

Interview with Dick Allwright for *Soletras Journal*¹

Dick Allwright, one of the most influential applied linguists in the field, retired in 2003 from a long and brilliant academic career teaching applied linguistics at the universities of Essex and Lancaster. Professor Allwright is still pursuing his interest in teacher, and especially learner, development, via the notion of ‘Exploratory Practice’, a form of practitioner research involving teachers and learners working together, during language lessons, to explore and develop productively their understandings of their classroom lives. In 2009, with Judith Hanks, he published his third book: *The Developing Language Learner: An Introduction to Exploratory Practice* (Palgrave).

Soletras: *Why, would you say, you made such an important move towards Exploratory Practice as a form of practitioner research, after being a third-party researcher for many years?*

I was increasingly disenchanted with third-party classroom research because it seemed unable to avoid being most often parasitic, taking up valuable classroom time and energy without ever being properly able to bring any real practical benefits to the very people who had actually contributed their time and energy, and not even to others, given the problem of communicating any findings to teachers even, let alone to learners. And that came to me as I was also realizing the people who really need to understand what is going on in their classroom lives are the teachers and the learners themselves (more than academic researchers like me, who only really ‘need’ understanding to further their academic careers?). Action Research, since it was intended to be conducted by teachers in their own classrooms, and so at the very least to be guaranteed to avoid parasitism, appeared to offer a solution, but I realized it was unsatisfactory because it seemed indeed to be fixated on finding immediate solutions for problems in the absence of any adequate concern for first developing an understanding of the problem situation itself.

Writing up classroom research for the 1991 book I was working on with Kathi Bailey (see the book’s Epilogue), I tried to imagine a new relationship between academic researchers and classroom teachers (I hadn’t yet got as far as including learners properly in these considerations). At that point I could only imagine academics like myself trying to make ourselves available as consultants to teachers’ classroom research projects, but strictly on the teachers’ terms, not ours. Working with teachers at the Rio branch of the *Cultura Inglesa* at

¹ Interview granted to Inés K. Miller and Isabel Cristina R. Moraes Bezerra.

the beginning of the 1990s I realised that some teachers were already working for developing their understandings of their own classroom lives, and were already including their learners in this work for understanding. That was, in fact, simply really good professional practice, and I thought it deserved to be honoured and helped to develop. That resonated at the Cultura, where I was working not only with Cultura employees but also with teachers, like Ines Miller, who were university academics as well as classroom language teachers. Out of those connections came the Rio de Janeiro Exploratory Practice Group, who took the ideas we were discussing in Rio and ‘ran with them’ (see their chapter 14 in ALLWRIGHT and HANKS, 2009).

Soletras: *How do you see the evolution of Exploratory Practice over the past two decades in (language) learning/teaching, teacher education and research?*

I think two developments predominate for me. Firstly, it took us a few years to really work on ‘inclusivity’, by which we meant finding ways for learners to be the people who proposed what they wanted to understand better about their classroom lives, rather than simply accepting to help teachers understand their (the teachers’) puzzles about it. Secondly, we slowly realized that what EP seemed to be doing in classrooms, when it appeared to be resolving problems by simply involving people in working to understand them, was helping in the development of an atmosphere of mutual trust in the classroom, between teachers and learners, and among learners. So perhaps it was the establishment of trust that was crucial. But it also seemed more productive for the establishment of trust to be a natural by-product of work for understanding rather than any sort of stated objective.

Beyond those two, there has also been the realization that EP can contribute to combating ‘burnout’, by restoring teachers’ faith in the possibility of enjoying a teacher’s life (a possibility that also seems directly related to the prospect of establishing mutual trust). Along with that thought came the idea that if teachers could get their initial training through EP, then that might provide them with the means to fight off ‘burnout’ if it ever threatened them. We had in mind teachers who are under constant pressure to ‘improve’ by adopting the latest pedagogic ideas, even if nobody in authority has really attempted to find out if the latest ideas are appropriate to the situation.

Soletras: *In your view, where has Exploratory Practice developed more significantly and why?*

A question for Judith, really. ‘Where is ambiguous, of course: in what places, or in what circumstances, or in what ways?’

I have dealt with the ‘ways’ in my previous answers, and, since I have now been retired for almost fifteen years, I would not claim to be up to date about what is happening around the world. Brazil is still very clearly the world leader in fully including learners (as we see annually in the amazingly inspirational ‘EP Events’ in Rio. Where learners presenting their EP ‘work for understanding’ heavily outnumber teachers. It is a highlight of my life in retirement that I can still, through Skype, visit the annual events and even contribute to them, albeit remotely. But also Rio leads in the development of EP in teacher preparation courses, and in fostering academic research into EP.

Elsewhere EP is strong in English for Academic Purposes, and in Continuous Professional Development. I would like to be able to say more but I know that my friend and colleague Judith Hanks is working on a full-scale state of the art paper and I can only look forward to its publication to widen my own horizons on such developments in EP. I know EP has also developed intellectual links with management studies (via Akira Takino in Japan), and with Chinese and European philosophical traditions (via Zongjie Wu in China).

All I can perhaps add here is that the development of EP depends, and has always crucially depended on the enthusiasm of individuals rather than on formal adoption by institutions. Indeed there has been a wariness about the institutional adoption of EP, as such developments always seem to at least water down if not actually hopelessly distort the underlying ideas and principles.

Soletras: *Would you say that Exploratory Practice has an ‘essence’ or its ‘own way of being’? Or, could we say that it is ‘sensitive’ to practitioners and their contexts?*

The ‘essence’ for me, is probably the willingness to postpone looking for ‘solutions’ until a serious attempt has been to understand the situation that apparently needs a ‘solution’. The history of EP has taught us that, more often than not, this ‘work for understanding’ goes a long way to creating a new situation in which the original problem is largely resolved.

Soletras: *Bearing in mind what you have written so far about Exploratory Practice and considering the current social, political and economic situation that teachers and students have been going through nowadays, especially in Brazil, what would you like to say to them?*

More than ever, we need the inclusivity EP offers, and, through that, the development of mutual trust between teachers and learners and among learners.

Soletras: *We have heard of your engagement in refugee work. Could you, please, share with us how you have developed this work and whether Exploratory Practice has had any part in it?*

We worked first of all as people who might be able to help refugees develop their English, but more recently we have shifted towards the more wide-ranging and informal role of ‘befrienders’. For us that has meant keeping in touch with asylum seekers as they go through the trauma of waiting (more than a year in some cases) for our Home Office to decide their fate, and being helpful in whatever ways are possible for us. And, when people have at last got ‘leave to remain’ (full refugee status) we can still be around to support them as they work to integrate themselves into Lancaster life.

I think the main contribution of EP thinking has simply been the emphasis on understanding, and within that, the acceptance of the huge complexity of each individual case. And that always means that it makes no sense to try to simplify life by ignoring the complications, you just have to acknowledge the complexity and work with it. For example, in Lancaster we have been working with ‘Syrian’ refugees who are certainly people from Syria, but who are already from a refugee background in Syria, their Palestinian forefathers having left Israel in 1947. And the present generation are still Palestinians in Syria, since the regime has never allowed them to become Syrian citizens. To try to ignore such a complex backstory does not help anyone.

There is another way EP might have helped. We have constantly found it helpful to work from what the refugees themselves want to understand better, rather than what we think they might need to understand better. That’s just common sense, but it is not always easy to remember it.

Soletras: *As someone who is thinking of retiring, I feel anxious and curious about "the day after". EP is so very much a part of my personal and professional life..., that I'd like to ask*

you "How are you coping with your retired life? Or what is it like to be an exploratory retired person?"

I think I did deal with my 'retired' life quite a lot in my final response, in respect of our relationship here to asylum-seekers and refugees. Beyond that there may be very little to say, except perhaps that what I wrote about that relationship is an example of EP as a way of being in the world. As such it seems, as I noted in that response, more a matter of common sense than of any sort of radically special perspective. So we carry on living (promoting CND, working with the local Pensioners Campaign Group to defend the NHS, and so on) in a spirit of believing it is worth trying to understand what's going on around us, and worth trying to be inclusive about it (i.e. help others, like grandchildren for example, develop their understandings). But that seems to be pretty much what everybody else is doing anyway.

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