If at first you don’t succeed - learning from experience in practitioner research in Scotland

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Paper presented at the 38th Annual SCUTREA Conference, 2-4 July 2008
University of Edinburgh

We discuss here the findings from two practitioner research (PLAR) projects in the field of adult literacies conducted in Scotland in 2005-6 and 2007-8. Its focus is on our learning about doing practitioner research and how we adapted the latter project in light of the practitioners’ experiences of conducting research that emerged from the former.

The Adult Literacy and Numeracy in Scotland (ALNIS) report of 2001 noted that ‘Scottish based research [in ALN] is virtually non-existent’ (pp.8). It identified the need for ‘grounding change in research and learner consultation’ (pp.2) ‘a national research programme including action research by practitioners’ (pp.4), and it recommended ‘that the national strategy, as it develops, be informed by and responsive to research and consultation with learners’ (Recommendation 16, pp.4).

The first practitioner research project, ‘New Ways to Engage New Learners’ was sponsored by Learning Connections, the Scottish Executive’s arm’s length agency with responsibility for adult literacies, for 20 months from 2005 to 2006. This project represented one strand of Learning Connections’ strategy to build research capacity in the field as well as an attempt to develop innovative approaches to good practice informed by learners and other stakeholders involved in ALN work. It was conceived as the start of an ongoing research process that would continually feed back into practice.

The project involved individuals or groups in the same workplace undertaking a research project related to the theme and their own work contexts. The practitioners were supported by a team of four from the Universities of Glasgow and Edinburgh who provided training and advice on the theory and practice of conducting research into adult literacies. This support comprised a series of workshops in Glasgow where the practitioners learned about research and shared their experiences of conducting it; local support groups where they could discuss progress, issues and shared concerns, and an on-line discussion forum for news, general communication and a space to reflect upon their feelings about doing research.

Whilst the research shed important light on the issue of engaging new learners and on the development benefits that the researchers gained, feedback from the practitioner researchers during and at the end of the project suggested that several aspects of the project design did not meet their support needs in conducting the research. Despite their evident commitment to the work, all struggled to maintain the momentum of the research in the face of demanding or changing jobs, and with levels of management support for the work that fell short of the agreements entered into at the start of the project. Our intent was to spread the research out over a period of ten months so that the research could be embedded in everyday practice in an unhurried manner. However, this timeframe created too long a gap between support meetings, leaving individual practitioners feeling quite isolated, and creating a loss of momentum as ordinary work pressures took precedence over the research. Furthermore the virtual communication environment (Moodle) that we anticipated would plug the support gap, failed to do so. Overall, while there were many
valuable findings emerging from this project, there were deep concerns about the viability of practitioner research in the face of work demands and the unstable employment experienced by ALN practitioners.

In late 2007 Learning Connections decided to return once more to the challenge of practitioner research in literacies work. This time the focus of the practitioner research was to be individual learning plans (ILPs), though the practitioner-researchers could choose their own specific focus. A research team of five from the Universities of Glasgow and Edinburgh successfully bid for the contract, and this time changed the format considerably.

Some of the key changes included:

- Providing increased face to face rather than online support
- Ensuring strong management support for practitioner involvement in the project
- Building several clusters of practitioners working together on one topic
- Having one key researcher work with each cluster
- Reduce the time scale to ten weeks, half a day per week

The change to a high intensity, low duration timescale generated some concern. Would participants and particularly participants' line managers, be comfortable with committing such an amount of time to the project? Would it be possible to provide participants to gain enough background in research to make informed decisions about their projects? Would there be time to produce responsible research in the equivalent of five days work?

The project began with 22 participants, largely from Central Scotland. All were experienced practitioners, though their institutional location varied across FE colleges, community learning and development, voluntary organisations and ALN teams. Whilst the majority had a very limited background in research, the most experienced had completed postgraduate research dissertation in adult literacies. Their work with ILPs varied from no experience because the practitioner was working within a voluntary organisation that did not use them, to considerable experience and the responsibility to redesign the process for the organisation.

Topics chosen by the clusters included looking at participant reactions to computerised ILP tools, assessing a variety of models of ILP, developing a model that could work in literacies and in other sectors, and exploring the use of ILPs in the college setting.

Initial findings include:

- The highly intense, short duration model is an effective way to organise practitioner led action research. While some initial misgivings were expressed by practitioners, once the projects were underway the timeframe created few practical problems.
- The clusters worked well in dealing with the complex tasks associated with research, and certainly spreading the workload helped to fit the clusters’ projects within the available time. It was very helpful to have at least one ‘enthusiast’ within the group.
- The type of research training that can be provided within this model is, however, quite limited. Most clusters were led by practitioners in relation to the topic to be investigated, but the research team led the enquiry process itself. There was simply insufficient time to provide practitioners with the amount of education necessary to design and conduct reliable research. Most cluster participants appeared to be comfortable with this arrangement.
- Most participants had very little previous experience of research, though it was
often very helpful to have one member who had conducted a small project at some point.

- Regarding ILPs, one very clear initial outcome is the huge diversity of approaches taken, both between partnerships and within partnerships. There is very little consistency, and even less if ESOL and CLD are included. Many partnerships now have combined teams covering all three areas but having completely different processes.

There are two sets of implications coming from this project, the first of which concerns practitioner-led action research itself. PLAR does show considerable potential as a model for professional development, though it may be easier to attract interest and institutional support if the research aspect of it is de-emphasised. Perhaps it could be promoted as something akin to 'enquiry based professional development,' which would fit with the limited amount of research training it is possible to provide in this type of initiative.

The second set of implications concerns ILPs. There is huge diversity in the ILP process, and a shared concern that learners do not see ILPs as 'their' process. Learners showed considerable interest in innovative approaches to the ILP process. It would be helpful to develop a 'good practice' model of ILPs clearly laying out shared expectations for the process and identifying areas where ILPs may be less helpful.

*This document was added to the Education-line database in June 2008*