

Critical perspectives on practitioner research: developing and sustaining critical practitioner research through the good times and the bad

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(Symposium)

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Introduction

This symposium paper critically questions the position of Practitioner Research in the current adult learning paradigm. Reflective professional practice and its relationship to research have historically been linked to action and participatory research methodologies which focus on collaboration, participation and praxis (Somekh, 2006; Atweh, Kemmis and Weeks, 1998). Whilst supported by many government offices and NGOs knowledge generated from this research is often devalued compared with academic research. Questions about who are the legitimate creators of this knowledge are at the heart of this debate.

This symposium paper contains four linked papers which together explore the place of practitioner research within the field of Life Long learning in the UK. Discussing examples from Northern Ireland, Scotland and England we ask whether practitioner research is in danger of being repositioned in the current national skills training agenda as little more than an effective training tool within an instrumental skills discourse. And, we question its place within the policy, research, and practice nexus. Practitioner research linked to policy potentially provides resources and a wider audience, which are often difficult to achieve (Gardner, Holmes and Leitch, 2008; Coffield *et al.*, 2007). On the other hand this may act to limit autonomy, independence and sustainability, raising the question of whether more resources and a higher profile is a positive development (Appleby, 2007).

The four papers discuss these overarching concerns within different national contexts showing many common issues, challenges and concerns. The first two papers, one from Northern Ireland and the other from England, both take as their theme the relationship between practitioner research and policy. Shelley Tracey discusses the development of practitioner qualifications, which include practitioner research, in the field of adult literacy within the Essential Skills Strategy in Northern Ireland. Although Practitioner Research is embedded in this successful programme it is under threat with changes in literacy tutor education within this policy arena. The paper raises the question of sustainability when policy changes and funding mechanisms alter. It explores other ways of developing practitioner research networks which may be more sustainable.

Mary Hamilton considers similar issues exploring some of the tensions of developing a Practitioner Led Research Initiative (PLRI) supported by the National Research and Development Centre for adult literacy and numeracy (NRDC). Hamilton discusses what enables and what constrains practitioner voices in this environment, questioning how independent or autonomous practitioner projects can be. She argues that such policy

environment sets up tensions and contradictions that have to be negotiated across differing power relationships. The paper uses deliberative policy analysis to emphasise the nature of the consultative opportunities that exist within policy spaces, discourses which shape these and the agency that key players can exercise.

Two papers follow that focus on challenging some of the boundaries that act to constrain the potential for practitioner research to count in policy, practice and the academic community. In the first Kathy Maclachlan and Ralf St Clair discuss ways of working with Learning Connections in Scotland to create practitioner research in adult literacy which linked to both practitioner knowledge and policy concerns. They discuss difficulties in creating 'enabling circumstances' where findings from practitioner research, funded by a national agency, can be integrated into future practice. Considering what hinders this 'new' knowledge from being incorporated into practice they focus on enabling circumstances and sustainability, discussing the impact that a different methodological approach can have on both.

The second paper from England looks at developing reflective practice and critical inquiry in Lifelong Learning Initial Teacher Training through embedding and publishing practitioner research. Yvon Appleby and Alison Barton argue that findings generated from this research frequently stay within the practice boundary of FE; it is not recognised with the academic community in HE, nor enters the public and professional domain as research informed knowledge. The boundaries experienced between FE and HE position those in HE as producers of research knowledge and those in FE as consumers. They discuss independently publishing a journal of practitioner action research which challenges knowledge creation and ownership across these boundaries by creating a collaborative interface.

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