Challenges to sustaining practitioner research in Northern Ireland

Shelley Tracey

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

The position of practitioner research in adult literacy in Northern Ireland is currently uncontested: it is located within a professional development programme which provides the mandatory teaching qualifications for adult literacy and numeracy tutors. However, the future of this programme is uncertain; it is dependent for its continuation on policy decisions about lifelong learning and tutor education. This paper identifies the factors contributing to the success of the practitioner research work and explores the development of alternative spaces for practitioner research in Northern Ireland.

The adult literacy and numeracy tutor qualifications programme described here is based in the School of Education at Queen’s University Belfast. The programme, funded by the Department for Employment and Learning for Northern Ireland (DEL), is a component of DEL’s response to the low levels of literacy and numeracy skills in the adult population as identified by the International Adult Literacy Survey in the 1990s. The purpose of DEL’s Essential Skills for Living Strategy (DEL, 2002) was to enhance adults’ functional literacy and numeracy skills for their personal benefit, as well as to make them more effective contributors to the economy. The focus of the policy has shifted to accommodate the Skills Agenda: funding for literacy and numeracy (Essential Skills) for adults in the community and voluntary sectors is disappearing, and the majority of participants in adult literacy and numeracy learning programmes are not adults enrolled of their own volition, but young people engaged in the government’s Training for Success (TFS) programme. The goal of TFS is to offer young people the 'industry-led qualifications in the skills business seeks today' (TFS, online); these vocational qualifications are supported by compulsory literacy and numeracy classes.

The changing nature of literacy and numeracy learners and the contexts in which they participate is not in itself a threat to the Essential Skills teacher education programme at Queen’s University Belfast. This student-centred programme addresses the diverse needs of its students, practitioners with a range of educational and vocational backgrounds and teaching experience. The model of reflective practice which forms the framework of the courses supports students in identifying their strengths and needs and in engaging in collaborative learning with their peers. The practitioner research programme, which underpins the second or Diploma year of the course, provides opportunities for students to identify and investigate areas of interest or concern in their practice. While the themes of the studies completed to date are diverse, including methodological interventions and case studies, the majority have focused on the factors affecting the motivation and engagement of their learners, particularly younger learners in compulsory programmes. Student evaluations of the research process have suggested that it contributes to their development as reflective practitioners, enhances their knowledge of their peers’ practice, and contributes positively to their relationship with their learners. The following comment is a typical acknowledgement of the part which the research plays in giving learners a voice:
I have enjoyed focusing on the learners’ views of the research process. I found that the learners were delighted to give their opinion about the research questions and to be asked to be involved in the research.

The main threat to the Essential Skills tutor qualification programme is that of short-term funding. Decisions about the continuation of the programme are based on DEL’s annual estimates of the required number of qualified tutors of literacy and numeracy. While DEL funding for the Queen’s University courses has been in place for the past six years, this funding was not allocated to cover the entire period; three separate bids for continuation have been required. Under these circumstances, long-term planning is difficult. While in theory it would be possible for the tutor qualifications programme to continue with the support of the university instead of external funding, this is unlikely. An undergraduate tutor qualifications programme for Essential Skills practitioners, in which a practitioner research programme is embedded, does not address the university’s preference for the prestigious postgraduate programmes. Nor is it valued as high-status academic research which attract funding and prestige.

It should be noted that the Essential Skills Strategy did not allocate any funding for research. The practitioner research programme at Queen’s has played an important role in creating local knowledge about literacy and numeracy in Northern Ireland. By the end of the 2007/2008 academic year, over 120 practitioner research projects in these areas will have been successfully completed. Together these papers create a ‘thick description’ (Geertz, 1973) of local practice. Tracey (2007), focusing on the 86 literacy practitioner research projects which had been completed to date, describes the processes involved in engaging the students and including them in a community of practice of practitioner researchers, thereby enhancing their confidence and identities as practitioners and practitioner researchers. One of the methods of inclusion is involving practitioner researchers from previous student groups in giving input about their experiences and advice. This mentoring process might be applied in the development of a network for practitioner researchers.

The need for such a network is supported by Kitchen and Jeurissen’s declaration (2006, pp. 39) that ‘if we are to take seriously the business of creating an environment which will nurture teacher research then there must be places where the voices of teacher-researchers can be seen and heard beyond their own school gates.’ At present, there are relatively few places beyond the ‘gates’ of the university and local institutions which provide spaces for sharing the results of and ideas about practitioner research. Within the context of the Essential Skills tutor qualifications programme, the outcomes of the practitioner research work have been disseminated to each student cohort in the form of annual collections of papers. Each year, students determine the title of the collection and the sequence of the papers. This process of reviewing and organising peer research might be applied in the development of a practitioner research network outside the boundaries of the university. Individual research projects have also been presented at conferences, including RaPAL (Research and Practice in Adult Literacy) in 2007, a dissemination event at Queen’s University Belfast, and two Learning and Skills Development Agency (LSDA) conferences (2004 and 2008). A book of nine literacy papers by local practitioner researchers on the theme of motivation and engagement is in press (Tracey, 2008).

While the practitioner research has reached an audience beyond the tutor education programme at Queen’s, wider dissemination and participation are required for the development of a robust culture of practitioner research in literacy and numeracy in Northern Ireland. The lack of such a culture is a reflection of the limited power and
autonomy of local practitioners. Many work part-time for relatively low wages, while others teach Essential Skills in isolation in small organisations. These factors, as well as the large base of practitioner research which already exists and might be made more widely available, point to the need for a network for Northern Ireland practitioners and practitioner researchers. This network will be developed through the implementation of a collaborative practitioner research project in the next academic year, drawing on an analysis of the processes and results of the practitioner research programme at Queen’s University Belfast. Current and past students will be engaged in designing a survey and conducting interviews with learners and tutors who have previously been involved in the research. A panel of practitioner researchers and learners will review and present the outcomes.

The following words of one of the participants in the practitioner researcher programme reflects its success, as well as the need for a space for sharing and reflecting on the results:

I feel that the research has helped me understand my responsibility as a practitioner. It is my hope that the findings will help practitioners develop good practice.

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