some abstract concepts – relevance, control, ownership and innovation that were exemplified by extensive research data included in our past projects (Woods 1990, 1993, 1995, Woods and Jeffrey 1996; Jeffrey, 2003). These concepts also acted as characteristics of creative learning:

relevance. They described teaching that contains this as ‘operating within a broad range of accepted social values while being attuned to pupils’ identities and cultures’

- *control* of learning processes. The pupil is self-motivated, not governed by extrinsic factors, or purely task-oriented exercises.

ownership of knowledge. The pupil learns for herself - not the teacher's, examiner or society's knowledge. Creative learning is internalized, and makes a difference to the pupil's self.

innovation. Something new is created. A major change has taken place - a new skill mastered, new insight gained, new understanding realised, new, meaningful knowledge acquired. A radical shift is indicated, as opposed to more gradual, cumulative learning, with which it is complementary.

Considering the relationship among these criteria, we concluded that the higher the relevance of teaching to children's lives, worlds, cultures and interests, the more likelihood there is that pupils will have control of their own learning processes. Relevance aids identification, motivation, excitement and enthusiasm. Control, in turn, leads to ownership of the knowledge that results. If relevance, control and ownership apply, the greater the chance of creative learning resulting – something new is created, there is significant change or ‘transformation’ in the pupil – i.e. innovation. (Woods, 1999).

Although there were bound to be some problems with differing understandings and interpretations of these four characteristics - ‘conceptual’, ‘linguistic and measurement equivalences’ (Osborne, 2004) - we were able to provide many familiar examples of teaching and learning practice from our research outputs to generate equivalent understandings of what we meant by creative teaching and learning. The research analysis in the publications provided extensive data on the innovative practices, stories and activities of the classrooms in which we had carried out previous research (Woods and Jeffrey 1996; Jeffrey and Woods 2003). Partners were then able to compare and contrast their situations and experiences against a solid empirical base, one of the main criteria that reflects an ethnographic methodology.

A Methodological Focus

The second base we established within the main research proposal was that of student perspectives, another principle of ethnography. Ethnography involves in-depth observation and relationship building through both informal and formal recorded conversations with teachers and students. The objective of this operation was to both gather data of people's perspectives that would include experiences, dilemmas, tensions, lifestyles, values, coping and solution solving strategies, observations, opinions and analysis and to engage in arguments and discussions concerning interpretations of their situation and situations.

The project depended on developing research strategies for obtaining student's perspectives and we were able to call upon a universal experience of having one's perspective taken into account or not in some circumstances. The partner researchers had not necessarily been involved in much research like this but they were aware of the general principle and we used our four meetings over eighteen months and our electronic contact. Whilst agreeing with Somekh and Pearson's experience that Email communications regarding collaborative research discussions and debates, our electronic system provided an extensive archive for administration, papers and memos and as it was a dedicated mailing list just for the partners it developed a useful and collegial culture.

Shared repertoires will develop differently according to the project and its methodology. Ethnography gave us an opportunity to call on generally available social experiences.

A Field Work Focus

The third strategy we invoked was that of shared methods of research involving field work and analysis. To this end we compiled an extensive framework for carrying out the fieldwork which established a shared repertoire. Fieldwork is a work of art (Wolcott, 1995) and as with research partner relationships the emphasis is on ensuring the flexibility and freedom of the researcher to use their own imaginative tools. However, the identification of relevant research lenses through which the researcher perceives a research site is a vital element in a loosely coupled research project. The lenses we devised reflected ethnographic methodology but were directly focused on the project of creative learning - context, interaction, cognitive explorations, subjectivity and learner agency. These field work lenses, contexts, social interactions, curriculum knowledge and engagement, the subjective experience of learning and learner's experiences of learning were used to assist researchers construct the 'thick description' (Geertz, 1973) of qualitative enquiry.

The researcher makes qualitative observations by taking field notes which include details of atmospheres, collaborations, interchanges and interactions, and in the case of this research teacher and student strategies to enhance creative learning.

Creative practices in schools often go unrecognised by the participants and unarticulated as they constitute professional pedagogy unless the situation is examined in detail and intuitive intentions and strategies are brought to the surface through observation, conversations, reflection and conscious experimentation. Indeed the explication of teachers' tacit knowledge provided one of the main strengths and promises identified by Hargreaves (1978) All the researchers also acted as participant observers to interpret contexts and situations and to engage in dialogues with teachers and students concerning their research analysis. Digital photographs were collected as data and used to stimulate discussion and debate with teachers and students. Students were informed of the study's aims and objectives and encouraged to take roles researchers.

Ethnographic methodology is a 'bottom up, grounded approach, which first locates the empirical cases, taking care to specify the criteria by which they are selected, and then employs a range of theories to portray and explain them' (Woods, 1996, p. 11). As a collaborative cross-national project, we needed a discourse through which to communicate a relevant set of common lenses with which to conduct our fieldwork.

Although these lenses were specific to this project they can be easily adapted to other projects using a similar methodology.

Contexts

The type of context and the influence it has on the participants and their interactions are central to opportunities to teach and learn (Woods, 1990) creatively. These contexts are framed by national policies and dominant educational discourses but they are also influenced by the teachers themselves or local school policies. Consequently, we expected researchers to consider the following aspects of context:

- The systems to promote creativity and creative learning, e.g.: curriculum and pedagogic programmes, institutional timetabling and extra-curricula activities
- The climates, cultures and environments that stimulate and develop creativity, e.g.: classroom tones, investigative approaches, flexible learning patterns
- The influences upon creative contexts such as national context, culture and policies to: prioritise learner inclusion; democratisation; experiential learning and tools to assess creativity.
- The extent, to which learning is made relevant to learners, e.g.: ownership of learning and knowledge is encouraged, control is passed back to learners and innovatory action is encouraged and valued.

The quality and relevance of social interactions

A symbolic interactionist and social constructivist approach to learning (Woods, 1996) prioritises interaction between teachers and learners, between peers and between learners and other relevant adults. As ethnographic researchers we were obliged to record how far and in what ways teacher-learner interactions either contributed to creative learning, or was the basis of it. Some of the productive interactive foci for research into creative learning included:

- the extent to which of learner voice is prioritised
- the quality of open questioning, challenging and problematizing
- the extent of co-participation, where knowledge, processes and problems are explored together.
- The characteristics of conversational learning, the relevant learning which takes place in the process of an activity to what extent it is the driver for creative learning.

The challenges and explorations of curriculum knowledge and knowledge relations,

The development of thinking skills is now a priority within the United Kingdom's education policies and those of other European countries. Particular aspects of thinking that involve cognitive explorations are relevant to the experience of creative learning. Research foci included:

- connection making and relationship identification,
- possibility thinking and possibility knowledge,
- playing with ideas,
- the discussion and evaluation of options
- risk taking
- the valuing of uncertainty and ambiguity and the promotion of the construction of alternative solutions dependent on context and variables by teachers.

The subjective experience of learning

Creative teaching and learning involves the emotions, the development of the self and identity and humanist social relations. Research foci included teachers' and learners':

- feelings,
- emotions,
- meaningfulness of creative experiences for the self and identity and

- the well being attached to social cohesion and engaging in collaborative or participative creative practices.

These subjective aspects of creative learning are common and familiar aspects of life across cultures and the focus upon them assisted the development of a ‘shared repertoire’.

Learners’ contributions to and evaluations of the learning process

The examination of the learning process by teachers and learners is an essential element of creative learning. The experience of creative learning itself cannot be separated from discussion about the processes themselves for the object of creative learning is not simply an effective outcome or an aesthetic form of learning. Creative teaching and creative learning includes a conception of the person as an agent of their own practice, someone for whom the process itself is inimical to both the experience of their creativity and its development. As ethnographic researchers we included data concerning:

- teachers’ discussions with learners concerning their experience of learning
- ways in which teachers include learners in the development of pedagogy and curriculum
- teachers’ and learners’ evaluations of the effectiveness of learning processes and in particular creative experiences,
- teachers’ and learners’ evaluations of the effects of ideas and actions upon the individuals and groups
- an examination of any measures, indicators and assessments of creativity used by teachers or institutions and the development of them
- examination of the ways in which ideas are represented – visual, kinaesthetic, orally, musically, fictionally, dramatically.

Data and analysis of teachers’ and learners’ perspectives was also important to our aims of showing how pedagogic reflection by teachers and evaluative contributions from learners enhanced the quality and effectiveness of learning.

These project focused fieldwork lenses were developed through the ethnographic framework, and strengthened our shared repertoire and began the process of developing a ‘community of practice’ (Wenger, 1998) by providing a common research text.

These three strategies of constructing a common conceptual subject understanding, a central common methodological focus and a fieldwork framework were supplemented by three interactive strategies - that of using a common text, holding regular meetings – more details below - and using electronic communication.

Organisation and Engagements

The common empirical texts used to establish the conceptual base of the subject matter (Woods 1990, 1993, 1995, Woods and Jeffrey 1996) were supplemented by methodological texts and one in particular 'Researching the art of teaching: Ethnography for educational use' (Woods, 1996). This is probably not unusual in team projects and probably used even more in comparative projects but we found it a unifying strategy. The majority of the partners were either using the specific text in their university courses or they introduced it as the project developed.

The shared repertoire of this project was firstly teaching and learning followed by an interest in creative learning but there were many differing experiences of this subject matter. Consequently, although the regular meetings allowed time for reporting findings they always had a strong methodological theme for we felt this essential to maintain our shared repertoire. It was easier to do this in terms of the methodology than it was in terms of the subject matter which was subject to policy and cultural differences. Our first two day meeting in Kortrijk focused on explicating the ethnographic method alongside discussions of cultural interpretations of creative teaching and learning. A day was allocated to a training session on a software qualitative research programme Atlas-Ti at the second meeting in July 2003 in Milton Keynes and the second day was spent reporting back on research. At the third meeting in Cadiz in February 2004 the first day was led by a consultant who specialised in ethnographic methods and partners reported on the extent to which their research was developing and presenting their findings. The fourth meeting in Innsbruck in May 2004 focused on the development of research findings from data coding through analysis to research findings with extensive reports from all partners.

Our main critical approach focused on the extent to which ethnographic methods had been utilised to extract 'thick description' (Geertz, 1973). The characteristics of ethnography were used to examine and discuss partner's projects and their analysis. Questions were asked concerning the way in which partners were applying ethnographic methods. Reflections and revisions were therefore not seen as a problem of cultural interpretation of the concept of creativity or creative teaching and learning but an examination of the methodology. For example one partner was asked to provide empirical evidence for her assertions, another asked to deepen the analysis by gaining the perspectives of all relevant people in the research site, another was asked to move beyond initial description and try to identify some broader characterisations and it was suggested to another partner that the theory should arise from the data rather than be imposed upon it. All these discussions were accepted as part of the role of a researcher to continually critique and develop our craft.

At the same time the focus on methodology allowed each partner to maintain the integrity of their chosen research sites. All the research sites were selected by partners in their own national context not for 'typicality' so that they could establish generalisability in cross-national comparison (Walford, 2001, p.162). They were chosen because they were 'intrinsically significant and interesting in themselves, for themselves' (ibid.). The cases chosen were 'vital to understand because of their particular significance within policy formulation and development' (ibid.). The most we could 'expect was that each ethnography would give some insights into some aspects of the culture of each institution and indicate some of the diversity that could be apparent within a range' (ibid.) of 'creative institutions.

Each partner focused on an arena of education with which they had research experience. The schools and the teachers were interested in developing both creative learning and increasing the extent to which student perspectives are considered in the pedagogic decision making and implementation of practice. These institutions were selected to cross class boundaries by ensuring that at least one institution reflected a poor urban/rural locality and one represented a wealthier urban/locality although mixed catchment areas institutions were sought.

Discussion as to whether specific teaching and learning situations were more or less creative ones were avoided and an academic relationship based on methodology was established and professional integrity maintained.

The substantive research element – examination of the characteristics of creative learning and the conditions under which it thrives or is constrained – was the subject matter of partner's reports and presentations but the development of their analysis was critiqued against the criteria that defines ethnography. The key elements of ethnographic research applied to the study of education contexts are:

- (1) a focus on the study of cultural formation and maintenance ;
- (2) the use of multiple methods and thus the generation of rich and diverse forms of data;
- (3) the direct involvement and long-term engagement of the researcher(s);
- (4) a recognition that the researcher is the main research instrument;
- (5) the high status given to the accounts of participants' perspectives and understandings;
- (6) engagement in a spiral of data collection, hypothesis building and theory testing – leading to further data collection; and
- (7) a focus on a particular case in depth, but providing the basis for theoretical generalization.

Each partner project retained its cultural signature but each one was refined in terms of the methodology. For example, one partner's project involved researching creative teaching and learning in a higher education college. The researchers were on the staff of the college and at first they felt they were only accountable to the management of the college. However, after two CLASP meetings and many discussions concerning the importance of incorporating as many relevant perspectives from the site as possible they devised a programme that brought a class of students and their teacher into an examination of their shared practice. The result was a richer analysis of creative learning as well as a change in teacher-student pedagogic relations. This research development involved examining the culture of the classroom, using multiple methods including video and focus groups. It was possible because of the familiarity the researchers had with the institution, the recognition that their interpretations could have validity as they were the research instrument and that therefore they could alter their approach, all as a result of the shared repertoire they had developed within the partner project. It has also been made clear in their report that this development applied to this particular case where the teacher and students felt able to engage in pedagogic dialogue. They have described another case where it was not possible (<http://clasp.ac.uk> – Polish report).

Prioritising the research methodology, in this case ethnography, as the 'shared repertoire' throughout the process of the CLASP project:

- Provided opportunities for inter-national cultures to maintain ownership of new knowledge, in this case the characteristics of creative learning, and at the same time offered the possibility to draw upon these autonomous analyses to provide tentative common features
- Maintained the focus of the research on the minimum requirements for research which are, in any case, immanent in research outcomes
- Provided a vehicle for critique and reflection of each partner's findings without appearing to criticise culturally based interpretations.

This international research was closely linked through ethnographic methodology whilst retaining a loose-coupling to maintain the autonomy of partners' existing and new 'shared repertoires'.

Outcomes

There can be no doubt that the outcomes of the project reflect that methodological framework but they also attended to the substantive aspects of the research. Teacher strategies for providing opportunities for creative learning were extensive and in particular the introduction of critical events, the creative use of space, the importation of external and community

support and cooperation and the development of influential discourses were significantly instrumental.

The characteristics of creative learning that were identified included the experience of open adventures, intellectual analysis, engaged productivity and process and product review.

Creative learning became meaningful to students due to the fact that it supported self affirmation and personal development, social identity in terms of belonging, a social role as innovator and creator and positive social relations in shared engagements.

Project Evaluation: building international research capacity

The account above of our development of a 'shared repertoire' could be read as an overoptimistic and rosy interpretation of the processes and experiences involved in a large cross-national research project. We felt, however, that little profit was to be gained in this current article by merely listing and rehearsing the very real difficulties which beset such a research enterprise. This task has been undertaken comprehensively elsewhere (Platt, 1976; Leggett et al 1994). Indeed there is a long tradition of such critical writing in educational research. In addition to the benefits already discussed we conclude with some further 'value-added' elements to the project.

There is much emphasis at present on the development of research capacity in the United Kingdom (Gorard, 2000). We argue that the CLASP project did much to develop research capacity within Europe. When invited to report on the benefits of participation the Scottish partner listed the following:

- Working with an international team of ethnographers at different levels of experience and sharing and debating issues of methodology and analysis
- Working in a team encouraged deeper delving into data to help characterise creativity in individual project contexts.
- A critical audience for written work
- Close connections with ECER Ethnography network led to further critical analysis and dissemination of work
- Increased understanding of constraints on creativity in a range of educational systems
- Development of a team of researchers for actual and possible future collaboration
- Introduction to Atlas-ti as an analytical tool
- Enabled consideration of cultural and linguistic difference which can enhance subsequent work

- Personally I used experience of CLASP project to inform departmental and faculty research seminars on international collaboration and use of digital photography to access learners' perspectives

The Swedish partner found the following benefits:

CLASP has had a very positive function in relation to other projects for both of us. My research student's thesis has benefited directly and indirectly from conversations around drafts of her own work and that of others. CLASP has been invaluable as a contributor to a wider study of education restructuring. Methodological and substantive discussions in particular have been highly appreciated. CLASP has supported the production of several international publications for us. The value of this hardly needs commenting on.

Possibilities of engaging in international networks have great developmental potential at both personal and professional levels and this has been thoroughly borne out in the CLASP project.

The Austrian partner was a novice researcher and postgraduate student:

Working in an international research project as a novice ethnographer was a very important time in my biography. I was lucky to be in good hands of an encouraging and inspiring research team for my status passage from primary teacher to researcher. From the first meeting I got the feeling that colleagues were interested in my former experiences, my ideas and my interests.

I was challenged by the freedom the project offered to me. Again and again I wished to have a clearer framework, to get a 'formula' of how to do research. But with hindsight I appreciated all the insecurities and detours necessary to establish my *own* concept of how to do fieldwork and to know that I have gone my own way – but within a network of challenging colleagues!

I always looked forward to each meeting. The face to face exchanges in the international group were very important to me to build up an identity as a researcher. I always came back very motivated and assured in going my way. As you might know ethnography is quite marginalized in German speaking countries and so the involvement in the international group and the European Conference of Educational Research (ECER) ethnography network enabled me to act self-confidently in discussions in Austria and Germany and the CLASP project was the starting point for several new networks in my home language.

CLASP showed me what the academic life can offer to researchers: an open minded community with open interactions and where everybody – even novice researchers can arrive at their *own* evaluations of their practice and thinking. I was challenged in rethinking my attitude. I did not feel my lack of knowledge in methodology or theory was something which I had to hide.

CLASP was her ‘starting point as a researcher in the international academic community’ and this experience made it possible for her to not only begin building an ethnographic research culture in German speaking countries, but also to be appointed on a new international research project using ethnographic methodology.

These extracts from their evaluations highlight the value attached to the methodological framework and critical discussions of research methodology.

Conclusion

The CLASP project was part of the new tradition of comparative research which aims to adopt contextual sensitivity and ethnography appears to be a suitable methodology for that approach. However, we also found that shared repertoires take time to develop and our international partners needed a firm framework through which they could embed their research activity prior to developing that shared repertoire. A common methodological framework was more effective given the different cultural perspectives on the subject matter of creative learning.

The new tradition of comparative research espoused by Osborn (2004) is one based in a qualitative methodology but this is a broad field and if this new tradition is to develop a substantively it needs a tight well defined base if it is to act as a framework for ‘shared repertoires’ in ‘communities of practice’. We argue that ethnography is emerging as one such framework.

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