This paper presents case study material from a study undertaken in vocational teacher education (Jennings 1987). Working with thirty vocational teacher trainees, data in the form of reports, journals and taped discussions to portray each trainee were collected. I worked alongside the teacher educator and together we became facilitators to the trainees who engaged in action research projects as part of their course requirements. This paper focuses on one trainee, Sophie, as she worked on her action research project in her college. She lacked the conceptual foundations to bring about a worthwhile change to her practices, expending her energy on coping with her day-to-day crises rather than solving them. By reporting on the action research activities of this teacher trainee, I have been able to reflect critically on the teacher training process and the action research methodology.

AN INTRODUCTION TO THE METHODOLOGY: CRITICAL ACTION RESEARCH AS A COUNTER-HEGEMONIC FORM

This study attempts a counter-hegemonic approach in research methodologies. That is, it creates a space for the adoption of 'critical' action research (Carr and Kemmis 1983) by the participant of the study. In this case study, as researcher, I provided an opportunity by undertaking action research for a Technical and Further Education (TAFE) teacher trainee to examine teaching alternatives and to recognize that these alternatives have origins and consequences. The teacher trainee was able to make problematic her taken-for-granted assumptions about her teaching practices through an alternative approach usually provided in traditional teacher education programmes. The researcher acted as a 'critical friend' in challenging the data that emerged in the action research process.

THE TRAINEE AND HER SETTING

Sophie entered her TAFE college (the practicum site) in the second week of February, and commenced her teacher training in the fourth week. For Sophie, this was not a sudden involvement with TAFE because she had been a part-time communications teacher for a number of years. However she had never gained formal teacher qualifications. Her initial experience of travelling between the TAFE college and the training institution was one of feeling betwixt and between.

Two facilitators (myself and one other) worked with Sophie—one as a ‘critical friend’, and me as a researcher. In recalling their first impressions of Sophie, both facilitators agreed that she appeared to be a nonconformist. Sophie gave the outward appearance of belonging to the remnants of a sixties subculture and, with her constant discourse about changing the system, the facilitators had high expectations that she would take up the challenge of becoming involved in action
research as a counter-hegemonic form. Sophie told of her youthful political interests, which had helped her to develop an awareness of social responsibility. She felt that entry into the teaching profession afforded her an opportunity to demonstrate that awareness.

During the early weeks of the teacher training course the facilitators provided support, suggestions and some initial structure for all trainees as they settled into their practicum sites. Sophie was attached to the General Studies section of her college. She was assigned a number of classes which she met on the days when she did not attend the teacher training institution. These classes serviced the trade school in the subject, Communications, and were generally the least sought after by communications teachers.

For her action research project, Sophie selected a class of pre-apprentice electrical trades students, to whom she taught the course Communications. Her fourteen students were aged sixteen and appeared to give Sophie some anxious moments:

> Because they had come to tech (TAFE) straight from school, they were very inclined to treat the classroom situation as an extension of school. They were enthusiastic in many ways and my main problem was with the noise level - they all wanted to talk at once and were generally fairly restless. I wanted to reduce the noise level (because it was driving me crazy) while at the same time treating them as adults. I decided that if I wanted them to act as adults, rather than school children, I would have to treat them that way.

(Sophie’s Report).

THE PROBLEMATIC

Sophie had vague notions about what was actually problematic in her context. This was common among many trainees. Sophie decided that part of her problem was the time at which the class was scheduled, the last lesson in the week. She felt helpless in effecting any change to the rescheduling process. In her journal she recalls her encounter with the Head Teacher of the particular trade school to which these students belonged:

> ... when I introduced myself to him, he said ‘I don’t care what you do with them as long as you keep them quiet. The teacher they had last year kept stirring them up and I couldn’t get any work done’.

(Sophie’s Journal)

By selecting sections of the prescribed curriculum that she thought would be ‘relevant’ to these lads, Sophie’s concern became that of modifying their behaviour and helping them ‘fit in’ to their role in society. However, despite her stated goals, her pedagogical approach was not so easily implemented.

Sophie’s early pedagogical activities were largely self-informed; she relied on instinct and intuition. As her instincts became heightened, the knowledge she gained at the training institution became less important. So, too, did her original
goal of attempting to change the TAFE system. Faced with her own inadequacies and inexperience with such a group, Sophie redefined her social responsibility to that of survival.

At an early stage of the project, Sophie feared she would be misunderstood by her facilitators and by her Head Teacher. She saw this misunderstanding as possibly inevitable. Her concerns were transmitted to other trainees in the programme. These concerns triggered self doubt which helped to magnify her radical position and created personal dilemmas about changing the structure of TAFE. Sophie reflected upon her suitability for the TAFE job:

I don't want to be seen as what other people perceive as being a good teacher, perhaps I'm arrogant. I was feeling convinced that my teaching philosophy was right for me but probably wrong for TAFE (because of the constraints in a TAFE environment - layout of classrooms, expectations of other teachers ... ) especially in the area of communications, which teachers and students in trade schools serviced by communication teachers in General Studies tend to dismiss as a waste of time ... these classes are the only non-trade oriented classes most of these students have in any week, and as such one of their functions should be to help students let off steam in a constructive and relevant way.

(Sophie's Report)

Sophie felt that many classroom management procedures, such as forcing students to raise their hands, symbolized repressive regimentation. Her decision not to structure classroom discourse was a conscious trade-off: she believed students would be more open if they could be spontaneous. However, student spontaneity in this class meant something different to students: it signified resistance to both Sophie and the material. The types of ideas they tended to shout out, were those which challenged Sophie's attempts at establishing her authority.

She tended to operate on the basis of a hunch that 'something was wrong'. It was an intuitive feeling (practical theory) that drove her toward making a decision to try an alternative strategy. She lacked sufficient knowledge and communicative competence (Habermas 1979) to propose alternative approaches to existing procedures. As Lampert (1985) suggests, it may have been a lack of conceptual foundations that prevented Sophie from engaging in serious critical dialogue about her classroom practices.

TIME FOR ACTION

In her apparent state of uncertainty, Sophie decided that her action step would be to provide more 'listening' exercises:

... so that they would understand what it was like to be 'heard', properly, and which would encourage them to listen to, and 'hear' each other, instead of all shouting out at once.

(Sophie's Report).
In the meantime, Sophie kept her journal, faithfully noting any behaviour changes in the students over the weeks. When asked if she consulted any other teachers about the apparent poor behaviour of the class, she replied:

I was on good terms with the teacher who taught them most but I really didn’t discuss their behaviour with him. I suppose because as communications teacher taking a trade class, I felt the need to appear to be well in control of what one usually regarded as a difficult class.

(Sophie’s Taped Reflection).

Sophie turned to her students for feedback. Although she had access to other sources, the strongest source was the students themselves. Much of their power to influence Sophie’s ways of acting in the classroom occurred because of her conscience, the time the class was scheduled in the week and her concern for ‘dropouts’ in society.

Because at this stage Sophie identified more with students than other teachers, she more easily turned to them. During class, Sophie often directly asked students how they felt about the class. Her honesty in sharing past and present fears with students may have led the students to empathize with her struggles. But the students’ feedback was often contradictory on both the formal and informal level. Informal feedback concerned student body language rather than any sophisticated oral articulation. It was Sophie who had to make meaning from their symbolic interactions. She read student grimaces as indicating disinterest in any form of classroom work, blank stares as a reflection of boredom, while unanswered questions were viewed as personal failure.

As a result of these exchanges of perceptions, Sophie unintentionally created an informal structure for student negotiation of classroom power. What seemed to complicate matters more was the conflicting understanding of control. Sophie understood control as a negative consequence of an authoritarian TAFE structure. The students saw control as a way of doing more work.

Sophie had felt that if given the opportunity, students would naturally take charge of their education and be clear about their learning needs. Her theory of educational development, however, did not take into account the conflicting messages students acted out in their classroom negotiation patterns. She also expected that if she identified with her students’ experiences, they would reciprocate. While none of these expectations materialized, they shaped her perception of classroom life and created clashes of interpretation over the meaning of classroom life.

Her informal chats with the students revealed the tension created by her desire to personalize learning in an environment maintained by depersonalised social relations. She was torn between preparing students for the harsh realities of their trade, which, in her mind meant some form of authoritarian stance, and at the same time creating a human environment. She realized the futility of keeping social forces and expectations outside the classroom walls. Yet, because Sophie had few ways of managing her classroom, she turned to the students for advice.
The need for support from others appeared to conflict with Sophie's striving for independence. Among other trainees, there was evidence of various degrees of dependence, but the common feeling was usually one of ambivalence regarding the self-perception of being dependent or independent professionals. Some trainees appreciated the support given by their head teacher or supervisor but felt that, although supporting them, this support did not allow them to acquire the independence they were seeking. Other trainees found themselves begging for help and not receiving enough assistance from their Head Teachers. Some felt neglected and at a loss.

**OBSERVATIONS OF THE CRITICAL FRIEND**

In contrast to what her students were saying, one of Sophie's facilitators offered an alternative view—that of a teacher's perspective. She suggested to Sophie that she try some more traditional pedagogical techniques of classroom management to establish some semblance of control and then to move into the less traditional forms. Although Sophie vehemently challenged the use of traditional strategies, she tried some out and defended their use in her journal.

While engaged in the process of planning a change to an accepted practice, many trainees, like Sophie, saw their problematic as forcing a choice between equally or unequally desirable alternatives. That is, they saw problems as arguments between 'opposing tendencies', of which neither could win. For Sophie, her choice appeared to be one of modifying raucous adolescent behaviour or treating students as adults. Some of her concerns raised questions of excellence and equality. However as Lampert (1985 p.182) points out:

> Facing a dilemma need not result in a forced choice. A more technical definition of a dilemma is 'an argument that presents an antagonist with two (or more) alternatives, but is equally conclusive against him whichever alternative he chooses' (Funk and Wagnall's Standard College Dictionary). This definition focuses on the deliberation about one's alternatives rather than on a choice between them. The conflicted teacher is her own antagonist; she cannot win by choosing.

Hence, facing contradiction for Sophie was the experience of having an argument with oneself—an attempt at holding conflicting parts together. The problem of balancing conflicting yet simultaneous desires for, say, excellence and equality, was an ambiguous self-definition.

In a number of instances many of the dilemmas faced by Sophie became acts of 'improvisation'. These acts were products of adjusting ambivalent desires to particular circumstances rather than finding a general solution.

**ACTION AND REFLECTION - THE TRAINEE'S VIEW**

In an attempt to alter the emerging pattern of disruptive behaviour and to treat
the young lads as adults, Sophie tried her first action step—that of a 'listening' strategy. She thought it would help to structure their behaviour and encourage them to learn to hear what others had to say. The listening activity did not work—students became even more difficult. Instead of further investigating their response to this strategy, Sophie abandoned the activity. In her frustration, she blamed the whole education system for socializing students into learning roles which rejected anything 'different'. After some reflection, she reported that:

*I came to the conclusion that it was not so much listening exercises these students needed, as exercises to increase their awareness of the needs of others, of which being heard was just one.*

(Sophie's Report).

Like many trainees, Sophie rarely deviated from her planned strategies, but rather tended to 'fine tune' them. If she did deviate, it was not recorded in the journal. After a few weeks, she invited the researcher along to class to provide some monitoring of her action step and to provide independent feedback on the action taken. When asked about whether she thought the class had improved she replied:

*The times they gave talks were best, especially if the speaker was talking about something universally interesting like drugs, sex or music. Chris gave a pretty boring talk and the noise level and chalk throwing got a bit out of hand.*

(Sophie's Journal)

She then described to the researcher how confused she became because of outside institutional constraints:

*I had gone on for too long about writing formal business letters - my teacher training constraints and my need to pass my probation as a new full time teacher in a new college had the effect of making me anxious about my level of cognitive input. I decided I must do more group discussion work with the class so that they could all get to talk . . . I agree with Kemmis that institutionalised processes partially promote and partially deny the possibility of a real education for students.*

(Sophie's Report)

Thus this trainee can be portrayed as an 'active negotiator', a broker of sorts, balancing a variety of interests that needed to be satisfied. The self was constructively ambiguous. While she worked at solving inequities in the system, she also worked at inner conflicts. She debated within herself about what to do; acknowledged them, embraced the conflict and found ways to manage (or cope).

Lampert postulates an image of the teacher as a 'dilemma manager', who accepts conflict as a continuing condition with which persons can learn to cope. That is, the teacher does not defend and choose among conflicting expectations, but rather welcomes their power to influence a working identity, and thus accepts conflict as endemic, and even useful, rather than as a burden to be eliminated:
If pedagogical problems could be separated one from another rather than entangled in a web of contradictory goals, then they could be solved in some sort of linear progression - shot down like ducks coming up in a row at a penny arcade. . . The work of managing dilemmas, in contrast, requires admitting some essential limitations on our control over human problems. It suggests that some conflicts cannot be resolved and that the challenge is to find ways to keep them from erupting into more disruptive confrontations.

(Lampert 1985, pp.192-193).

As Sophie began to reflect on her journal which recorded the incidents in the lessons in which she tried 'listening' strategies, she concluded:

Nothing has worked. I would have to acknowledge that nothing I have done has had much effect on the actual noise level . . . and if the alternative means treating these students like school children, then I am unable to do this.

(Sophie, Reflection Paper).

She then began to seek self-justification for the continued 'noise' levels:

I'm not frightened of self exposure, I believe in my perception of the problem, but what I feel is that I'm not TAFE material. I don't fit the TAFE model of a teacher. And yet I'm confident that TAFE doesn't need 'good teacher material'. That's my dilemma. But I'm being sprung about not being terribly structured.

(Sophie, Taped Discussion)

ACTION AND REFLECTION - THE RESEARCHER'S VIEW

From the case of Sophie, the researcher became concerned by the fact that many trainees were unable to discuss the issues that engagement in action research asks them to confront. Many were not able to relate their foundation course which concerned issues such as inequality and justice to the broader issues of critical inquiry. It seemed that they bowed to the call of internal conflicts within themselves or for relevance and wanted to focus on teaching techniques in a technical mode. In very few cases were methods of teaching seen to be connected to their political and economic implications. Issues such as readiness, grouping, individualization and student needs were considered in most cases to be purely technical issues and devoid of political and ethical considerations.

The inability of many trainees, as well as Sophie, to articulate their problem and consider possible ways to overcome contradictions was a concern of the facilitators: it revealed either an undeveloped ability or lack of inclination to engage in abstract or critical thinking.
Trainees considered alternative strategies only when they judged the instructional process to be going poorly. The cue trainees used in judging the success or otherwise of their efforts, was the level of interest or participation by students. Sophie became confused about her students' interest and their noise level. Trainees like Sophie tended to be satisfiers rather than optimizers. That is, trainees tended not to think about improving their situations unless there was evidence that the instruction was going poorly.

For Sophie, unable to come to grips with the noise level, had to make a decision whether she could continue to accept the situation. Unable to change, she rationalized instead:

> When a class is 'quiet' or concentrating on a written task, it does not necessarily mean that any more learning is taking place than when there is higher noise level. Noisier tasks which demand a higher level of classroom involvement and interaction can be perfectly appropriate...I believe a lot of learning takes place, but perhaps not all of it is required by the syllabus.

(Sophie's Reflection Paper)

Sophie was caught between the official expectation of her Head Teacher, the student's unofficial expectations of negotiating for classroom power, and her own philosophical exploration of the activity of teaching. Although Sophie felt the institutional pressure to succeed and a desire for the students to accept one another, student opposition persisted. She considered their resistance to the system as valid, but was not able to channel these forms successfully into her learning environment.

So Sophie learned to cope with her problem of noise rather than to solve it. She resisted the system by allowing her students to engage in activities that were 'beyond' the syllabus, but at the same time accommodated the system by deciding not to mount a challenge beyond the classroom:

> As a teacher, I am not prepared to treat students as anything less than equals. Although, as a teacher I theoretically have the 'power', the only real power is TAFE institutional power, which demands assessments, regular attendance and so on. This power is extrinsic to the classroom.

(Sophie's Reflection Paper)

A sense of powerlessness overtook Sophie by the end of her first year, especially when she considered whether one person could really change the system.

Sophie's working class background provided her with a lens with which to view life experiences and to help her focus on her real life choices. At university, Sophie had experienced 'class shock' - a circumstance she described as an alienation from middle class values and expectations of the education system. Class shock had distanced Sophie from both her peers and her education. She admitted that she had practised social withdrawal while at the same time
internalizing the activities which surrounded her - and this personal contradiction formed her responses of accommodation and resistance.

Although Sophie's previous political discourse tended to validate her need to break out of constricting situations, it did not provide her with strategies for taking social responsibility. So when Sophie accepted permanency in the TAFE system as a full-time teacher, she was sure the system was not very good but she had no concrete strategies to change it. She lapsed back into her coping mechanisms of withdrawal and internalization; both forms of resistance and accommodation.

Her inability to solve dilemmas with respect to 'structures' within TAFE alienated her further when she began to rely on political rhetoric without action. For her, the personal remained personal; it did not become politicized in actions. For example, she constantly complained about the assessment system and how inappropriate it was for her electrical trades 'lads'. And yet, her complaints remained superficial. She did not address the issues of grading and assessment in an informed way. She made no attempt to critically analyse the issues through wider reading or by seeking others' advice.

Tozer (1985, p. 150) in commenting on the inability of teachers to articulate their grievances about grading systems suggests:

... that teachers lack an adequate understanding of what kinds of questions about grades they would have to raise in order to meaningfully oppose them. Such questions would have to deal with the role of schooling in a larger society that maintains sharp inequalities between social classes yet claims to give everyone an equal chance to succeed.

There were differences amongst all the trainees in levels of communicative competence (Habermas 1979) and familiarity with educational issues. It was obvious that Sophie was relatively politicized in her views, but she had not developed the ability to translate these views into actions.

Communicative competence is the individual's ability to negotiate meanings and purposes instead of passively accepting the social realities defined by others. It requires a knowledge of relevant issues and an understanding of the conceptual frameworks that influence our way of thinking. The process of socialization limits many of us to the taken-for-granted beliefs of modern culture. As taken-for-granted beliefs are made explicit and are challenged, there is a moment in social time when the individual experiences a temporary liminal space, where they feel they do not know what to believe. The disruption of routines and beliefs can provide a sense of liminality that is psychologically disorienting to some people. But some individuals will not see it as an opportunity to participate in a community process of renegotiation. That is, all people are not equally capable of participating in the renegotiation process.

Trainees are more likely to be reactionary, in the sense of wanting to return to traditional practices, or to follow an authoritarian approach which will give them
a new basis for belief. Some people may not be able to respond to the political change of liminality because they have not experienced the conceptual disruption of their taken-for-granted world. Others, like Sophie, may not be able to participate effectively in the renegotiation process because they lack the conceptual foundations essential for communicative competence.

Britzman (1986) suggests that it is important to recognize that what we think and experience is influenced, to a significant degree, by the cultural maps or schemes that we carry around in our heads. In effect, these cultural maps represent historically grounded message systems. These cause thoughts and feelings to be organized in ways that reflect the categories, assumptions, and patterns of thinking acquired through socialization to a particular culture's way of organizing reality.

Sophie's cultural maps appeared to be politicized within a state of 'inaction'. It was easier to keep sounding platitudes of resistance because she knew that she really could cope with her lads. She had not yet reached the stage of consciousness that necessitated radical change to her practices.

CONCLUSIONS

The total picture that emerged from this cultural analysis of a teacher trainee struggling with her context is one where the processes of social and economic reproduction is seen to operate in a paradoxical rather than deterministic manner. In this picture, there was room for real learning and resistance. Unfortunately, the focus of Sophie on everyday life remained an individual expression of discontent - where coping became the strategy, rather than a real resistance of re-appropriating through a solving mechanism.

In many respects the study can be characterised as a critical reflection on the experience of others working with action research. Action research provides an opportunity for participants to change not only their practices but bring about worthwhile changes in the wider society. The real question that Sophie failed to address was the concern of 'education for what'? Such a question creates a space for contestation, conflict and contradiction which can reawaken a vision for change and freedom (Giroux 1983).

REFERENCES


