

## A Practitioner-Researcher \*<sup>1</sup> Grouping: Reflections on Process

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### Introduction

The University of Wolverhampton has been heavily involved in developing a range of new courses in Adult Literacy, Numeracy and ESOL during 2003-4. Teacher training staff are also committed to creating *long term* professional development opportunities, including those of encouraging practitioners to generate new knowledge through research and practice. In this short article we shall discuss our experience to date on a practitioner-researcher project, based at the university and funded by the regional Learning Skills Council. We start with a brief outline of the project and then focus on processes rather than outcomes at this stage.

### Implementing the Core Curriculum: the LSC funded Project

In 2003, the West Midlands LSC provided some seedbed funding for 15 small practitioner-researcher projects over a two year period. Invitations were extended to AE/FE colleges within the region and the first five projects got underway. They have focused on a common theme- *Experience of Implementing the Curriculum*-and are currently considering the following questions:

1. Are students with disabilities including dyslexia now effectively excluded from accreditation processes?
2. How does the context shape the implementation of the curriculum: A comparison of work in three different contexts: Further, Prison and Community Education.
3. What happens to the quality of curriculum implementation within the

tight timescales allowed in employment programmes? Why do some adults keep returning to programmes?

4. Do new and experienced teachers respond differently to implementing the new curriculum? A comparative exploration with college staff.
5. How do dyslexic learners and their tutor describe the learning outcomes within a dyslexia group? How closely do they fit with assessment criteria?

New members of the grouping have raised further questions about whether a centrally prescribed curriculum can be implemented in ways which reflect real life issues of creativity, criticality and linguistic diversity: what role can story telling have in developing the curriculum; how can material about *critical literacies* be incorporated in curriculum practice; and how can developing language forms in social sub-groups be adequately included in the literacy curriculum?

Clearly these questions place the project as a whole at important policy interfaces. What started as an exploration of literacy policy implementation has had to focus on the interactions between a range of social policies as they are actually experienced on the ground. For example, the practitioners are showing some of the tensions which emerge between disability and literacy policies. Despite extensive work on Access for ALL within the Skills for Life Initiative, the question of whether general policies on literacy accreditation appear to be more excluding than the systems used before Skills for Life is a live one and is being explored in one college.

\*1 The term practitioner-researchers is used here to indicate that all actually work currently as practitioners and are undertaking research within and during their own practice.

\*2 The article was drafted by Margaret on the basis of conversations between the authors and also incorporates pieces of writing from several members.

Similarly, though we have long known of the theoretical tensions and the political realities at the interface between literacy and employment policies (see earlier RaPAL articles: Castleton, no. 39, 1999; Peutrell, no. 43, 2000; Frank & Rodrigues, no. 51, 2003), there are present concerns about the impact of current employment programmes which combine a focus on getting people into work with a determination to provide literacy tuition prior to taking up such jobs. One such concern is about the conflicts of interest stemming from the twin goals: between the training organisation's short term goals and funding which are geared to getting people into the first available jobs and the learners' interest in developing literacy skills to enhance their longer term employment opportunities. Curriculum implementation in such circumstances can be highly constrained and hence one member of the group is exploring these conflicts and, in particular, is discussing with students how they perceive this situation.

The work at these interfaces feels like 'the coalface' as literacy staff act:

- to spot inconsistencies within, and the fallout from, policy measures,
- to try to work out what can be achieved in these contexts and how the curriculum is actually re-shaped to fit them,
- to assess what is actually happening to learner power in the process.

*Time* (and the way it is institutionalised in each context) is emerging as a key parameter governing the ways in which the curriculum can be implemented. The main findings will emerge during 2005 but for now we would like to consider some of the processes involved in this work.

### **Designing the System for Practitioner-Researchers**

This project is developing within a national context of increased recognition of the potential role of practitioner-researchers in this field (and the funding of some of this work by the NRDC). It is particularly important, therefore, to provide the details of how this particular project has organised

the work.

The system for involving practitioners was designed to counter some of the barriers, which had already been identified in this kind of work: lack of time, lack of classroom cover, lack of self belief as knowledge makers etc. To some extent it amounted to an hypothesis in response to the research question: what is the best system for encouraging inexperienced practitioners or inexperienced researcher practitioners in this field to feel that they can engage in these processes?

The system we devised involved a number of financial and professional incentives:

- o the opportunity of obtaining a 30 credit module;
- o the payment of module fees;
- o the provision of a small amount of money to cover research costs-staff cover; transcription costs etc (£1000).
- o individual support in developing the proposals (with the proposals being seen as an unfamiliar form of literacy which may need to be taught); and a formal process of acceptance;
- o individual research training (and access to group training via separate research modules);
- o email access to the research coordinator/advisor with detailed feedback on draft proposals;
- o individual monitoring and development sessions during the projects;
- o clear timetabling;
- o group discussions about the work;
- o assistance with the writing up.

The system for dissemination was clarified at the outset: we would discuss the project throughout its life, updating colleagues about its progress. In particular we wanted to be in professional *conversation* with the LEARN\*<sup>3</sup> Network of school-based teacher researchers via their annual conference. We also wanted to connect this work with the extensive body of such work in the RaPAL network and with the current NRDC project on Researcher-Practitioners. Once the module dissertations were complete, the



intention was to devise methods of publishing the findings. All participants were required to sign up to helping with this aspect of the research.

## Discussing Processes

### I Motivation

In the course of our individual and group discussions we wanted to find out whether the system incentives actually played any part in developing motivation. Why had practitioners wanted to get involved in the project?

Although the professional development opportunities offered by this work were attractive, some participants revealed that a desire for change was driving them into this research.

Howard writes...

*When I found out about the research project, I initially thought about my own personal development because it would give me the opportunity to gain credits towards a degree.*

*I then obtained information relating to the project and was interested in the fact that I could choose the topic that I wanted to 'explore.' This gave me the motivation to embrace the opportunity to 'have a voice' as I knew that any information I discovered would be written into an article. As a basic skills practitioner, I had always felt that it was pointless raising issues unless action would be taken and so I saw this project as a vehicle for highlighting what is happening in the hope that people would understand or relate to it and that ultimately, improvements would be made in these policies.*

Lyn writes...

*I wanted to be involved because new insights into recent theories of literacy led me to question the integrity of my underlying approach to teaching basic skills. It was important for me to find a way to*

*enable learning, which would make a real difference...rather than continue to perpetuate the power system which had placed students 'in deficit'.*

It certainly seemed that all those wanting and able to participate had immediate questions for research arising from their practice and a desire to resolve these. Those who started the process and who had to withdraw during the early stages, cited new pressures at work or family illness/responsibilities. A more considered evaluation at the end of the project should provide some insight into the relative importance of intrinsic and instrumental motivations and the significance of the support systems.

### II Feelings

For some members of the grouping, this was the first sustained piece of research activity they had done, with all the attendant insecurities.

Elaine writes, capturing the mix of excitement and apprehension...

*When I first began my journey as a practitioner-researcher, I felt the feelings of "excitement" and "terror." The best way to describe it when I first began was as if I was boarding a "ghost train"; on a journey into the unknown. My other feelings have been those of "fear" and "panic." It's the not knowing where the next station is and if the train will stop but it is a "thrilling" journey, which occasionally halts, giving me time to reflect on my childhood years, schooling and working memories. The journey has enabled me to travel back and forward in time comparing the facts and findings of others with those of my own. It's been an ideal opportunity to personally put old "ghosts" to rest and a chance to further explore and "unearth" my own individuality and have my voice heard.*

Throughout, the stance has been one of acknowledging **feelings** about research and about being researchers.

\*3. The LEARN project, funded by NCSL, is coordinated by Dr Linda Devlin at the University of Wolverhampton. Contact Linda at [L.Devlin@wlv.ac.uk](mailto:L.Devlin@wlv.ac.uk), for further details.

### III Support

The presence of such feelings suggests that the support arrangements would be important for retention.

Howard writes...

*On starting the project, I was apprehensive; as I had not undertaken a task like this before, and having read published materials, I was concerned about my abilities to produce work to the standard required and also about the support that would be made available.*

*I was relieved to find that I had excellent support in guiding me through my choice of topic and during the research process. I welcomed the opportunity to meet with other research practitioners and found their chosen topics to be a real 'eye opener.' The relief continued when I heard that they had similar concerns and fears and that I was certainly not alone in this process.*

As noted above, we need to interrogate the significance of 'support' more closely as the project proceeds.

### IV Research Methods

All members spent considerable time on the research design, with much discussion about the kind of knowledge which could be generated from particular processes. Issues of where the researchers were placing themselves in relation to the researched arose regularly and detailed questions about particular methods were considered.

Ann spoke about group interviewing with dyslexic learners,

*I have been wondering about the extent to which I am putting words into student mouths during interviews. Are they mimicking me and if so what does this mean?*

This question goes beyond the issue of leading or closed questions and raises issues about the linguistic discourse when word finding delays are part of the student experience and using the words of the

questioner is a survival strategy. Also if giving of words and literacy 'modelling' goes on in literacy classes what are the implications for research processes in classroom situations?

*I also wonder about going off at tangents in group discussions...is the data entirely relevant to the questions?*

This shows sensitivity to the dynamics involved in general interview situations and especially about how to respond to the fact that some dyslexic learners show strengths in tangential thinking.

### V About the experience of the group(ing)

The question at the outset was about the kind of group(ing) this could or would need to be.

The original plan was to work as a group, meeting four times throughout the project. So far we have not met as often as planned because of the traditional barriers of illness, work pressures, lack of cover in the colleges etc. but we have noted some key advantages of working in a grouping:

- finding that we have similar concerns about research: questions about the nature of the knowledge we are generating and questions about ourselves as researchers. *"It is not always a very rosy path but you can unravel the problems"* (Elaine)
- listening to the experience of others brings out more in your own research situation, for example, linking past and present as new tutors, learning about past literacy education experience rather than seeing SKFL as the beginning of everything
- the theoretical ideas implicit in the research can come to the fore easily and references to further literature are stimulated. We have already found ourselves discussing concepts of literacy underpinning policies, concepts of disability, ideas about exclusion, theories about literacies in prison (for example, Anita Wilson's Third Space theory),

learning theories etc. And we have noted that the RaPAL Journal is a key source for practitioner-research work

- all reported on feelings of enthusiasm generated in the group meetings and its affective function in general.

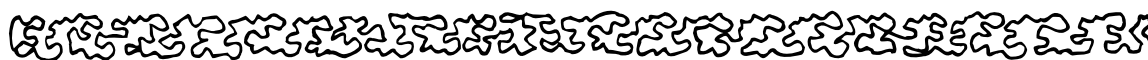
We shall do some of our dissemination in a group and so will have more to report at the end of the project about the significance of working in this way. For now, we can say that the grouping has provided a common theme and a loose framework within which to try out and challenge ideas. It appears to provide an additional layer in the research dynamic.

### VI Students as co-researchers

Several of the projects have involved students in some way and some are moving towards the inclusion of students as co-researchers. This has required some discussion about how power can be exercised and 'shared' between the practitioner researcher and the students. Previous experience has been noted (RaPAL Doing Research 1990) and a preliminary matrix of possibilities has been established for working in this context (see below). We anticipate that we should be able to draw up maps of the kinds of power involved and show how power is exercised within the different projects.

**Diagram 1 - Exercising Power in Research in Practice**

Activity	Practitioner-researcher	Student(s)
Initial planning of the research	Proposal to secure funding	No power at this stage necessarily Some circumstances could be designed to facilitate this.
Ongoing development of the plan	Shared but must take final responsibility	Can contribute and change
Recording of data	Initial decisions about recording methods. Final responsibility for obtaining permissions	Power to change methods of recording, amend, edit raw data. Power over who has access to what raw data and to deny access to some
Analysis	Co-analysis but primary responsibility for the analysis in the project dissertation	Co-analysers. Role acknowledged.
Writing up	Final responsibility for module submission	Responsibility for chosen parts and for any submission for accreditation
Dissemination	Shared National and local	Shared Local and national



## VII Research Advisor Role

Margaret writes...

During the project I have found myself asking questions about the nature of my role. It involves negotiations with individuals and therefore differences occur across the group. However, the general stages have involved:

- o clarifying the history of research in/and practice ( with national and international references) and the particular significance of the current climate and the current project.
- o discussing practitioners' first ideas, helping them to shape these into proposals and alerting them to possible references in the literature. Acknowledging feelings and insecurities.
- o working as a literacy educator in relation to two particular literacy practices: first, the literacy context of a research proposal and the vocabulary and terminology used. Initial drafts required sharpening and pushing into a very clear design. Detailed modelling of sections of the writing was used to show what these proposals had to include; and, second, the structuring of analysis and data in the writing up
- o working as a research educator, on an individual basis, explaining about different methodologies and epistemological issues: initial and ongoing. This is particularly important when first time researchers lack confidence about debating research methodologies and knowledge creation in general.
- o planning of a schedule for the work across the group: each negotiating when would be best for them to meet, do drafts etc
- o drawing attention to the national and international debates to which their work will contribute

It has seemed something of a hybrid role: project manager, mentor, research advisor, literacy educator, connector with debates, critical reader etc. Though there is clear overlap between this work and that of

general research supervision in universities, it is useful to describe this particular work as thoroughly as possible.

I have also noted some tensions and some strong benefits from working with the group: first, I was conscious of the tension for me between working collaboratively with each member and assessing the final outcome from their investigation. I always made clear that my suggestions were just that and that the responsibility always lay with them for what they finally produced for accreditation. However, I also signalled that accreditation was one step and that beyond this lay their ongoing contribution to knowledge in this field, singly or in joint authorship. Second, I was aware that the fears of practitioners about the type and quality of research and the nature of exposure during dissemination had to be addressed during the process.

*"I never thought I would be in a conference, or published"*

It appeared to me that the fears often stemmed from prior social and educational experience and from adherence to some of the traditional narratives about research and researchers. I could see that part of my role was convincing practitioner-researchers that this was not some second class type of research but generative qualitative investigations which could become the basis for more broad-based statistical investigation, if appropriate, but which anyway could provide useful feedback to policy makers.

### Concluding Comment

If practitioners are to believe that they can build research into the infrastructure of their practice and create new knowledge in response to their urgent questions, we believe that the opportunities created to assist them must be *practitioner-researcher centred*. Issues of identity as researchers, confidence, expectations, the range of research traditions etc. as well as the practical circumstances within their places of work, must all be acknowledged explicitly.

The issue of who has traditionally been excluded from the research agenda, and their own position in relation to this, must also be explored.

Finally, the urgency of the questions raised by the members of this group reveal the value of placing scarce research resources with practitioner researchers. They are all concerned with central policy concerns about the power of adult literacy students in developing their curricula and in securing fair accreditation mechanisms.

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