

Supporting and developing a collaborative research community

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'If we are serious about making the most of learning opportunities, including the idea of improving them, then we need very good information about what people currently do, why they do it, and why they keep doing it.'

(James & Diment, 2003: p. 407)

Background to the project

Whilst there is a wealth of research on FE by HE researchers, there is little generated by practitioners within the lifelong learning sector (LLS). In this sense, the LLS is a non-traditional setting for research, and we are aware that there may be challenges to face, and, potentially, a need for the 'culture shift' identified by Anderson et al (2003).

The recent ESRC-funded TLRP and TLC-FE projects have identified a diversity of cultures within the sector, and a strong rationale for an increase in practitioner research within these settings, and particularly the adoption of a bottom-up perspective to research.

To begin to address this imbalance and to develop research capacity in the PCET sector, the authors submitted a successful application for funding to ESCalate* with the aim of engaging practitioners within the CETT in research, and support them in researching their working contexts.

*ESCalate is part of the Higher Education Academy. The Academy is an independent organisation funded by grants from the four UK funding bodies for HE, 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.

The CETTnet community

The project aims to build capacity through the creation of a research culture amongst practitioners, moving away from the image of teaching staff as 'trusted servants rather than empowered professionals' (Anderson et al, quoting Avis, 2003: p. 502). This project could provide a timely opportunity in which to develop that capacity, creating and providing support for:

- a dynamic action research network (CETTnet) which harnesses the experiences and expertise of practitioners throughout the post-compulsory sector
- a research culture, increasing the capacity of practitioners to critically evaluate research completed elsewhere
- a forum for the exploration of diversity of cultures within the sector by practitioners to lead to more informed practice. This will build upon the work exploring FE culture as part of TLRP.

This project is supported by Success North Centre for Excellence in Teacher Training (CETT), and uses its existing Moodle site. The common aim of raising the standards of both initial teacher training and continuing professional development needs might be most effectively achieved through research-based strategies and materials derived from situated practice, and the medium will form the research hub, both as a repository for current research and as a dynamic forum for discussion and critical analysis.

The launch of CETTnet took place in November 2008. Following further publicity and invitations to participate, a networking event is now planned in which ideas and areas of interest can be shared with a view to support the research process.

A dissemination plan will inform the engagement of the LLS community, enthuse practitioners in research and aim for an innovative approach/methodology for the presentation of research findings.

It is envisaged that the project will generate:

- a reflective record recording the development of the CETTnet research community and lessons learnt
- research papers, and resources of interest to the sector, the ESCalate community, and those who work in the HE sector supporting FE partners
- a minimum of two workshops, with a process and product focus: outlining the research process, experience and the findings which resulted
- briefings from CETTnet members to other practitioners, including management, within their own contexts (OLAS, ACL, voluntary sector, WBL).

CETTnet members will be supported and encouraged to move towards to publication. There is a growth of vehicles for such research, and the CETTnet team are excited at the prospect of submitting collaborative work completed to this journal, which fulfils an important role of welcoming submissions from the LLS sector widely.

Bibliography

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