

Challenging HE/FE boundaries by publishing an independent action research journal

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We explore here how the publication of an independent action research journal has challenged concepts around the production and ownership of research knowledge across the Further and Higher Education sectors. Traditionally Higher Education (HE) has been associated with the production of knowledge through academic scholarship and research, whilst the Further Education (FE) sector has been viewed as being a recipient, or consumer, of that knowledge. The transfer of what counts as knowledge is frequently one-way, from HE to FE, with HE carrying out research and disseminating it through academic networking and publications. The FE sector, which is more practice based, has less resources to carry out research and less access to academic networking and publications.

There are notable exceptions with large scale research programmes such as the Teaching and Learning Research Programme (TLRP) attempting to bridge this divide (Gardner and Pollard, 2008; Pollard, 2008) and research centres such as the National Research and Development Centre for adult literacy and numeracy (NRDC) including practitioner research within their remit and publications (Davies, Hamilton and James, 2007 and examples of practitioner guides Appleby and Barton, 2008; Appleby, 2008)). However successful these examples may, or may not, be in creating sustained change, as Mary Hamilton discusses above, they are exceptions to what is often experienced as a divide between FE and HE in the production and consumption of research based knowledge.

Our example here is based upon The University of Central Lancashire's (UCLan) Initial Teacher Training (ITT) programme which is a partnership between an HE institution and 15 FE institutions in the North West of England. It has 1800 students taking qualifications to enable them to teach in the Lifelong Learning Sector. Most of the provision is delivered within the FE institutions that independently deliver the HE franchised programme. Managing a partnership, across two distinct boundaries, is a challenge, as the cultures of HE and FE are distinctly different (Bathmaker and Avis, 2007). FE can be seen to have developed a culture of performance related delivery supported by contracted working hours linked to vocational training. The focus has been firmly on teaching and learning with little time or resources for professional development except around curriculum updating. Teachers working within this practice-focussed domain have strong vocational identities related to their curriculum area and subject expertise: for example in hairdressing or sport. This is frequently in tension with being able to develop a professional identity as an educator.

The culture of HE on the other hand seeks to develop curriculum expertise and new knowledge through undertaking scholarly and research activity (Jenkins, Healey and Zetter, 2007). The outcomes of these activities drive the curriculum offered and the professional identity of the lecturers. The HE domain frequently privileges research over teaching in academic professional identities where the research carried out is rarely based upon pedagogical practices. In each sector the identity construction of being a teacher is

different in relation to research and its significance to practice.

The UCLan ITT programme uses action research to support critical reflective practice (McNiff and Whitehead, 2006; Armstrong and Moore, 2004) and the development of research skills. Research undertaken within FE tends to focus on the 'outcome' or product of the research and its value is often measured by the impact that the research has in practice. As the focus is on activity and 'outcomes' the knowledge generated from the research stays within the boundary of FE. As such any new knowledge created rarely crosses into the academic research domain of HE or is made accessible to a wider audience of practitioners.

This was the dilemma faced by a group of teacher educators (mainly based within HE) working in partnership with new and developing teachers within FE and the wider Lifelong Learning Sector. Trainee teachers, teacher educators and college management were becoming increasingly excited by the outcomes of research being undertaken as many teachers were able to reflect critically on the nature of learning and teaching in the classroom. Indeed, action research gave some the permission they needed to move away from prescribed and externally accountable teaching strategies to a more internal accountability and reflexive approach.

Final research reports became increasingly impressive and as 'assessors' of work we collectively began to feel enriched and knowledgeable through the process of reading our trainees' work. We reflected on ways to share the findings including photocopied and web based materials. This was the drive to promote the professionalism of the work that underpinned creating a professional journal *Through the Looking Glass*. The journal, published by the university, gave a voice to FE colleagues more familiar with having research done 'on them' rather than 'by them'. The journal was established with the principle that the design and content would emerge from colleagues in the FE sector, raising the profile of how the sector was perceived as academically credible both internally and externally.

Initially it was thought that the beneficiaries of the journal would be the next cohort of trainees who would be the main audience. In the first year of publication the motivation to be included in the journal resulted in very high levels of research reports being written. Being acknowledged as having credibility both as researchers and also in findings that related to the trainees curriculum area was very attractive to teachers who wanted academic recognition. Many trainees delivered HE programmes within an FE context and saw this as an opportunity to influence their own subject teaching as well as raising the profile of both themselves and their learners. This resulted in a new perception of professionalism as the status of a successful researcher was given to those included in publications.

New trainees undertaking research valued the journal as an up to date resource that had particular currency within their teaching context. Equally, teacher educators used the journal as a reference and selected suitable readings to generate discussion and reflection around the research process. The journal has been purchased by other HEI as a resource for their libraries increasing the contributor's sense of professionalism and academic credibility.

Wider benefits for being included in an academic publication, drawing on increased academic capital and self-confidence, include promotion, new posts and additional research opportunities. College management have noted a raised staff profile from being

included in the publication and have allocated time for new researchers to write up reports. Colleagues within FE are continuing to request their colleagues in HE to develop pathways that include further collaborative research opportunities and we as the HEI partner are committed to maintaining the production of the journal as an example of what can be achieved when working, and challenging, academic research boundaries.

Challenging these boundaries needs a sensitive acceptance and valuing of each culture: treading carefully is required. In our practice we have removed the concept of the boundary and replaced it with an interface that allows us to travel freely in both directions as required. Colleagues from FE therefore work on committees and development groups within HE, while HE staff move into FE to deliver research modules. However interfaces alone are not enough. What the flexible nature of the interface has really achieved is the creation of a working space where individuals and groups can teach and study together effectively as a learning community, or community of practice. Creating a working space that is neither HE nor FE but a shared place to develop ourselves as practitioners has been one of the fundamental aspects of being able to publish an academically credible HE journal that is based in FE experience.

The journal also challenges the perception held by colleagues in FE that the creation of and the ownership knowledge lies exclusively within the HE domain. Publishing the journal enables new knowledge to be shared, analysed and synthesised into a wider context. As such the journal acts as a catalyst to further investigation in both sectors. Its success has confirmed for us that creating interfaces and working spaces that are external to the boundaries set by the defined contexts in which we are employed is beneficial to us all. It becomes a space for us to examine our practice and share our ideas and empowers all of us in the process.

Common threads across the different contexts

The four papers illustrate some of the possibilities and challenges associated with practitioner research in the field of Lifelong Learning. They show both areas of similarity and difference. Some of the differences reflect national policy contexts which shape the type of adult learning that is supported and funded. This also impacts upon the different models of practitioner research supported by changing national education priorities. The similarities show the vulnerability of practitioner research in policy and academic arenas where even if valued, or expedient, it is expendable. A similar theme running across the papers is the need to retain some independence. This more successfully enables embedding practitioner research in critical professional development as a priority. Publishing in academic domains make the work more visible and accessible as well as challenging assumptions that practitioner research is not 'real' research.

The different national policy contexts have produced different opportunities for practitioner research linked to the emerging skills agenda. In the case of Northern Ireland and England, explored above, this has enabled practitioner research to be recognised as an important part of national research and teacher training. What the papers also show is what can be given in one hand can be taken away by another. Resources made available at particular policy 'moment' can as quickly be relocated to a new priority. It could be argued that the resources themselves have created different models of practitioner research. At their best they have supported the development of some practitioners to take part in research projects and programmes. At their worst they act to constrain choice and individual professional development by concentrating resources more on the product rather than the process. This removes the crucial link between research and practice which supports the development of an independent autonomous critical voice.

At a time when adult education is framed within the increasingly functional skills discourse of Life Long Learning it is essential that we maintain critical perspectives on practitioner research: even if it requires biting that hand that offers to feed us.

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Notes

The Practitioner-Led Research Initiative (PLRI) ran for three years between 2004-06. The initiative drew on the European Social Fund (ESF) and was co-ordinated by a team at Lancaster University. Each round funded up to six, nine month projects selected through an open competition.

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'Independent learning' was translated differently on a poster in a school I visited in China. They had borrowed our list of 'good learning behaviours' but had translated independent learning as 'learning on your own and not distracting or talking to others around you'. This point reinforces the need to be explicit about what precisely students are expected to do and achieve. Challenges (ISSN 2078-1547) is a scientific peer-reviewed open access journal for research proposals and open problems published biannually online by MDPI. inVIVO Planetary Health is affiliated with Challenges. Open Access—free for readers, with article processing charges (APC) paid by authors or their institutions. Rapid Publication: manuscripts are peer-reviewed and a first decision provided to authors approximately 20.4 days after submission; acceptance to publication is undertaken in 3.8 days (median values for papers published in this journal in the first half of 2020). Kitchen M and Jeurissen M (2006) —Teacher Research as TESOL Professional Development: A Case Study—, New Zealand Journal of Teachers— Work, 3, 1, pp.33-41. Challenging HE/FE boundaries by publishing an independent action research journal. Yvon Appleby and Alison Barton. Paper presented at the 38th Annual SCUTREA Conference, 2-4 July 2008 University of Edinburgh. We explore here how the publication of an independent action research journal has challenged concepts around the production and ownership of research knowledge across the Further and Higher Education sectors.