

## Widening the net: a review of the CETTnet practitioner research group

**Diane Thurston**

Newcastle College  
Success North

### Abstract

This article draws upon the work of two practitioner-researchers who are facilitating a Practitioner Researcher (PR) network (CETTnet) with a small group of Lifelong Learning Sector (LLS) professionals. In this account, the researchers reflect critically upon their own experience, and the power and possibilities of practitioner-research activity in the LLS. The discussion presents the learning curve that the practitioner-researchers identified for themselves, as well as their heightened understanding of potential barriers to PR in the LLS. The article finishes by reflecting upon the early learning of the researchers from this collaborative research project with some tentative directions for further exploration in this area.

### Key words

Practitioner Researchers; Collaborative Research; ESCalate; Lifelong Learning Sector; Research Capacity.

### Introduction

*What is CETTnet?*

CETTnet is a support network, initially funded by ESCalate<sup>1</sup> and by Success North Centre for Excellence in Teacher Training (CETT), which aims to support PR through collaborative working in the Lifelong Learning Sector (LLS).

The launch of CETTnet took place in November 2008, and was followed by a series of meetings and online interaction through the Success North CETT Virtual Learning Environment (VLE). At each subsequent meeting, there were opportunities for delegates to share their own research interests and any ongoing or planned activity, as well as to solicit support for research. The meetings emerged as a safe environment in which to share and explore ideas with colleagues.

Our perspective was that the CETTnet community would develop its own momentum, and we were aware of the inherent potential challenges in such an approach, some of which are explored in this article.

*Why did we establish CETTnet?*

Over recent years, there have been significant changes in the LLS which include the delivery of higher education courses and the growth of dual sector institutions (Bathmaker et al, 2008), and teaching staff are engaged with more formalised research. The profile of Continuing Professional Development (CPD) including research activity has also been raised, with new qualifications and standards for teachers as well as CPD regulations for practitioners to maintain professional standing in England from 1 September 2007 (DfES, 2004; LLUK, August 2007). The Institute for Learning (IfL) plays a key role in the process, holding responsibility for the registration and regulation of licensed practitioners and for defining CPD. The IfL has signalled support for PR as part of recognised CPD (IfL, 2007: p. 9-10). PR is increasingly supported and funded by government agencies and initiatives in UK and elsewhere (Peters, 2004). Within the literature, there is extensive research and support for developing PR capacity (Bartlett, 2002; Clayton et al, 2008; Kemmis, 1988; Kemmis, 2006; Peters, 2004; Stark, 2006), although studies in Further Education (FE) contexts remain rare (Anderson et al, 2003).

*Who are the CETTnetters?*

Success North CETT includes partners from Work Based Learning (WBL), Offender Learning and Skills (OLASS), Adult and Community Learning (ACL), the Voluntary and Community Sector (VCS), Further Education Colleges (FECs) and Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), reflecting the diversity of the sector.

CETTnet aimed to attract practitioners from all settings with the LLS, and the delegates for the first four meetings reflect this diversity (Figure 1):

Figure 1:

Delegates by context	Nov 08	March 2009	May 2009	June 2009
OLASS	1	2		1
ACL	2		1	2
VCS	1			1
HE in FE	6	6	6	5
FE	2	2		1
HEI	2	1	1	

<sup>1</sup> ESCalate is a subject centre within the Higher Education Academy. The Academy is an independent organisation funded by grants from the four UK funding bodies for Higher Education, subscriptions from higher education institutions, and contract income for specific initiatives. ESCalate supports developments in teacher education, education studies, continuing and adult education and lifelong learning, and HE programmes in Further Education colleges.

A range of subject and vocational areas were represented at the meetings: English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL), literacy, numeracy, engineering, art and design, teacher education. A minority represented management roles (quality, human resources, departmental); online contributions came from practitioners in other subject areas (e.g. music, education).

It was clear from the first meeting that people came with different perceptions and goals. Some members joined to discuss their ongoing research or research ideas. Other members did not feel ready to embark on 'research' activity but wanted to get involved or to support other members. A range of suggestions for group activities from members included:

- workshops on research approaches and methodology
- advice/support on routes to publication
- proofreading and editing of work ready for publication
- training on quantitative research methods/tools.

Participants from local HEIs offered support for the group; other HEI delegates were keen to embark on collaborative research projects. Some participants were managers seeking information/direction in supporting research activity within their own organisations.

### **What view of PR informed CETTnet?**

Initial literature reviews highlighted widespread support for PR. However, debates within the literature about the definitions, value and goals of PR reflect this as a contested area. An understanding of this debate is crucial to an understanding of the aims and challenges to capacity building, and valuable to us in our aim of supporting capacity through CETTnet.

Within the literature, it is noted that Action Research (AR) has been influential for '*decades*' (Bartlett and Burton, 2006: p. 396), stretching back to the work of Stenhouse in the late 1960s/early 1970s (Bartlett, 2002). For Kemmis (2006), AR is the '*greatest achievement*' of educational research. Support for the benefits of teacher reflection, experimentation, practitioner access to '*new ideas, opportunities for experimentation and sharing experiences within school cultures*' (Muijs and Lindsay, 2008: p. 195) is located within the literature. The recent Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC)-funded Teaching and Learning Research Project (TLRP) and Transforming Learning Cultures in Further Education (TLC-FE) projects have identified a diversity of cultures within the sector, a strong rationale for an increase in PR within these settings, and the adoption of a bottom-up perspective to research.

For some writers the terms AR and PR may be used interchangeably, although increasingly, AR is replaced by the '*more fashionably termed PR*' (Bartlett and Burton, 2006: p. 398) securing '*its place within educational discourse*' in the last decade (Bartlett and Burton, 2006: p. 395). Criticism of educational research in the 1990s, noting the '*sorry state of educational research*' (Ball, 1995: p. 107), supported the development of PR. It was suggested that '*educational researchers write mainly for one another*' (Hargreaves, 1996: p. 6), distancing potential 'users' from research:

*'...trainee teachers soon spot the yawning gap between theory and practice and the low value of research as a guide to the solution of practical problems.'*

(Hargreaves, 1996: p. 5)

Thus, both initial and in-service teachers may feel excluded from the research community and question the relevance and value of top-down research.

The location of PR within the workplace as a '*study of one's own professional practice*' is stressed and is undertaken '*with a view to improving practice for the benefit of others*', (Bartlett and Burton, 2006: p. 395) - presumably for learners in the setting, and for teachers and learners beyond the workplace under investigation. Thus concerns of the researcher may tend to '*practical questions*' (ibid. p. 397). This practical view is contested elsewhere, with PR embraced as a social movement (Bartlett, 2002: p. 529) within a critical theory tradition, and suggestions that greater political control of research may threaten quality (Gorard, 2002).

However, views of PR vary across the literature and extensive debate with regard to its value, quality and goals, and issues around capacity. Teachers may not be used to working in research traditions and lack research skills (Bartlett and Burton, 2006: p. 396). Thus, research may result in '*descriptions of practice*' or '*repetition of previously held views*' (ibid: p. 396). For others, such criticism results from narrow definitions of research which do not accept '*different types of research with different purposes*' (ibid: p. 397). Such criticism may lead to practitioners who lack confidence in their research skills and may not view PR as worthwhile unless it is '*conducted at a high standard of rigour*' (Clayton and O'Brien et al, 2008: p. 79).

However, a developmental focus is stressed elsewhere, with PR viewed as a '*stepping off point*', and descriptive approaches to data collection and reporting - characteristic of PR - viewed as part of an interpretivist research tradition (Bartlett and Burton, 2006: p. 396). Action research is defended for '*potential to produce more emancipated forms of educational practice*' (Clayton and O'Brien et al, 2008: p. 74), playing a significant role in empowering practitioners and ensuring they are more than '*trusted servants*' (Avis, 2002: p. 329). In this view, reflection on teaching beliefs and research on individual practice is not enough; teachers need to '*reflect critically on the wider institutional, policy, social and cultural issues that enable or constrain their practice*' (Morton et al, 2006: p. 5). Such views were influential in the approach to the CETTnet group.

### **Barriers to PR capacity building**

### *A 'non-traditional' setting for research?*

Time, workload and lack of teacher empowerment may be judged to impair action research: *'Teachers struggle to implement action research within contextual conditions that are inconsistent with the process of teacher enquiry'* (Peters, 2004: p. 536).

Barriers faced may include a lack of awareness of research funding, concerns about fitting research in – particularly at a time of work intensification in sector. These issues came through in recent IfL research on practitioner views of CPD provision, where concerns included:

- time and resources for teachers to carry out meaningful CPD
- the 'CPD offer' that colleges and other providers make
- the mismatch between an employer's perspective of teacher needs and reality [IfL website, accessed 9<sup>th</sup> Feb 2009].

In some cases, a barrier to the building of research capacity in the LLS may also be cynicism about *'value and purposes of such schemes'* (Bartlett, 2002: p. 538). It is also suggested that CPD activity, including research, is unlikely to have a lasting impact without organisational support (Muijs and Lindsay, 2008: p. 198).

### **Capacity building and leadership**

*'Tensions and challenges within professional groupings, cultures and contexts can impede action learning, and hence have a negative impact on professional development'*

(Stark, 2006: p. 23)

Thus, important aspects of practitioner-research capacity building programmes are:

- engaging senior management
- encouraging managers and leaders to provide essential infrastructures for PR
- for senior managers to become more active in disseminating research and acting on outcomes (Davies et al, 2007: p. 6)

The project group will next undertake a review which will touch upon the *'learning organisation'* (Beattie, 2002: p. 182), conditions to support this (Jameson, 2008: p. 13), and potential strengths and weaknesses of the model.

### **Contextual barriers**

*'Imagination is becoming the first victim of an ever-increasing technological rationality within educational institutions'*

(Harris, 2002: p. 60)

It is important to recognise barriers which may be viewed as specific/characteristic of the sector, and which were noted by facilitators and practitioners within the CETTnet group.

The experience of managers and practitioners within LLS has been one of *'endless change'* from the 1990s to present (Edward et al, 2007). A range of external pressures operate on the LLS, and are widely noted in literature (Smyth, 2002; Ball, 2003; Coffield, 2006; Coffield 2008). Within teacher education, control of curriculum and delivery is increasingly defined centrally (DfES, 2006; Simmons and Thompson, 2008; Thompson and Robinson, 2008). Such control is not limited to teacher education and government policy within the sector has been acknowledged as radical in impact:

*'Interventions by policymakers to define what learning should involve and how it should be carried out are re-defining what it means to be a teacher or lecturer in all aspects of the education and training system.'*

(Bathmaker and Avis, 2005: p. 48)

This has been allied to a discourse of deficit in reference to the LLS within government discourse (DfES, 2002; DfES, 2003; DfES, 2004; DfES, 2006). The impact of such language may add to conformist pressures, and certainly appear to imbue the discourse of a number of managers and practitioners within the LLS. Even processes ostensibly put in place to support teacher learning may be subverted within a culture of control (Avis, 2002; O'Leary, 2006).

There is some evidence that increasing accountability may lead to normative behaviours (Taylor, Neu and Peters, 2002: p. 47), and the project team were keen to explore impact of policy focus on PR in terms of the amount, quality and purposes of research conducted within the context. There is some evidence that the accountability 'tradition', as it has developed in FE contexts, may impede PR development. Concepts such as accountability are presented as the state operating in a 'stewardship' role, ensuring that taxpayers receive value for money, and that those delivering services at local or national level are responsible to a range of stakeholders, including parents, students, staff, and government agencies. Thus, accountability is aligned with the discourse of value-for-money, efficiency, economy, effectiveness and equity: *'the government's much stated desire to achieve "something for something" in the form of tangible improvements in outcomes in return for increased investment'* (Wilkins, 2002: p. 313). In adopting such a stance, a direct relationship between financial resource management and effectiveness is postulated (Glover and Levacic, 2003: p. 91). However, just as the direct relationship between resource management and learning outcomes is difficult to show, and even described as *'virtually unresearchable'* (Wilkins, 2002: p. 313) a similar range of difficulties may be encountered in evidencing the effectiveness/impact of PR on learning outcomes. These concerns were reflected in the discourse of the practitioners within the CETTnet group.

Pressure to conform (Glover and Law, 2003: p. 46) may result in *'approved'* research practice and *'palatable'* findings for external bodies performing the roles of policymakers, enforcers and funders – a potent form of the *'principal-agent model'* (Ladd and Zelli, 2002: p. 200). Such pressure may be particularly felt within the LLS where the rise of *'new public management'* has had

a far-reaching impact on practice (Avis, 2002: p. 340). *'Dilemmas, pressures and constraints'* experienced by teachers and educational leaders in the face of policy reform (Smyth, 2002) may be particularly acute with a shift from *'benign neglect'* to a *'series of high profile initiatives'* (Morton et al, 2006: p. 9) - comparable to *'innovation overload'* in schools (Glover and Law, 2003: p. 46).

Research findings suggest externally-imposed policy is difficult for institutions to resist (Ladd and Zelli, 2002), but has less impact than bottom-up initiatives (Glover and Law, 2003: p. 46), and may also create movement towards isomorphism (Taylor, Neu and Peters, 2002). Externally-imposed policy in such views becomes a limiting factor, resulting in a focus on *'narrow, instrumental ends'* (Clayton and O'Brien et al, 2008: p. 73). Thus, PR may be reduced to *'a vehicle for domesticating students and teachers to conventional forms of schooling'* (Kemmis, 2006: p. 459). Will the goals of PR as a *'participatory democratic form of educational research for educational improvement'* (Kemmis, 1988: p. 167) be distorted as result of policy activity, with *'research perspectives and research findings increasingly tightly tied to the policy agendas of government'* (Ball, 1995: p. 109)? Or will managers and practitioners respond *'creatively'*, and engage in *'critical participation'* (Harris, 2002: p. 60)?

In the next stage of the research project, the team will undertake a further review of documentation to include a focus on the operationalisation of the meaning and purposes of PR in policy documents, and the resultant impact on the understanding and practice of PR by practitioners and managers, particularly with regard to criticality and the exploratory nature of research.

### **What have we learnt?**

The CETTnet group is at an early stage of development, and the following points represent initial findings.

#### *A lot of research activity is going on in the LLS*

A wide range of research activity is already being conducted at a variety of levels among the CETTnet group (including action research, research projects as part of accredited programmes e.g. BA and MA, production of articles for journals etc). There is a strong desire for involvement in research activity from other practitioners, and some managers. This represents a level of interest/enthusiasm which could and should be harnessed and supported.

#### *Varied personnel*

Group members also reflected research activity taking place in varied organisations and in collaboration between the sectors represented (OLASS, HEI, FE, HE in FE and ACL). The personnel of the group reflected a northern reach, with delegates coming from the North East, North West, and Yorkshire and Humberside.

#### *A differentiated approach?*

Both discipline-based and pedagogical research projects were being undertaken by CETTnet members. How can both be supported?

#### *Support structures are variable*

The research activity currently undertaken by CETTnet group members enjoys different levels of support. To develop this research activity further, to support collaborative research and to ensure that PR has further impact within and beyond the organisations where it is taking place, support structures, including from leaders, are required.

#### *Time and work intensification are a consistent factor*

Work intensification was strongly felt by CETTnet members. They experienced constrained time and opportunities for meetings, collaboration between members and for following up research activity. The group facilitators were aware of these issues, responding with a flexible approach to the scheduling of meetings and online meetings.

#### *Confidence*

Practitioners in the LLS may lack confidence in their research abilities and skills. Even the term *'research'* has the capacity to strike fear (and/or alienation/disengagement) in practitioners. The CETTnet group is exploring needs in this respect and looking at the option of research mentors for practitioners, in addition to the support network offered by the CETTnet members. A related issue for the CETTnet group is the question of *'peripheral participation'*. The group currently consists of a small core, and a range of members with differing levels of affiliation to the group, some of whom have expressed interest in research activity but a degree of nervousness about engaging in research activity themselves. The group needs to explore how to accommodate these differing needs and develop the confidence of practitioners.

#### *Expectations of delegates*

The facilitators felt the need to manage member expectations and were concerned that some members appeared to expect a level of direction which exceeded the function of the group or was even at odds with the ambition that the group would become self-directed. These are issues to explore as the group matures. The facilitators have reflected on the group model adopted (Davies et al, 2007) and are exploring adaptations with group members.

### **Some conclusions**

There is an appetite for research activity in the LLS and some individuals and institutions are actively exploring opportunities and approaches to supporting research practice. Both CETTnet facilitators and group members felt a potential shift is in operation in the sector and this development should be viewed as an opportunity to grasp and be supported. It is important to highlight what an increase in PR activity could offer the sector:

- assisting organisational development
- encouraging professional development
- developing collaborative patterns of working
- leading to the production of useful research
- generating 'products' such as networks, websites and, of course, research reports (Davies et al, 2007: p. 9).

Early findings from the CETTnet group suggest that there are additional, at times 'non-tangible' benefits, including increased staff morale, as well as increased collegiality between practitioners and institutions across settings within the sector. Ultimately, increased research capacity in the LLS can move practitioners and learning providers into a position from where they are able to re-define what learning should involve and how it should be carried out.

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