

## CHAPTER 4

### METHOD

He may be mad, but there's method in his madness. There nearly always is method in madness. It's what drives men mad, being methodical.

G.K. Chesterton (*Author, 1874-1936*), *The Man who knew too much* (2003/1922)

In this chapter I provide a description of the method behind the madness of a collaborative action research project (which I also refer to as the core action research project or the R@I initiative); and the larger thesis project which comprises my living theory of my developing academic practice. I stated our research questions in the core action research project in chapter two as follows:

- (1) How can we improve the functioning of the Itsoseng Psychology Clinic?
- (2) How can we increase our research output?

In the sections that follow, I describe the action research process that included data recording and analysis relating to our attempts to answer these two questions.

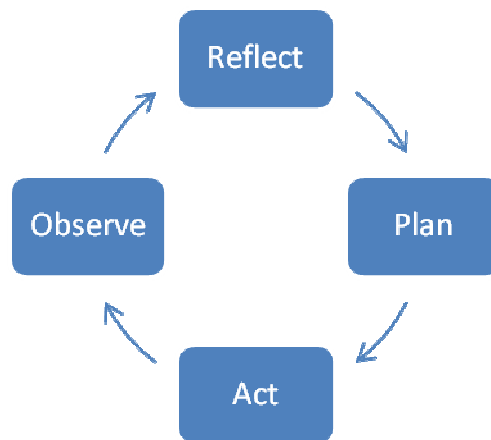
In my construction of my living theory I focused on my facilitation of the R@I initiative. I used a meta-analysis to examine our collective and my personal transformation as a result of the process in which we participated and reciprocally influenced each other's development in the R@I initiative. In particular, I focused on my role in facilitating a research process that allowed for more than just arriving at answers for the research questions. This additional process entailed an inquiry into my developing ability in facilitating opportunities for personal and collective transformation as a form of learning and improving my practice. In line with living theory action research (Whitehead & McNiff, 2006), my living theory research question is: "How can I improve my academic practice by facilitating and participating in the core action research project?" In this chapter, therefore, I also discuss the method I employed to arrive at my living theory of how I improved my academic practice in facilitating the R@I initiative.

## The core action research process (R@I)

In chapter two I drew a distinction between the core research project and the thesis project in line with Zuber-Skerrit and Perry (2002). In this chapter and throughout the rest of the document the core action research project refers to the R@I project and the thesis project to my meta-analysis of the R@I project and my examination of how I developed my living theory of my academic practice.

### *Cycles of action and reflection*

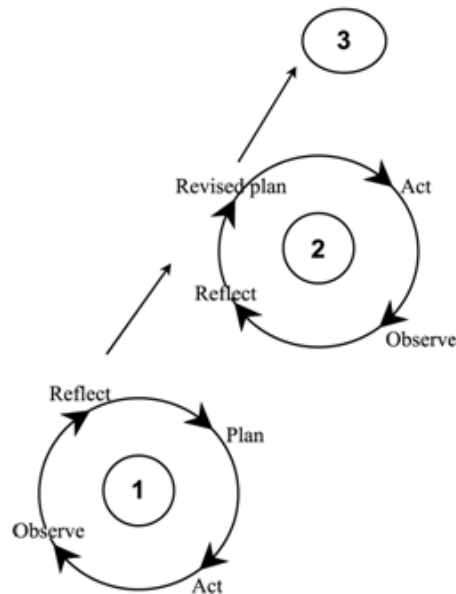
The dominant model of the action research process described in the literature (see, for instance, McNiff et al., 2003; Susman & Evered, 1978; Zuber-Skerrit, 2001) takes the form of a recursive cycle of steps with the last step (observing the outcomes of actions taken) feeding back to the first step (reflecting on what is the most suitable course of action to address the research question or original concern). A simplified version of this process is represented in Figure 8.



**Figure 8 Basic action research cycle.**

The individual and collaborative construction of meaning in an action research project is ongoing, and is perhaps more likely to happen (although not always) during the reflection phases of the action-reflection cycles. Action researchers often organise their work and research reports as a cycle of steps (McNiff & Whitehead, 2006). When the outcomes of actions are evaluated against their original purpose during a reflection

phase, the researchers have an opportunity to revise their plan and start a second cycle of recursive steps with the benefit of knowledge gained from the first cycle, and so on. This evolving process of action research is visually represented in Figure 9.



**Figure 9 Evolving action-reflection cycles (Zuber-Skerrit, 2001, p.15).**

In representing the outcomes of the R@I project in the form of action reflection cycles (in chapter five), I show how our actions were informed by our reflections on how we attempted to improve our collective practices. I also use the action reflection cycles to indicate where certain key transformations in our knowledge and identities as researchers occurred as a result of answering the four research questions.

*One set of action-reflection cycles or two?*

Action research aims to be a method for problem solving as well as generating and testing theory (Elden & Chisholm, 1993; Greenwood, 2002). According to McKay and Marshall (2001), these dual imperatives can be distinguished as a problem solving interest and research interest:

Conceptually at the very least, there appears to be two AR cycles, one overlaid on the other, and operating in tandem with one another. The first cycle relates to the researcher's problem solving interests and responsibilities, the second to the researcher's research interests and responsibilities. (p.50)

These authors further argue that the method or strategy employed to address the stated problem necessarily differs from the method or strategy employed to answer the research question. In this chapter I discuss the methods I employed to facilitate the problem solving interests our workgroup shared collectively in answering the questions pertaining to the improvement of the functioning of the clinic and our output of locally relevant research. I also discuss the method of data collection and analysis I employed to serve my living theory research interests and responsibilities as facilitator of the R@I project.

As the core AR project came to an end in April 2006, I started to critically engage with the records of our reflections and actions and started writing multiple drafts of my thesis manuscript, with each subsequent draft representing a new or different understanding. During this period Whitehead and McNiff (2006) published *Action research: Living theory* which provided me with a first frame to distinguish the core research project from my thesis research - my own learning as a result of facilitating the core action research project. The distinctions provided by McKay and Marshall (2001) (problem solving interest and research interest), and Zuber-Skerrit and Perry (2002) (core action research project and thesis project) further usefully augmented my ability to analyse my own learning as discernable from the collective results of the core action research project.

### **Data recording**

The core action research project took place from May 2004 to March 2006 and involved monthly workgroup meetings to increase our research output and improve the function of Itsoeng Psychology Clinic. The central data set relevant to the core action research project as well as (but to a lesser degree) my living theory project comprise the typed records of the 17 monthly R@I meetings attended by the R@I workgroup (Appendix E). These records contain *descriptions* of our actions as well as our *explanations* (based on observations, reflections and planning) for our actions.

*Seventeen meetings (May 2004 to March 2006) as data*

I arranged 17 meetings during the period May 2004 to March 2006 and went to considerable lengths to find dates and times that suited every team member's schedule. The meetings were well attended as can be seen from Table 1, where the number 1 reflects the presence and the number 0 the absence of the R@I team member at each of the 17 meetings.

**Table 1 R@I Members' Attendance of the 17 R@I Meetings**

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	Total
<b>Willem</b>	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	17
<b>Terri</b>	1	1	0	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	16
<b>Linda</b>	1	0	1	1	1	1	1	0	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	15
<b>Gerhard</b>	1	1	1	1	1	0	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	16
<b>Ilse</b>	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	17
<b>Member 6</b>	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	0	1	1	1	0	1	1	1	15

As can be seen from Table 1, Ilse and myself (R@I facilitator) attended every meeting, Terri and Gerhard missed only one meeting each and Linda and Member 6 missed two meetings. The regular attendance of these meetings over a two-year period attests to the value that each of the members derived from these meetings. It also reflects my persistence in scheduling the meetings with enough notice and regular reminders and encouragement (well-organised, refreshments provided, etc.) to attend.

I took notes during the first and second meetings and found that it interfered with my own active participation. From the third meeting I therefore recorded our discussions on audiotape with permission from the workgroup members. After each meeting I typed up a record of our discussions in summary form and emailed a copy to every team member. I ensured that I provided a record (via email) of every previous meeting prior to the following meeting. I also encouraged regular feedback on the process and structure of the meetings themselves so that the structure would adapt to our purpose rather than the other way around.

After the sixth R@I meeting, we reflected on the value that the R@I meetings held for us as a creative forum that encouraged experimentation, and decided to open up the meeting to other interested members of the psychology department. I sent an email to the rest of the psychology department staff on the Hatfield campus, inviting them to attend the R@I meetings, which were held on the Mamelodi campus. We received supportive emails from some of the invited staff members and one or two of our meetings were attended by the head of the department and one other Hatfield staff member. As we were newly incorporated into the University of Pretoria, we were still regarded and often referred to as “the Vista colleagues” by the other members of the psychology department based on the Pretoria (Hatfield) campus. This likely contributed to their perceived lack of interest in this project. Our experience was one of being perceived as ‘other’ (Bakker, 2007), and hence this notice was an indication of our attempt to stimulate interest from our new colleagues in our work. This invitation forms part of the data set (see Appendix B).

Sometimes during meetings we reflected on conversations that were held outside of the scheduled meetings. In this way some of the ideas were also recorded in the minutes of the actual meetings. Discussions that took place between meetings either in direct conversation or via email and for which records exist were also included in the data set.

In keeping a record of our reflections, plans, decisions and actions in the R@I project, I followed the recommendations by McNiff et al. (2003) to monitor and document as clearly as possible (1) my own actions as well as my motives and intentions for my actions; (2) other people’s actions and stated intentions and motives for their actions; and (3) monitoring critical conversations about the research to show significant moments of change in practice, change in thinking over time and to provide “information that the validation process has been continuous and formative” (McNiff et al., 2003, p.102). I envisioned that the records of the regular meetings would be a source of data from which articles and other research products (web blogs, dissertations, PhDs, etc) could be crafted. I also imagined that discussions about the functioning and management of the psychology clinic could serve as a starting point to create new knowledge that would be immediately useful and beneficial to the participants. I furthermore acted as a

collector and archivist of records of every meeting, correspondence, research idea and collective working document. In the section on validity through craftsmanship (Kvale, 1995) below, I further discuss the value of transparent record keeping of discussions to encourage continuous feedback from participants and to test whether interpretations were reasonable made.

According to Kvale (1995), validation through craftsmanship resides in built-in quality control procedures that happen throughout the knowledge creation process. This is done through various checking processes (e.g., if interpretations were reasonably made, getting feedback from participants, etc.) and continually questioning the intent of the study and actions during the study.

#### *Presentations about our work as data*

During the R@I project we delivered presentations about our work in various forums. These included presentations to various members of the executive management team of the University of Pretoria on three separate occasions to explain our vision of the potential value of the Mamelodi campus as an integrated research, teaching and community engagement campus. This is an indication of the advocacy or activist function of AR (Brydon-Miller et al., 2003; Radermacher, 2006). This was at a time when the University of Pretoria (as incorporating institution of the Vista University Mamelodi campus) appeared to be strongly considering closing down the Mamelodi campus. We delivered another presentation to our psychology colleagues at the main (Hatfield) campus during a departmental research day. The final presentation that forms part of the data set was delivered at a Symposium on Indigenous Knowledge during the International Society for Theoretical Psychology conference in Cape Town in 2005.

#### *R@I team member evaluation of the value of the R@I project*

Action researchers use their values as a basis for actions and decisions during the research project and therefore bear a responsibility to check whether their values are justifiable and whether their influence is benefitting the participants of the study (McNiff et al., 2003). I made it a priority that the contexts in which these meetings were held would be conducive to a more relaxed style of interaction than would be the case in

usual staff meetings. My intention was to choreograph a conversational space that was distinct from everyday work conversations or meetings, where time was at a premium and the schedule of the meetings often did not allow for in-depth discussion. In addition, I enjoyed the company of my team members on social occasions and hoped to invite those other sides and aspects of them into the R@I meetings. To do this I employed the time-honoured social lubricants of food and drink, and spread the boardroom table with a bright cloth to help redefine the space as something more inviting. I further scheduled three-hour meetings (typically 9-12am) to allow for conversations to unfold and evolve. Although I organised refreshments for most of the meetings, team members also spontaneously contributed to these.

It was sometimes difficult to prevent these meetings from becoming only a pleasant social gathering of like-minded people, without any “research” being done. My worries were unfounded, however, since even the most raucous and “disorganised” meetings yielded inspirational ideas when I transcribed the audio recordings. The general format I tried to keep to when facilitating each meeting was to start with a reflection process on gains made, which then gradually moved into a planning session for action, and finally, decisions about who will do what by when. This format reflects the general action research cycle (Zuber-Skerrit, 2001) of reflect-plan-act-observe referred to above. On some occasions I circulated a task list between meetings as a reminder to every participant what actions they committed to prior to the next meeting.

What is not clearly visible from the written transcripts of the meetings is the mood in which these gatherings were held and the value they have added to individual members’ lives during those two years. Education is defined by McNiff et al. (2003, p.19) as “the interaction between people (and other beings) which enables them to grow in life affirming ways”. In order to evaluate my educational influence on the participants of the study, in July 2006 I circulated a set of questions (Box 1) to each of the participants. I interviewed one member (Ilse) on audiotape and the rest of the team members provided me with a written essay. These testimonials are included in chapter six and form an important part of the validation process, in addition to forming part of the data set for my



living theory. It is in these testimonials that the value of the project for each of the participants is explicated.

*Box 1. Questions to participants to evaluate my educational influence*

<p>What do you gain and have you already gained from participating in the R@I initiative? In answering this question: Please describe any increased awareness and/or shifts (or not) that you have noticed in terms of: Your values (what is important about research for you) Your way of working (how you approach your research projects) Your identity (how you think about yourself as a researcher) Your own unique abilities and preferences Resources available to you as researcher What is there that I (Willem) specifically do or did that makes R@I valuable or not for you? Any other comments about R@I you feel is important to mention (e.g., how R@I could be improved)</p>
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**Making sense of the data**

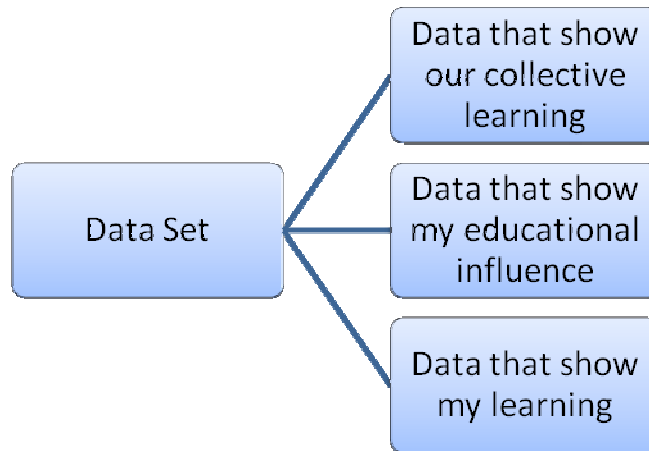
*Sorting and categorising data*

The first stage of working with the data involves sorting the data into categories and subcategories (Whitehead & McNiff, 2006). I used all the available records of discussions (observations, reflections, planning) and actions (research products, presentations, meetings) as data sources and sorted them into categories (based on the event that gave rise to the record), and indicated their date of origin (Table 2).

**Table 2 Data Set Organised in Terms of Events and Dates**

<b>Category</b>	<b>Data</b>	<b>Date</b>
<b><i>Invitation to first meeting</i></b>	Invitation notice to colleagues	25/5/2004
<b><i>Transcripts of meetings</i></b>	R@I meeting 1	26/5/2004
	R@I meeting 2	9/6/2004
	R@I meeting 3	16/7/2004
	R@I meeting 4	6/8/2004
	R@I meeting 5	27/8/2004
	R@I meeting 6	8/10/2004
	R@I meeting 7	10/11/2004
	R@I meeting 8	25/1/2005
	R@I meeting 9	21/2/2005
	R@I meeting 10	25/4/2005
	R@I meeting 11	23/5/2005
	R@I meeting 12	19/9/2005
	R@I meeting 13	18/10/2005
	R@I meeting 14	21/11/2005
	R@I meeting 15	20/1/2006
	R@I meeting 16	28/2/2006
	R@I meeting 17	29/3/2006
<b><i>Invitation to rest of psych department</i></b>	Invitation notice to colleagues from receiving institution (Univ of Pretoria)	26/10/2004
<b><i>Presentations</i></b>	Presentations to Univ management	July 2004
		October 2004
		November 2004
		January 2005
	Departmental Research Day	30/5/2005
	International Society for Theoretical Psychology (ISTP) Symposium	15/6/2005
<b><i>Participant research ideas</i></b>	Gerhard	29/6/2004
	Gerhard	5/8/2004
	Ilse	20/7/2004
<b><i>Email conversations with participants</i></b>	Task list based on R@I meeting 3	20/7/2004
	Responses to Task list (R@I 3)	Multiple dates
	General	Multiple dates
<b><i>Participant evaluation of my educational influence</i></b>	Ilse	16/3/2006
	Terri	26/6/2006
	Gerhard	11/7/2006
	Linda	23/5/2008
	Member 6	26/5/2008
<b><i>SOS Research project</i></b>	Proposal	12/8/2004
	Research report	17/5/2005
<b><i>Indigenous psychology discussion</i></b>	Joint meeting between UP and UNISA psychology lecturers on the Mamelodi campus facilitated by the R@I team	3/6/2005

McNiff & Whitehead (2006) propose further sorting data into (1) data that show the practitioner-researcher's own learning; and (2) data that show other people's learning. I organised the records (data set) into three data sets: (1) data that showed our collective learning; (2) data that showed my educational influence; and (3) data that showed my own learning as a result of facilitating and participating in the R@I initiative. This is visually represented in Figure 10.



**Figure 10 Data set organised in terms of our collective learning, my educational influence, and my learning, adapted from McNiff & Whitehead (2006, p.146).**

I selected data that showed our collective learning based on statements in the R@I records, which reflected improvements, new insights, increased awareness of resources and transformations (e.g., group identity or ways of working). I chose data that showed evidence of my educational influence based on responses to explicit questions in this regard (see Box 1 above) as well as other recorded statements made by group members on separate occasions. To select data that reflected my own learning I searched for evidence of my changed academic practice over time which could be attributed (at least in part) to my facilitation and participation in the R@I initiative.

### *Analysing for meaning*

In an action research study, analysing the data for meaning implies the construction of particular meaning from the data set (Whitehead & McNiff, 2006). Indeed with reference to action researchers constructing meaning from data, McNiff et al. (2003) point out:

The social intent of your research was to improve your particular situation. Improvement would probably have occurred because you, working with other people, improved your understanding of what you were doing. You were working collaboratively, so you were clarifying for one another what this meant for you and your work. You were negotiating and constructing your own meanings out of your shared practices. In this way you were advancing your individual and collective knowing. (p.132)

Analysing the data therefore entails identifying which meanings were generated throughout the project that led to an improvement to our and my particular situations. This identification process could in itself be seen as a particular meaning generating exercise – an exercise to construct an account of our collective and individual understandings that led to an improvement of our situation.

### *Analysing the data for the core research project*

Two data analysis exercises were used for the core AR project. The first analysis occurred as a result of the action research process during the lifetime of the R@I project in which the workgroup members collectively examined the outcome of our previous plans in service of previous questions, generated new questions and new plans for finding answers, and so on. This process happened during each of the R@I meetings and can be seen as a continuous implicit collective data analysis that is part and parcel of the AR process.

The second type of analysis happened after the R@I project had come to an end and involved my scrutiny of the records of the 17 R@I meetings and other records of communication or actions directly related to the R@I project. In this second analysis exercise I looked specifically for evidence of collective and personal transformations that took place. The results of the second analysis appear in chapter five. These results form part of my thesis project in that they represent my analysis of the collective gains (based

on evidence from the records of the R@I project) that were made as a result of our participation and continuous joint co-creation of the R@I initiative.

### *Analysing the data for my living theory*

Generating a living theory involves a value identifying exercise by the researcher when scrutinising the data. In the words of Whitehead and McNiff (2006, p.81): “This (analysing the data for meaning) means you will look for those things that you consider worthwhile.” In my case, I carefully scrutinised the data for records of any actions, relationships or transformations in skill or knowledge that I deemed of particular value to me, as they related to the research questions. I furthermore looked for change (transformations) in my own and our collective theories or understanding of our work as a result of what we were learning during the research project. In this regard, Punia (2004, p.2) notes: “A living educational theory is living in two ways: people and their theory change as a result of learning and they are living what they learn.” Lastly, I looked for evidence that I was more able to live in the direction of my values (McNiff et al., 2003) and in so doing have found a resolution to my living contradiction (outlined in chapter two). My living theory therefore provides an account of the transformations that took place. In addition, it tracks the movement during the research project towards what we considered worthwhile as the project evolved from the research questions. One way of representing the movement in the direction of what is considered good is by means of action-reflection cycles.

### ***Identifying standards of judgement***

By identifying “good” or “valuable” situations from the data, the researcher is operating from implicit standards of judgement that are used to make these identifications. In this vein, Whitehead and McNiff (2006, p.82) state:

This idea is core to action research, which is itself premised on the idea of taking action in order to improve a situation, that is, move it in the direction of what we consider is good. Generating evidence involves identifying standards of judgement, which have their basis in what we consider is good. Standards of judgement enable us to make value judgements, from a reasoned position.

Standards of judgement can be distinguished from criteria of judgement. Criteria can be expressed as minimum targets to be achieved in order to complete a task (e.g., to obtain a degree), and are usually discreet in the sense that you either fulfil them or you do not. Standards express the quality or relative value with which the targets need to be achieved (McNiff & Whitehead, 2006). In analysing data for the generation of a living theory, the researcher needs to indicate not only what was done, but also *how* it was done. Furthermore, he or she must justify why that represents evidence of *good* or *bad* practice (McNiff & Whitehead, 2006).

In looking through the data, I made a deliberate attempt to identify evidence of good (and bad) practice. In order to do this I made use of my own standards of judgement, which I articulate in the following way (adapted from Hartog, 2004):

- Evidence of transformation: how our collective and my own understanding and practice as academics have changed over time, based on the four research questions
- Evidence of an ethic of care and commitment to inclusion, creative ideas, and respect for individual contributions in my facilitation of the Research@Itsoseng project
- Evidence that as a researcher I have shown commitment to a continuous process of practice improvement through the establishment and maintenance of an action research initiative (R@I project)

Apart from these living standards of judgement that provide a valuable means to judge my research practice, I include in the next section additional criteria and measures that I used to ensure the validity of the research findings.

### **Validity of knowledge claims**

This thesis contains knowledge that was co-created in a collaborative group context during the lifespan of the R@I project, as well as knowledge created in the period after the R@I project and based on my reflections and interpretations about our and my learning and transformation as a result of the project. I provide in this section a brief description of my understanding of validity and explain the criteria I used and measures I have employed to assure the validity of the knowledge claims in this thesis.

Traditionally validity referred to the accuracy or truthfulness of findings (Altheide & Johnson, 1994). With the linguistic turn in the social sciences came the question of how to establish accuracy or truthfulness if objectivity is not obtainable:

One of the most catalytic influences on the qualitative domain has been the lively dialogue on the nature of language, and particularly the capacity of language to map or picture the world to which it refers. Developments in post-structural semiotics, literary theory, and rhetorical theory all challenge the pivotal assumption that scientific accounts can accurately and objectively represent the world as it is. At a minimum such work makes clear the impossibility of linguistic mimesis; there is no means of privileging any particular account on the grounds of its unique match to the world.... If there is no means of correctly matching word to world, then the warrant for scientific validity is lost, and researchers are left to question the role of methodology and criteria of evaluation (Gergen & Gergen, 2000, p.2).

The crisis of validity (Lincoln & Denzin, 1994) in the social sciences, and in particular the field of qualitative research, is a much discussed and ongoing debate (Gergen & Gergen, 2000; Sandelowski, 1993; Whitemore, Chase & Mandle, 2001). Kvale (1995) seemingly sidesteps this crisis and refers to validity as simply “whether a study investigates the phenomena intended to be investigated” (p.26). In order to make this judgement, he recommends paying attention to (1) the quality of craftsmanship in an investigation; (2) testing the validity claims through dialogue (communicative validity) that allow arguments for and against interpretations; and (3) the pragmatic value of the knowledge which raises the issue of who has to the power to decide the desired results, direction of change and underpinning values of action (Kvale, 1995).

Whitemore et al. (2001) view the validity of a research project in terms of certain agreed upon “standards of quality” (p.531) present in the qualitative research literature. They provide a synthesis of contemporary validity criteria in qualitative research and distinguish between criteria and techniques of validity: “*criteria* are the standards to be upheld as ideals in qualitative research, whereas the *techniques* are the methods

employed to diminish identified validity threats” (p.528). They make a further distinction between primary and secondary criteria of validity:

Credibility, authenticity, criticality, and integrity are considered primary criteria, whereas explicitness, vividness, creativity, thoroughness, congruence, and sensitivity are considered secondary criteria. Primary criteria are necessary to all qualitative inquiry; however, they are insufficient in and of themselves. Secondary criteria provide further benchmarks of quality and are considered to be more flexible as applied to particular investigations. (Whittemore et al., 2001, p.529)

In the following section I discuss primary and secondary validity criteria as explained by Whittemore et al. (2001) and show how these criteria apply to this study. In addition I discuss the three domains of validity judgements (craftmanship, communicative validity, pragmatic validity) from Kvale (1995) to explain which measures and techniques I have used to further ensure the quality of the research results.

### *Primary validity criteria*

#### ***Credibility***

Credibility refers to whether the results of the research reflect the experience of participants and/or the context in a believable way (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Whittemore et al., 2001). In order to pay attention to the credibility of the knowledge claims in this thesis I have situated the R@I project within the sociopolitical, geographical and historical context of our work on the Mamelodi campus during a period of higher education transformation in South Africa. Throughout the results chapters I include excerpts from the R@I meeting records in an attempt to adequately represent the various experiences of the team members as well as the influence of the context.

#### ***Authenticity***

Authenticity is closely linked to credibility (Whittemore et al., 2001). According to Sandelowski (1986), authenticity involves the representation of research in such a manner that it reflects the meanings and experiences that are lived and perceived by the participants. Whittemore et al. (2001, p.530) state that because of the “multivocality of an interpretive perspective, authenticity of the person, phenomenon, or situation become important criteria for validity.” Lincoln (1995) advises an awareness of the subtle



differences in the voices of others in order to produce authentic accounts. In this respect the involvement of the researcher can affect his or her ability to speak authentically for the experience of the participants (Lincoln & Denzin, 1994). In my presentation of this research I have included many verbatim responses from the R@I team members and made an effort to represent the differences in the voices of the R@I team members where I became aware of these differences. I also regularly invited the R@I team members to amend the R@I records in order to reflect their lived experiences and meanings more accurately.

### ***Criticality***

Criticality refers to a critical stance of the researcher towards alternative explanations and the researcher's own biases (Marshall, 1990). In addition, Maxwell (1996) proposes that a critical approach involves the presentation of evidence that substantiates the researcher's interpretations in order to guard against conjecture or distortion. McNiff and Whitehead (2006) suggest that in an award-bearing programme (e.g. a PhD degree study), the researcher may be assigned a supervisor or promoter to offer additional critique on the research. In the course of this study I have had the benefit of two supervisors. Each of them extended my thinking in different ways and encouraged me to substantiate my interpretations with evidence. I also presented part of this work at an international conference in 2005 (this paper was published as part of the proceedings; see Eskell-Blokland et al., 2007), which provided a further opportunity to expose my work to a critical audience. I also ensured that the chapters (five to seven) in which I offer my interpretations include excerpts of data that substantiate my interpretations.

### ***Integrity***

In interpretive research the subjectivity of the researcher is valued in that data may be interpreted uniquely (Johnson, 1999). Integrity in the process of interpretation is necessary to ensure that the researcher's interpretations are valid and grounded within the data (Whittemore et al., 2001). In order to ensure integrity of the interpretation process, I provide a reflexive account of my involvement in the research process and made recursive and repetitive checks of my interpretations. Throughout the interpretation process I used the theoretical themes of *turning resources into assets* and *personal and*

*collective transformation* as well as the stated research questions, and looked for evidence in the data that could substantiate any presence of these themes. In this way, my interpretation process achieved a degree of integrity.

### *Secondary validity criteria*

#### ***Explicitness***

Explicitness refers to the presence of an audit trail which allows the reader to follow the interpretive effort of the researcher (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Whitemore et al., 2011). An explicit presentation of the methodological decisions, research biases, interpretations and research results allows the reader insight into the research judgments that were made (Ambert et al., 1995; Marshall, 1990; Sandelowski, 1986). This manuscript contains explicit presentations of my methodological decisions (chapters four and six), researcher biases (chapters two, three and seven), and interpretations (chapters five to seven). The inclusion of the complete R@I records of the 17 meetings further allows for a comprehensive audit trail.

#### ***Vividness***

According to Whitemore et al. (2001), the quality of vividness allows the reader to “personally experience and understand the phenomenon or context described” (p.531). To provide a vivid account of the research, thick and faithful descriptions (Geertz, 1973) are required. They should be presented with artfulness, imagination and clarity (Whitemore et al., 2001). These rich descriptions should highlight the salient themes or features of the research (Ambert et al., 1995), and in this way show the essence of the research. Vividness also entails carefully constructing rich descriptions in order to avoid overwhelming the reader with unnecessary detail (Sandelowski, 1986). In each chapter I endeavour to provide thick descriptions of the various process of the research to highlight the essential features, and have sought creative ways to present with clarity my interpretations of the salient issues in our and my personal transformations.

#### ***Creativity***

Creativity as a criterion of research quality refers to imaginative methodological designs to answer specific research questions (Whitemore et al., 2001). Creativity is also visible

in the flexibility of the researcher to respond to the changing demands of the inquiry process (Chapple & Rogers, 1998). My use of an emergent research design required a creative and flexible approach to respond to my understanding of the group process as it evolved over the course of two years. In chapters five and six I have sought to highlight certain strategic (creative) decisions I took to gently direct the research process.

### ***Thoroughness***

Thoroughness involves “attention to connection between themes and full development of ideas” (Whittemore et al., 2001, p.532). Similar terms such as saturation (Leininger, 1994) and completeness (Eisenhart & Howe, 1992) have been used to refer to this quality criterion of research. Thoroughness implies that the research questions are convincingly answered (Eisenhart & Howe, 1992; Thorne 1997) and that the full scope of the phenomenon is explored (Marshall, 1990). My attempts to be thorough are reflected in the way I looked for connections between themes; by answering the four research questions as fully as possible; and remaining true to the data in my attempts to do so.

### ***Congruence***

The Oxford dictionary defines congruence as “agreement or harmony; compatibility” (Oxford Dictionaries, 2010a). Whittemore et al. (2001) argue for congruence between “the research question, the method, and the findings; between data collection and analysis; between the current study and previous studies; and between the findings and practice” (p.532). Congruency as quality criterion in this study can be judged by how well the research questions reflected our and my concerns and how well the method and outcomes of the research were related to and addressed these concerns.

### ***Sensitivity***

Sensitivity implies consideration for the human, cultural and social contexts in which the research took place (Altheide & Johnson, 1994; Munhall, 1994; Whittemore et al., 2001) and requires that ethical considerations be made explicit (Whittemore et al., 2001). In this respect, Lincoln (1995) advises that the researcher demonstrate respect for participants and concern for human dignity, and be mindful that “research serves the purpose of the community in which it was carried out rather than simply serving the community of knowledge producers and policymakers” (p.280). For instance, Member 6,

who experienced some discord with members of the team (for reasons not related to the R@I project) provided feedback in a testimonial that acknowledged my attempts to recognise this group member's needs and efforts to include this member in the group. Member 6's feedback suggests that my engagement was experienced by this group member as sensitive and considerate. I consciously assumed an attitude of respectful engagement with each of my R@I team members and made efforts to include team members' contributions. As the project was explicitly designed to serve the purpose of the R@I community, I engaged with my interpretations with regards to my personal research questions only after the completion of the project. This further ensured that the focus remained on the immediate benefit of the research to the community of R@I team members and other stakeholders.

#### *Validity measures through quality of craftsmanship*

According to Kvale (1995), validation through craftsmanship resides in built-in quality control procedures that happen throughout the knowledge creation process, through various checking behaviours (e.g. if interpretations were reasonably made, getting feedback from participants, etc.) and continually questioning the intent of the study and actions during the study.

Some built-in checking measures in my study included obtaining regular feedback from participants and testing my interpretations. I did this through transparent record keeping, distributing the records detailing the content of the R@I meetings, sharing my reflective summaries of some of the nodal points of knowledge creation, and inviting feedback and corrections. With regards to evaluating my educational influence, the set of open-ended questions (Box 1) served as another procedure to obtain feedback from my team members. This was important to avoid merely relying on my perception of my educational influence on the members of the core action research workgroup.

The pragmatic intent of both the core AR project as well as the thesis/self-study project was to improve a certain aspect of practice. This is implicitly expressed in the research questions (how do I improve my academic practice? How can we improve the functioning of Itsoseng clinic?). Kvale's (1995) recommendation to question the intent of

actions resonates with the idea of praxis in action research as “informed, committed action that gives rise to knowledge as well as successful action” (McNiff et al., 2003, p.13). In further support of this line of reasoning, Reason and Torbert (2001) state that the “action turn” that followed the “linguistic turn” of postmodernism allows for a re-examination of the purpose of human inquiry in the social sciences:

We argue that since all human persons are participating actors in their world, the purpose of inquiry is not simply or even primarily to contribute to the fund of knowledge in a field, to deconstruct taken-for-granted realities, or even to develop emancipatory theory, but rather to forge a more direct link between intellectual knowledge and moment-to-moment personal and social action, so that inquiry contributes *directly* to the flourishing of human persons, their communities and the ecosystems of which they are part. (pp.5-6)

The purpose of the core action research project (the R@I project) can be framed as an attempt by the members of the R@I team members to link personal and collective knowledge with individual and collaborative action to contribute directly to a greater sense of flourishing as academics within our professional communities of belonging. We communicated our account of these forged links by means of the various presentations we delivered. Providing an account of this to a critical audience forms part of the measures of communicative validity.

#### *Communicative validity measures*

One form of communicative validity resides in submitting research reports to a critical audience such as an examining panel for a degree or for professional peer review at conferences or in journal publications (Terre Blanche & Durrheim, 1999). Validation through review by the academic community has been in place for a long time, but a relatively new development in qualitative research is “the extension of the interpretative community to include the subjects investigated and the general public, with the emphasis upon truth as negotiated in a local context” (Kvale, 1995, p.32). According to Whitehead and McNiff (2006), validity is about establishing the trustworthiness of knowledge claims and entails “showing the authenticity of the evidence base, explaining

the standards of judgement used, and demonstrating the reasonableness of the claim” (p.98).

This study can be classified as practitioner action research, and as such there are two processes that are regarded as acceptable forums for validation, namely, personal validation and social validation (McNiff & Whitehead, 2006). Personal validation resides in my own conviction, based on my own critical reflection, that my interpretations, evaluations and resultant claims are valid. Submitting this work to the process of social validation assumes that it has already passed my personal validation process in the sense that I am content that I have provided sufficient evidence that my evidence base is authentic, that I have clearly articulated my standards of judgement, and that I have met the institutional criteria of judgement as well as my own articulated standards of judgement. Social validation involves submitting the criteria and standards of judgment together with my claims to my team members for a critical appraisal and evaluation in terms of the trustworthiness of my claims. Social validation in this instance also involves institutional validation by submitting this work to external examiners in a tertiary education context. In this research project I facilitated an internal social validation process of my educational influence in the R@I project by using the R@I team members as a critical group and asking them to respond to a set of open-ended questions (Box 1).

#### *Pragmatic validity measures*

According to Terre Blanche and Durrheim (1999),

if we are deliberately looking to achieve an end, and we are looking via our research to find ways to do it, the extent to which the actions indicated by the research bring about the desired results is a measure of the truth value of the research. (p.432)

Kvale (1995) states that pragmatic validity of interpretations goes beyond the aesthetic dimension of communicative validity. It shares closer ties with the ethical dimension of interpretations by taking decisions on how and when to act in response to interpretations. The individual and collaborative decisions I took in facilitating the core AR project were constantly informed by an evaluation of what would be the most useful action at any given point in time. In this I am supported by Reason and Torbert (2001, p.4) when they

state: “the question is how to act....in a timely, idiosyncratic, ecologically sensitive fashion that catalyzes self or other transformation when appropriate. And when is this *not* the question?”

Kvale (1995) furthermore discerns two types of pragmatic validation: (1) claims of knowledge or transformation that are accompanied or followed up by action; and (2) interventions based on the researcher’s interpretations that appear to act as a catalyst for a change or transformation in behaviour or towards the research goals. In a collaborative AR project such as the R@I project, the research team or workgroup “together develop knowledge of a social situation, and then apply this knowledge by new actions in the situation, thus through praxis testing the validity of the knowledge” (Kvale, 1995, p.34).

### **Ensuring ethical practice**

A social science researcher can face many dilemmas throughout the research process. For instance, Miles and Huberman (1994) mention the following: validity versus causing harm; anonymity versus visibility; scientific understanding versus individual rights; detached inquiry versus help; help-giving versus confidentiality; freedom of inquiry versus political advantage. In addition, ethical practice in action research projects is considered to be more complicated than in traditional (outsider) qualitative research projects (Barazangi, 2006; Morton, 1999; Zeni, 2010). The added complexity is related to (among others) issues of authorship of collaboratively created knowledge (Morton, 1999) and balancing the interests of the researcher with the interests of the collaborators (Zeni, 2006). McNiff and Whitehead (2006) recommend three key ethical aspects to be taken into consideration when other people are involved in research: (1) negotiating and securing access; (2) protecting your participants; and (3) assuring good faith. Throughout the research project and in this document I have taken steps to minimise any potential harm; and where known risk for harm existed, that every participant was aware of this risk and consented to it.

### *Negotiating and securing access for the R@I project*

Prior to commencing the R@I project I scheduled a meeting with each of my five colleagues and discussed the potential value of the R@I project as well as my role, what information I intended to document and who would have access to the data. This could be seen as a negotiating and securing of access exercise with the primary group of people who were going to be involved as collaborators. The clinic director (Linda) was one of the R@I team members and as such she had a direct influence throughout the R@I project in terms of what information relevant to the clinic we would access and how that information would be presented. I nevertheless requested and received written permission from Linda in her capacity as Itsoseng clinic director to conduct the R@I project and use the Itsoseng clinic as a research forum. I submitted a written proposal to the University of Pretoria's ethics committee, detailing every research procedure planned. I also requested and received written permission from the Mamelodi campus principal to conduct the R@I project on the Mamelodi campus. My application to the University of Pretoria's ethics committee, detailing all procedures and permission letters was approved.

### *Protecting the participants*

Zeni (2006) advises that ethical practice involves our examining the impact of our research on the people whose lives we document, and offers the following questions to aid this examination:

What negative or embarrassing data can you anticipate emerging from this research? Who might be harmed (personally, professionally, financially)? What precautions have you taken to protect the participants? Might your research lead to knowledge of sensitive matters such as illegal activities, drug/alcohol use or sexual behaviour of participants? How do you plan to handle such information?  
(Zeni, 2006, p.14)

In this research report I only named or identified participants, stakeholders or people named in meetings with their specific permission. The benefit of naming participants is to fully credit their ideas and contributions. One of the R@I team members preferred to remain anonymous and I therefore refer to this person as Member 6. This proved to be particularly challenging as the collaborative action research project was conducted with a



small group of people within the physical context of the Itsoseng Psychology clinic on the Mamelodi campus. The collaborative action research project furthermore took place during a transformational period in South Africa – ten years after democracy. As the details of the sociopolitical, geographical and historical period are highly relevant to understanding the impetus and development of this study, providing anonymity to the role players was almost impossible. Member 6 gave consent to be part of the study with the knowledge that the data would be used towards a PhD thesis. I have made a considerable effort to ensure that I included Member 6 in such a way as to protect identity as far as it is in my power, as well as to acknowledge this member's contributions, which I deemed valuable throughout the project. Omitting Member 6 altogether by erasing this member's contributions from all records would present a greater ethical concern as it would amount to an inaccurate picture of both the process and content of the project.

Member 6 expressed discomfort on three occasions during the research project. As the project sometimes involved a personal scrutiny of our individual academic practice in the presence of others, it had the potential to be an emotionally threatening environment. Most of the conversations were also audio recorded (with the permission of all participants). This possibly increased the likelihood that participants would restrict the early expression of discomfort (when it arose) at the risk of appearing out of kilter with the dominant positive atmosphere present during most discussions. Several attempts were made by myself and other members of the workgroup to address the concerns that Member 6 had both during and between meetings. This member made the following comments in response to my request for an evaluation of my educational influence (these comments appear in a fuller context in chapter five):

*Honestly Willem, I know you did a lot and tried with all. However with regard to me, an immense amount of dynamics happened between me and the rest of the Mamelodi personnel in the last 2 to 3 years... For this reason I saw the meetings we had as more of a further possibility, that would have been used to belittle me by some of the members of staff on Mamelodi, and chose not to participate.*

*I truly appreciate the fact that you did try to pull me into the group, to participate. That is an integral part of any group functioning and I know you did a wonderful job with all.*

Prior to this research project, each of the six faculty members had an existing role and a relative amount of influence in the decision making process regarding the functioning and management of the Itsoseng clinic. The core AR project involved using Itsoseng Clinic as an experimental nucleus to integrate research, teaching and community engagement, thereby improving the functioning of the clinic and increasing our collective and individual research outputs. Prior to the first R@I meeting, a concern was expressed by two workgroup members regarding my role as “primary” researcher and R@I facilitator, and how that would influence the relative power I suddenly was perceived to have acquired in terms of the management of the Itsoseng Clinic. It is important to stress that these perceptions of my sudden apparent power over the management of the clinic were not anticipated, nor did I perceive myself to have acquired any additional power. These two workgroup members were functioning in a capacity as operational clinic managers who reported to Linda as the overall clinic manager. This concern was expressed in an email (dated 19 May 2004) to me by the then clinic director (Linda) in response to my invitation to participate in this research project:

*Dear Willem, I fully support this meeting and especially the venue. One point of concern is that [two of the members] feel undermined with Itsoseng and I think you should discuss your intentions with them first.*

In response to Linda’s suggestion, I held discussions with both operational clinic managers prior to the first meeting. My dual role as research team member and project facilitator was discussed and clarified in some detail during the first and second R@I meetings. I made every effort to constantly assure members that I had their best interests at heart and presented them with an ethics statement which appears in Appendix C.

### *Assuring good faith*

Assuring good faith involves doing what you said you were going to do (Whitehead & McNiff, 2006). I made every effort to keep to all agreed arrangements and to be open to ideas and suggestions of every member. In the interests of transparency, I provided all members of the core AR workgroup with copies of the transcribed and typed meeting records prior to the next meeting. I also regularly encouraged amendments and refutations to the records, as indicated in Box 2 and Box 3.

#### *Box 2. Invitation to amend the typed records of the R@I meetings*

**Invitation:**

This document serves as my recollection of some of the main ideas expressed during the meeting held on 2004-05-26 at Sammy Marks museum. I invite you to add to this document:

- ideas that you remember that were expressed but which are not reflected (or not adequately reflected) in this document
- new ideas that came up for you while reading this document and which relate to the general topic
- other crazy ideas which are not really related to the topic of the meeting but which you feel could add value to future meetings or reflection on this meeting
- process comments on the meeting – perhaps you noticed something in the way we communicated or dealt with contributions that influenced the discussion.

From Record of 1<sup>st</sup> R@I meeting (26/5/2004)

#### *Box 3. Second invitation to amend the typed records of the R@I meetings*

**Authorship of this document**

This again is my recollections aided by my notes taken and writings on a flipchart during this meeting. Comments, refutations, amendments and enhancements are always welcome to these records.

From Record of 3<sup>rd</sup> R@I meeting (16/7/2004)

In addition to doing what you said you were going to do, Burns (2007, p.154) proposes that “good facilitation of action research depends on mobilising passion and building trust. It encourages emergence rather than pushes for solutions, and it sometimes requires the action research facilitator to go out on a limb and make strategic challenges.” Looking back over the evolution of the core AR project, I am able to see that my focus during the first ten R@I meetings was on preserving a record of as many contributions from each workgroup member as possible, rather than on keeping the direction of the conversations strictly focussed on the initial research question. I found myself often frustrated with this state of affairs, being concerned that the conversations would evolve into nothing more than collective complaining sessions of how difficult the challenges we faced were. However, I believe that my attempts to engage with each member’s contribution (by means of challenging or supporting it) possibly had the effect of affirming and encouraging passion already present in each participant. I provide evidence of some strategic challenges I made during the 11<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> R@I meetings in chapter five where I present certain key reflections that likely contributed to the transformations that I regarded had taken place during the core action research project.

## **Conclusion**

In this chapter I provided a description of the research process as well as the data gathering and analysis methods I used in order to answer the research questions and to present evidence of our collective and my personal transformation as a result of our participation in the R@I project. I explained how finding answers to the research questions may not only benefit the R@I group as a whole but may also inform into my living theory of how I improved my practice as an academic. I discussed criteria and measures of validity and reported on how I used these to ensure the quality of the results. I also discussed ethical practice and provided an account of actions I took to ensure proper negotiation and securing of access to research contexts, protection of the participants, and assurances of good faith. In the next three chapters, I present and discuss the results of the study organised in terms of the transformations that occurred through our attempts to answer the research questions.