TRANSCRIPT

Developing (as) a research team with Alison Buckler

ALISON BUCKLER: For me, diversity in research teams is essential. I think that's the bottom line. And there are lots of reasons why I think it's important, which I'm sure we could talk for hours about. But one of the angles that I think is interesting is this debate about who should be able to research where in academia.

And I don't necessarily think the way forward is to say that you can only research in a place or about an issue that you have direct personal experience of because I think that limits us as people and as researchers.

But I do think that we shouldn't be researching places or issues that we have no direct personal experience of unless we're in a diverse research team, and we're working with people who do. And I think that for me, that's one of the key things that we think about the learning that we are doing about a place, as well as the learning that we're generating through the research.

And in my research, which is very international, it's just a cornerstone of all of my work, is that I only research in places if I have people in the team who come from those places and who can speak, who have first-hand experience of those places and of the contexts.

And I would return the favour if they were researching in a place that I think it's about-- a lot of my work is international. And it's really important to me that I wouldn't take on a project in a particular place unless I was working in a research team where there were others who did have first-hand experience of that context, or of that place, or of that issue.

So I think we've all got to start somewhere as researchers. And I'm sure if all of us look back across our research career, there are projects we've worked on where we wish we had done things differently or could have done things differently.

And it's easier to say these things, speaking from the privileged position of someone who's been working in this area for 15 years and has had the opportunity to build up networks and communities of research teams that I am really, really fortunate to be able to call on to work with and who invite me to work with them.

So I completely understand that if you're, for example, a doctoral student who's researching something for the first time, then you're in a very different position. And I think the first question that you maybe have to ask yourself is why is it really important to you to be researching this place?

So if you're maybe a White British doctoral student and you're really, really passionate about doing some research in, say, India, so maybe really ask yourself the difficult questions about why it's important that you do that research in that particular place. And if it is really important to you and your supervisors agree with you, then it's really important to have or to build up an understanding of that place before you start to research it.

And there are lots of ways that you could do this and your supervisors could support with, and hopefully one of your supervisors would have contacts or connections to that place. One of the tips that I've always really liked comes from Professor Singer at the University of Cambridge. And she encourages her students to read novels about the places that they want to go and research because she really believes that when you engage with the kind of creative piece of work around a place, then you get to know it in a different way. So I think that's always something that I try and recommend to my students as well.

And then I think the other thing that we have to be conscious of as supervisors is what can we do to support our students to have a richer engagement with the place before they start to research with it? And just as an example, I've got an AHRC-funded student starting in October. And there was a budget for the fieldwork, and she is from the place that she wants to research. So that's a really great starting point for her because she's already very familiar with the context, but she's not familiar with the specific communities that she's going to be working with.

And so one of the things that we did as a supervision team is that we wrote to the funder and asked if there was any additional funding for an engagement visit to the community before the research starts. And they were very receptive to that. And so I always think it's really important to pull the levers that you can for other people to be able to develop that engagement in connection with the community before they start to research with people in it. Yeah. I mean, like I said, I absolutely don't believe that we should only be researching what we know and who we know. And I think that the benefits of working in research teams is that you-- see, I'm a comparativist. And I really believe that the kind of core function of comparative research is not to compare A with B but to use A to see B in a different way and to use B to see A in a different way. And I think that's what we can generate, that kind of empathy, new ways of looking at things by working in research teams.

And for example, one of my research projects works in the UK, South Africa, and Nigeria, and we have researchers from all three countries on the research team. And it's fascinating the conversations that we have about the places and things that we take for granted in our own contexts that other people pick-up on and things that we're shocked by in other contexts that seem totally normal.

And I think really, it's about making space around the edges of the research for those conversations to happen. And again, I think it's not just about having diverse teams. It's about having diverse teams where you've built up a sense of trust and safety around saying, hey, this is different. This is not how I would do things, or this is surprising to me, and have those sort of statements land and people be responsive to them, and empathetic around them, and help everybody's learning to move forward together.

So I think it's not just about having a diverse team. It's about creating spaces within the research where the members of that team can have conversations that extend beyond the immediate focus of the research. So we can understand not only how they're seeing something but what they're bringing to the project that influences how they're seeing something differently to us. And for me, that's the most exciting part of learning through research.

I think it's really important to think about what we can do as individuals and what is happening in the sort of wider structures and institutions that we are working in. And I think it's you can-- So for example, one of the pressures we're under as academics is to, if we get some funding in, is to not reach out to consultants because that money then goes outside of the university, but to hire researchers who are already working for the university because that's more cost effective for the university.

So then as an academic who's trying to put together a diverse research team, where are you measuring this sort of diversity? What level are you thinking about diversity? Because you might have access to some really great researchers outside the university who would really enrich the research. And then maybe within the university, you might not.

But then you have to ask, well, where are those diverse researchers in the university system? Are they not being hired? Are they being hired but they're not feeling confident to come to events where you might get to know them? Are they not being supported to put themselves forward for things?

And so really it's about understanding what you can do as an individual but also how institutions are working to support diversity and to encourage researchers from a range of different backgrounds to come and work for us. And then when they do come and work for us, have the confidence to be present in spaces where they might have the opportunity to be picked for research teams. And if we're not finding them, if we're not finding people with our own kind of institutional communities to work with, then that's a problem, I think.
I think it's often very easy to think about diversity in the abstract, and to think, isn't it a wonderful thing? We're striving for diversity in our teams, and we're all going to learn and grow together. And often, my work is rooted in sociocultural thinking.

And I write a lot about how when learning happens at boundaries and tensions are generative. And I believe that. But I also know that when you're in a research team and and there's a tension, it can feel very, very challenging. It can feel very threatening. It can feel very personal.

And it doesn't always feel like something that you're both going to grow from. It feels like something that could threaten the future of the whole project. And so I think we often convince ourselves that we're open to diversity. And then when it picks up the phone and talks to us or sends us an email, that comes up against something that we hold really closely to us about our personality, or our way of working, or like you say, these kind of cultural norms that we don't often think about when we're just getting on with our lives, then it doesn't feel very positive or generative. And it can be a really scary place.

And I think the more you encounter it, the better you learn to deal with it. And I think that's really important. It's important to recognise that a clash of opinions doesn't mean everything is going to fall apart. And sometimes, it's really important just to take a deep breath and step back and think, well, where is this coming from?

And I think it's really important to just listen. And this is something I've learned the hard way, but I think sometimes, in a research team, when someone comes to you with a problem, we have a tendency to want to fix that problem in the short term. And then perhaps we don't really listen to what the problem is and reflect on maybe the deeper roots of that problem.
So I think these tensions can be generative, but I think it takes practice and time and empathy and respect from both parts for that new knowledge and new ways of working to come to the surface. And it's not always quick, and it's not always easy. But often, you do look back and think that was worth investing that time into resolving that. And yeah, and things are different now because of it, and they're perhaps better because of it.