University of Salford
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ILIA

Innovative Learning in Action

Issue Seven: New Academics Engaging with Action Research 2

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Education Development Unit

Introduction

Dear Colleagues

Welcome to this seventh issue of ***Innovative Learning and Action*** (ILIA) which celebrates and disseminates some of the work produced by recent cohorts on the Postgraduate Certificate in Higher Education Practice and Research programme. As part of their assessment in the second module, *Learning Design and Enquiry* participants engage in action research completing a planned, first cycle of what is essentially an iterative process. Participants inevitably confront action research from different perspectives largely based on past research experience. Some perceive themselves as 'novice' researchers generally, when they encounter this paradigm, whilst others are seasoned researchers steeped in more traditional approaches. Part of the assessment therefore addresses evaluation and reflection on action research processes as they have been experienced and this is included in the work presented.

The insights generated are the product of genuine concern, interest and enthusiasm in responding to the challenges of teaching and learning that pervade Higher Education today. This small sample of papers demonstrates a heightened awareness of issues; the student voice is apparent but it is reinforced in conversation with academics. The papers show how action research builds on the authors' willingness to collaborate with their students and indeed, other stakeholders in seeking mutual understanding of complexity and in formulating ideas to enhance the quality of the student learning experience.

Each of the contributions has direct relevance to both policy and practice encouraging readers to reflect on key issues in the context of Widening Participation. The transition to HE is clearly a fundamental concern. Authors explore support systems for both students and their workplace managers in the challenging context of secondment to study in pursuit of CPD; the potential of FE/HE teaching exchange as a form of professional development to enable lecturers and teachers to facilitate their students' journey across the sectors and the possibilities for enhancing the academic writing skills of students.

One common theme is the complexity encountered in negotiating cultural boundaries in different contexts – the boundaries between workplace and place of study, between one educational sector and another and between one style of communication and another.
A final contribution prompts us to consider the complexities of teaching and learning across international boundaries in exploring the potential for enhancing learning through the use of video-clips in a distance learning programme.

I hope you will enjoy these papers which I feel provide much food for thought. I am also sure that the authors would welcome approaches from colleagues either within or outside their respective disciplines who are interested in similar areas of practice.

Dr Viv Caruana

Module Leader, Learning Design and Enquiry

Postgraduate Certificate in Higher Education Practice and Research

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Notes for Contributors

Submission details (for papers and 'snapshots')

We will be pleased to receive papers, case studies and 'snapshots' which demonstrate innovation in learning and teaching at the University of Salford. Potential contributors new to writing might find the following article 'Writing Academic Papers: the *Clinical Effectiveness in Nursing* experience' useful:

http://www.harcourt-international.com/journals/suppfile/flat/cein-writing.pdf

Length

Papers and case studies should be a maximum of 3,500-4,000 words without references.

'Snapshots' should be a maximum of 600 words without references.

For both papers and 'Snapshots' authors should include a full word count, (preferably with and without references) with submission.

Page size

All submissions should be left-right justified on an A4 page with 3.5cm margin on the left and 2.54 margins at the top, bottom and on the right

Text formatting

Normal text: 11 point Arial font

Title and Authors:

Title: Arial 14 point bold centred across the full width of the page

Author(s) name(s): Arial 12 point non-bold. We also recommend you add your e-mail address using the standard house style.

Sections: headings in Arial 12 point bold with only the initial letters of significant words capitalised (Note: determiners such as 'the' 'or' 'a' are not capitalised unless they are the first word of the heading).

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Page numbers, headers and footers, footnotes

DO NOT include page numbers and headers/footers in your submission. These will be added when the publication is assembled. Footnotes should be in Arial 8 point.

Abstract

Papers and case studies: an abstract of a maximum of 200 words summarising the context should be included.

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Figures or tables should be inserted at the appropriate point in your text and have a figure caption in normal Arial 11 point font, at the bottom and left justified.

Quotations

Use single quotation marks throughout unless quoting within a quotation. Substantive quotes should be indented with no quotation marks.

Keywords

Include three or four key words to increase the likelihood of potential readers searching the literature accessing your article.

Language, style and content

Please make sure that your paper is in clear, readable and proper English. Please make consistent use of British dialect of English. Please write for a cross-disciplinary and international audience.

- Write in a straightforward style. Use simple sentence structure. Try to avoid long sentences and complex sentence structure
- Use common and basic vocabulary and avoid jargon
- Briefly explain or define all technical terms
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For further advice and examples regarding gender and other personal attributes please visit the British Sociological Association website (http://www.britsoc.org.uk)

Acknowledgements

Acknowledgements should be included under a separate heading before the references at the end of the paper. For example,

We thank Dr. Joe Bloggs and Prof. Joanne Bloggs of the University of Salford for their comments on earlier versions of this paper. This project was made possible by funding from the University of Salford TLQIS.

References and Citations

Within the text, references should be indicated using (author, year). If several papers by the same author and from the same year are cited, a, b, c, etc. should be put after the year of publication.

If the reference is to a piece by two authors, both should be cited, for example (Reynolds and Trehan, 2000). If there are more than two authors, et al should be used. The full list of authors should appear under References at the end of the paper.

The references should be listed in full at the end of the paper in the following standard form:

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For Articles: Reynolds, M. and Trehan, K. (2000) Assessment: a critical perspective, *Studies in Higher Education,* 25, pp.267-278

For Chapters: Walker, R. (1987) Techniques for Research, in: R.Murphy & H.Torrance (Eds) *Evaluating Education: Issues and Methods*

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Can teaching exchange between HE and FE offer an effective model of Professional Development for Lecturers and Teachers?

Kathryn Allan

k.l.allan@salford.ac.uk
School of English, Sociology, Politics and Contemporary History (ESPaCH)

Abstract

This paper reports on an FE/HE cross-sector teaching exchange, the purpose of which was to explore its potential as a model for continuing professional development (CPD). It considers the local and national context in which the exchange took place, describes the methodology used, and reflects on the experiences of the participants and feedback from students and other staff members. It is argued that teaching exchange offers a valuable model for professional development with potential benefits for both staff and students. The paper concludes with some recommendations for 'best practice' in cross-sector teaching exchange and suggestions for further research.

Background

My personal interest in the link between FE and HE stems from an involvement in outreach activities and mirrors a general concern among linguists in academia that there is a lack of continuity from the English Language A-level to undergraduate curricula. In terms of outreach I have been involved in a programme of school visits and other activities to promote awareness of the University of Salford's language programmes. I have also been involved with 'Enrichment Day', a University-hosted event for students from local schools and colleges, and have delivered 'taster' workshops in FE institutions. These activities have proved an effective way of gaining some awareness of A-level students' knowledge and understanding of the discipline whilst establishing working relationships with teachers who are keen for their students to engage with HE lecturers.

Whilst this kind of cross-sector liaison is valued generally in the post-compulsory sector, there are also discipline-specific reasons for the interest shown by English Language teachers. In my own cross-sector engagements FE colleagues have cited a lack of opportunities for A-level English Language students to take part in activities related specifically to their course. For example, English Literature students can be taken on theatre trips or be offered screenings of films, but these are not directly relevant for their English Language peers. Furthermore, my experience is that it is relatively common for English Language A-level teachers to come from a literature background with limited training in language study.

As an HE lecturer I have found that students sometimes find the transition from A-level difficult, and are surprised by the content of degree programmes, since the 'cores' of the discipline are very different in the two sectors. For example, some A-level curricula include creative writing as a key element, but this is generally not regarded as a key subject within the HE linguistics curriculum. Conversely, students often have little or no experience of areas that are key to level 1 programmes such as the history of the language, syntax, phonetics etc, and this leads to the perception among HE staff that the A-level lacks relevance to language study at undergraduate level. Ben Knights (2005:2) records:

[English language academics] agreed that the rise of English Language and Language and Literature at AS and A2 has had a major effect on the knowledge and understanding of many students… but you could not make too much of what you assumed students would have learned. (Film Studies or Sociology A-levels were, it was felt, quite often a better preparation.)

My own feeling is that, with the rise in popularity of language study, there is an acute need for teachers of both A-level and undergraduate programmes to be better informed about their respective curricula and cultural contexts to inform complementary curriculum development and student support in the transition to HE.

Insights from the literature

Raising Aspirations, Widening Participation and Continuation

Widening Participation in HE has led to general concern about the retention of students in recent years. The 'Aimhigher' programme - a HEFCE initiative which facilitates participation in HE and FE by students from all backgrounds – embraces the collaborative ideal between and within compulsory and post- compulsory sectors:

'*Aimhigher* is enabling further and higher education to become part of the school experience for many pupils. In the same way, experience in the wider learning community serves to inform the mission of higher education and the way that it is delivered. At one level this means that learners have a more integrated learning experience wherever they are in the system. At a deeper level it means that the boundaries between institutions and sectors are more permeable, with the learner taking centre stage'. (HEFCE 2006/02:5)
Having raised student aspirations through such initiatives as 'Aimhigher' the challenge then becomes retaining them in the education loop. One of the most common reasons for withdrawal from

HE, particularly among students from non-traditional backgrounds, is a mismatch of expectations once on programme. A recent report by the Higher Education Academy underlines how seriously this impacts upon students' completion rates:

'It appears that the more students know about their institutions and courses before enrolling, the less likely they are to consider dropping out… the likelihood of withdrawal was considerably affected by… students' prior knowledge of their institution and their course, and how stimulating they felt their teaching to be. 41% of students who knew little or nothing about their course before enrolment had thought of withdrawing, compared with 25% of those who knew a moderate amount or a lot'. (http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/news/20_4492.htm)

A closer relationship between HE and FE practitioners may foster more familiarity with respective cultures and course content which in turn, could go some way to addressing the retention and continuation issue since better informed practitioners will presumably be better able to advise and support students in the transition from FE to HE. Several projects have been developed in recognition of this aim, for example, the FE-HE Interface Project based in Central London states that its aims are "to find effective methods of bringing HE and FE together to encourage progression and retention for FE students" and "to bring staff from FE and HE together in order to ensure mutual understanding through curriculum and staff development" (http://www.hefeinterface.org.uk/).

Professional development

Provision for professional development appears to vary across the sector. Greenaway and Harding (1978:12) quote a respondent in their research: '…The trouble is that the phrase 'staff development' is so all embracing that… it could be anything and everything' (Greenaway and Harding 1978:12, quoted in Webb 1996:1). Stefani (2003:9) observes that:

'…staff and educational development defies simple definitions owing to its complex and constantly evolving nature. On the one hand, the intention of staff and educational development is to offer the opportunities for all staff and students to develop their full potential. On the other hand, these same opportunities must fit with the strategic goals of the institution in the rapidly changing context of higher education (HE). Managing the complex relationship between an individual's development and institutional strategy and planning presents a major challenge.' (Stefani 2003:9)

Staff development currently tends towards both "…centrally designed and directed initiatives increasingly linked to institutional objectives and priorities…" and "…linkage of staff development to… personal career planning, including the use of portfolios…" (UCoSDA, 1994: 10-11). Whilst centralised staff development is 'delivered' through sessions designed to fill gaps in knowledge and skills, the personal development planning (PDP) model tends to offer staff more freedom to actively set up their own 'bespoke' development activities. In this way, the PDP model might be more effective in encouraging staff to explore their own potential and reflect on their professional practice in order to develop and enhance it (Schon, 1983). In considering the most successful kinds of staff development, Rowland observes that:

'…the heart of my enquiry must be my interest, just as with any other intellectual pursuit. I am sure that there are many ways in which my teaching leaves much to be desired. But if I am to develop it, I have to start with what interests me… As with any form of learning or research, I want to start from my interests and strengths. That way I am able to maintain and extend my interest. Furthermore, since learning about teaching and learning is a critical activity, I can only pursue it when I am committed to reflecting upon it in some depth, asking awkward questions and being open to change. I can only do these things when I am really interested'. (Rowland 2000: 121)

This is an important perspective which seems to validate teaching exchange as a professional development activity. However, it also suggests that in terms of its potential for professional development, teaching exchange should be a self-selecting activity, since it will only encourage reflection in individuals who are motivated to take part.

Teaching Exchange

A number of exchange-based projects exist, and these have been useful in contextualising and scoping our teaching exchange. One project based in Scotland involved staff from schools and colleges of education, examining the possibilities for secondment. The context of this project is quite different from ours, since it was concerned very much with linking theory and practice for practitioners in the discipline of Education, but there are important parallels in the issues that were identified and the potential benefits that were anticipated, which Gatherer (1988) describes as:

'…the professional benefits to be gained by teachers and lecturers [in taking part in secondments, exchanges and short-term contract appointments across school and college of education sectors]: experience of different working environments; the opportunity for college lecturers to test out theories of teaching and learning and for schoolteachers to undertake research and curriculum development; personal professional development as practitioners; and the 'replenishment' of their 'professional commitment'. The system would gain because their mid-career experience would enhance the quality of pupils' education and students' training, and some of the prevailing prejudices against the colleges' work would be dispelled'. (Gatherer 1988:1)

Another comparable project, the FE/HE Staff Exchange Project (part of the West of Scotland Wider Access Forum) (Hinks 2005:7) suggests barriers to organising large-scale exchange including over-ambitious aims, staff preconceptions and lack of awareness of the need for exchanges between sectors and time constraints.

Defining the project

The focus of this action research is a two-day teaching exchange involving myself and a colleague at a local College. We met at an outreach event in 2005 when her class attended a workshop I delivered, and we kept in contact after this. We had been interested in doing this exchange for some time, prompted by a colleague's reference to a HEA article on 'up-down teaching', or teaching swaps between colleagues in HE and FE, that were cited as a helpful way to find out more about the other sector and explore teaching practice.

Primarily, my colleague and I were inspired by the collaborative nature of the project. We have similar interests, and felt intuitively that taking part in an exchange would be an interesting and challenging experience which would give us the chance to reflect on our teaching practices outside the 'comfort zone'. Knight observes that "the more we feel that the ways in which we learn are similar to the ways in which students learn the better…" (Knight 2002:36)

Having delivered sessions to A-level students in the past I have increasingly felt that my input was 'dropped' into the syllabus rather than being informed by the students' background and previous knowledge and understanding. Thus I have begun to talk more to teachers before sessions about the most appropriate and relevant content, and have become increasingly aware of a need to be better informed about course content and the FE sector in general. Like my exchange colleague I am also interested in how teaching differs in different contexts and at different levels, and was keen to explore this issue further across sectors. My FE partner also welcomed the opportunity to return to research in an area that she had studied at Masters level, but which is not part of her FE teaching portfolio, and to further her knowledge of English Language as a discipline.

Collecting data

In order to prompt reflection on our experience of the teaching exchange we decided to compile a list of pre- and post-session questions and noted our own answers to them. We also discussed our feelings about the project at various times before and after the sessions, but we did not record our discussions because we felt this inappropriate in view of the supportive relationship that we hoped to enjoy as exchange partners.

After each exchange session students were asked to complete evaluation forms which we had compiled collaboratively. Since the research question was about professional development we were also keen to get feedback from other staff members about the project. A sample of six academic colleagues were approached (3 from each sector). We wanted staff members to feel comfortable with the data collection instruments we used and therefore consulted them on this. All of the teachers in FE elected to fill in questionnaires by hand, while my colleagues took part in structured interviews where I noted down and then transcribed their responses. Although alternative collection instruments might have yielded more data we felt, that at this stage of the project, it was more important to acquire a small amount of data which would give an impression of whether or not the project was feasible. Interestingly, the Mapping, Tracking and Bridging Project based in Scotland, which focused on the FE/HE interface and student progression, also began with a programme of informal research to gauge staff attitudes and opinions (Beveridge et al. 2004:4).

Whilst we had some fairly concrete aims regarding the research we were acutely aware of the potential ethical issues surrounding the teaching exchange and so devoted much effort to discussing and agreeing the 'rules' of the exchange to ensure that neither group of students would be disadvantaged in any way. The exchange was organised as a one-off 'swap' of classes. The sessions had to be given within the normal teaching timetable and in regular teaching rooms. They had to blend in with the existing curriculum and be directly relevant to the students' assessments, whilst at the same time, allowing each of us to bring our own interests and perspectives to the subject matter. We agreed the topics we would cover together, and had a series of meetings to plan the sessions collaboratively to ensure that they would be relevant.

Discussion of findings

Our experiences and professional development

I believe that the value of our exchange is the relative ease with which we were able to organise it. Because the exchange sessions involved only a one-off 'swap', and because we were both present during exchange sessions, we did not have to gain the same kind of permissions that might have otherwise been involved (a concern raised by one colleague in HE). Whilst the project did add to both workloads this was not a major problem because only a single session was undertaken. The fact that we exchanged teaching meant that it did not feel so much like an extra pressure, since the exchange partner was contributing a session in return.

An important factor in the success of the exchange was the fact that it was based on a personal link, and organised directly by participants; while this way of working can be problematic in longer term projects (see comments in Hinks 2005:9), it was a fast and effective way of organising our exchange. I would contend that personal links can lead to stronger and more lasting links between institutions and sectors as long as they are recognised and supported adequately by the institutions; the reverse, i.e. the implementation of 'higher level' policies to encourage personal commitment to developing links with individuals in other institutions, is not always equally successful.

Both my FE colleague and I feel strongly that taking part in a teaching exchange has been a positive and valuable experience. As we had anticipated, the collaborative aspect has been important in reinforcing an equitable and supportive partnership. It has also given us an opportunity to discuss teaching and learning practices, and the cross-institution and cross-sector perspective has been particularly helpful. We both feel much better informed about each others' sector, and it has been illuminating to think about the similarities and differences in culture. I felt very strongly that much of this was true before we had given the exchange sessions, and that I had already benefited from a much better understanding of the way in which A-level students are taught and the kind of material they cover. I think this is an important point: the exchange sessions themselves are obviously the focus of any teaching exchange, but in the context of professional development they are a mid-point in the process rather than the beginning.

In terms of the sessions themselves, the project has been valuable in a number of ways. Because we attended each other's sessions, we were able to observe each other's teaching.

The exchange sessions were not set up as teaching observations per se and it is interesting to note that because this was not the focus of the sessions, and because we were from different institutions and different sectors, neither of us felt any pressure to 'perform' – a pressure which we had both experienced in the past in the observation setting whether for appraisal or developmental purposes. Ours was a much less threatening and more relaxed form of observation. For me, the session also prompted reflection on how I relate to my students as a group. The fact that the sessions ran in the usual teaching slots made me realise how rare it is for me to bring in someone to teach *my* class, and I had not anticipated feeling protective of *my* students In this respect, I think the exchange felt very different from having a guest lecturer, which tends to be billed as a separate event from usual teaching.

There are also longer term benefits which I feel we will reflect upon in our future practice - I feel strongly that the project will help me to think carefully about the programmes and modules I teach and how these relate to A-level study, and this is particularly relevant to my Level 1 teaching. Biggs points out that:

Teaching builds on the known, it must not reject it. In deep learning, new learning connects with old, so teaching should exploit interconnectedness: make the connections explicit…, choose familiar examples first, get students to build on their own experiences, draw and explain parallels while teaching, use cross-references, design curricula that draw out cross-connections, and so on. (Biggs 2003:76)

Colleagues' views on the exchange

The importance, but also absence of the 'inter-connectedness' noted by Biggs (2003) is echoed in the comments of one colleague in HE:

We need to link with what students have done before; this would make them more confident, and would be mutually beneficial. The teaching culture is so different for them, and it has little relationship with what they've done before. This can make them feel deskilled. Even bright students say things like 'I know that because I did it at A-level but I can't mention that here.' We get them here with A-levels, then immediately discard and discount these and say they're worthless. There is no sense of building on existing skills because we don't know anything about these, and instead we concentrate on the skills they haven't got.

Another colleague goes further in saying that *'The cardinal sin of the HE teacher is expecting students to come 'pre-loaded' and then ranting and raving when they haven't got this knowledge/experience and blaming the students for the differences'.*

Clearly, HE lecturers' in this project were generally conscious of the need to be better informed and data suggests that FE lecturers feel that greater awareness of what and how their students will study at undergraduate level can only enhance their learning experience and better prepare them for transition. Several FE colleagues comment about being better able to advise students about progression:

knowledge of curricula would allow us to advise our students better for HE and perhaps suggest reading lists and so forth.

However, we would suggest that awareness of the differences in material and approach may also inform the way students are taught at A-level, and this is evident from my collaborator's post-session comments, where she asserts that:

the experience has given me a lot to think about and has definitely been beneficial to my A-level teaching.

More generally, data gathered from questionnaires completed by colleagues after the exchange sessions suggest a consensus that they would consider participating in a teaching exchange. Five out of the six staff members in HE said that they would take part in an exchange The one colleague who did not anticipate participation nonetheless recognised potential benefits:

It could be good for all concerned (staff and students) to get different perspectives on teaching styles and material… It might be useful to think about changing teaching style, but is not something that I want to do… it probably would benefit the students [if I were more familiar with the FE sector], in which case it would benefit me. The thing is that the aims of FE are so different from those of HE that knowing about them is not necessarily helpful, but it might benefit students if I took account of these differences.

This comment resonates with my own view that there are difficulties in the relationship between the sectors and the way their practitioners are perceived. It is important to be aware of covert attitudes which see the sectors as part of a hierarchy which are largely the product of differences in culture, but seem to have important implications for the process of encouraging dialogue and working towards a more integrated educational system. Ebbutt et al (2000) discusses the way in which perceived types of knowledge are linked to the way in which different kinds of teaching practitioners are perceived, and argues that this effects a 'hierarchy' in education:

'…there has developed over time… a hierarchical valuing of knowledge… This most valued knowledge, it is argued, is the propositional or declarative knowledge (knowing that, knowing about, Ryle, 1949) produced in the academy through the contemplative pursuit of pure theory or pure science. Pure theory gives rise to the less precise applied theory. Applied theory gives rise to the much less precise knowledge of practice (knowing how). It is this messy knowledge of practice claims Schön, which is least valued and least esteemed by society. Elliot's argument… is essentially similar. Teachers feel threatened, he claims, when their 'lowly' practice-saturated knowledge, engages with the comparatively more highly valued, more highly respected, pure or applied knowledge that theoreticians bring from HE institutions'. (Ebbutt et al. 2000:322)

Ebbutt (2000) is referring to collaboration between school teachers and practitioners from an HE School of Education, but it seems likely that there is a more general point here - about the perceived 'hierarchy' that is applied to types of institutions at different levels within the educational system - which presumably relates to this 'hierarchical valuing of knowledge'. Our impression is that HE institutions are often seen as much more prestigious than FE colleges, and this may explain the resistance of some colleagues to working across the sectors and informal reactions to our exchange

project. Colleagues' in HE sometimes perceived our teaching exchange in hierarchical terms, suggesting that an FE colleague's involvement in HE teaching represents an exciting opportunity and possibly a small step towards progression up the hierarchical ladder. At the same time some experienced difficulty in understanding why I should want to teach at a 'lower' level. These attitudes seem to be deeply rooted across the sectors, but are rarely discussed openly. I feel that cultural considerations represent perhaps the single most important barrier to successful and widespread collaboration between the sectors. Hinks (2005:8) makes a similar point, in relation to practical problems faced by staff involved in the FE/HE Staff Exchange Project about, the

'barriers that exist between the sectors… focus group members from the steering group (who were all based in FE) believed the lack of communication was primarily from the HE sector… most active members of the group were staff from FE, reinforcing the suggestion that there was a division in interest between the sectors'.

One way to try to break down barriers is to promote the kind of equal partnerships that can be formed in activities like teaching exchange, and in this way address some of the prejudices that exist.

Colleagues also mention a number of concerns about taking part in exchange, and I think these are valid and need to be considered carefully. We have taken account of comments about the relevance of sessions and the appropriateness of any exchange in our recommendations for best practice. The issue of workload is also something that needs to be managed appropriately.

Students' learning experiences and the exchange

This project has focused on the benefits of teaching exchange for practitioners. However since professional development in the educational sector is concerned with teaching and learning, there are clear benefits for students. It is generally acknowledged in the literature that reflective teachers make the 'best teachers, and any developmental activity which encourages reflection and boosts confidence clearly has positive implications for students. We feel that because we devoted significant effort to plan classes and reflect in collaboration on content and teaching methods the sessions we delivered were particularly well thought-through and highly relevant. Student evaluation reports tend to underpin this proposition. When asked how well their session fitted in with the course/module, 86.6% of college students and 75% of university students rated the sessions 4 or 5 on a scale of 1-5 (5 = very well). In terms of *Aimhigher* projects HEFCE guidelines recommend as effective "...activity... that has been informed by an input from all partners and integrated with the learning of pupils, students or apprentices in their everyday situations" (HEFCE 2006/02:5-6), and this clearly applies to our project.

Analysis of student evaluation forms suggest that there may be further benefits in the short term. Students were very positive in their feedback for both of the sessions we delivered and, more generally, in response to questions about guest teachers/lecturers. For example, one FE student commented that 'A change of tutor is refreshing' , whilst an HE student stated that students are 'More likely to engage with a new person. [It is] good to have a new set of ideas and perspectives'. Overall, 80% of FE students and 87.5% of HE students answered 'yes' when asked whether their institution should try to incorporate more sessions by guest teachers/lecturers on their modules/courses. Although the appropriateness of any guest session must obviously be considered carefully in the context of the discipline, it seems likely that there can be advantages to teaching exchange for student learning.

Conclusion and 'best practice' in teaching exchange

In this report, we have tried to address the question of whether teaching exchange offers an appropriate model of professional development. In answering this question, it is important to think again about what professional development constitutes. In discussing development, Elton claims that:

'…staff and educational development will have a primary function as an agent of institutional change. While one of its concerns must always be to meet the legitimate personal needs of staff, its main concern in difficult times will be to meet the needs of students, in their learning experiences, in the services provided for them and in the environment in which they spend three or more years of their lives. It will be concerned in different ways with changes in knowledge, skills and attitudes of all staff…' (Elton 1995:178)

By Elton's criteria, we would contend that teaching exchange as we experienced it is an excellent professional development activity.

Participating in exchange of this kind offers the opportunity to reflect on and change both personal and institutional practice, and to respond directly to the needs of students progressing from FE to HE.

Based on our experience, we would make several recommendations for best practice in teaching exchange:

- **Exchanges should build on existing personal links between individual practitioners:** The quality of an exchange depends on successful collaboration between two individuals, and the relationship between the exchange partners is therefore key to the success of the exchange (and to making this a positive experience for participants!). It is crucial that practitioners have formed a relationship of mutual trust and respect to be able to negotiate the exchange with sensitivity. For example, deciding upon the appropriateness of strategies and material in one another's classes.

- **Exchange sessions must be planned collaboratively:** This ensures that sessions are directly relevant to students, and therefore addresses the ethical issue of immediate effect of a change to the curriculum in a particular course or module. As well as this, collaboration is at the heart of the rationale for this project, and we believe that for staff to gain maximum benefit from working across sectors they must have regular contact in the lead up to teaching exchange.

- **The appropriateness of an exchange session within a course or module must be considered carefully:** Exchange sessions are best incorporated into a course or module that is fairly flexible, since there must be room in the syllabus for the exchange partners to bring their own experience to student learning, and this may result in a session which was not originally anticipated as part of the programme.

- **Exchange sessions should take place within the usual teaching set-up:** As a central aim of an exchange will be to learn more about the culture and environment of the FE/HE sector and interact with students in their 'normal' learning environment the teaching set-up should not be altered in order to accommodate exchange.

- **Exchange sessions should be evaluated by students and exchange partners:** This gives the opportunity for practitioners to reflect on their experience of the exchange and on students' reactions to the sessions. We would also suggest that it is helpful for the students to think about how the session has differed from their usual classes, and how the material fits in with other material on the module/course.

  Participation in teaching exchange should be recognised and reflected in staff workloads: In order to maximise the benefits of teaching exchange, it is important that both exchange partners have the opportunity to take time over preparation (both individually and collaboratively), and time is also needed for post-session feedback.

Further Research

O'Leary's cycles of research diagram (quoted in Koshy 2005:7) shows that the cyclical nature of action research necessitates reflection and planning at each stage, and that the direction of future cycles can only be determined when the previous stage has been completed. In the process of carrying out this research the potential and possible future direction of the project has become apparent, but this did not happen until the end of this cycle when we had the chance to reflect on our experience and gain an overview of what we have achieved so far.

This report is based on our experience of participating in teaching exchange only. Although it is informed by research into similar projects and background material it would be helpful to be involved in future exchanges with different partners from other institutions, and to be able to compare our experiences with those of other exchange partners. As colleagues commented in discussions about this project, there are major differences in context in different institutions, and this will inform the whole process of exchange (and the likelihood of exchanges).

My FE colleague and I are considering the possibility of setting up some kind of exchange network with a number of other FE and HE institutions. This could facilitate exchange between partners at different institutions, and it might also be helpful if colleagues could set up exchanges within each sector to explore differences in context. We hope to widen the debate on this through discussions with colleagues in both sectors.

In terms of curriculum, we are interested in building an exchange into the syllabus of the relevant module and course to build on the collaborative link that we have established. I am also keen to try to involve some of my students in the collaboration, and am in the process of planning sessions that are taught by Level 3 undergraduates to A-level students. At this point I can anticipate possible benefits. At the most basic level, this kind of collaboration would strengthen the link that exists between the institutions and sectors, and promote the idea of continuity for A-level students; it would provide an opportunity for A-level students to meet and talk to undergraduates, but also to gain more insight into the kind of subjects and activities they might expect to experience at university. This has benefits in terms of widening participation and retention.

It would be valuable to involve undergraduates in integrating the university into the wider community. There are real advantages in the kind of experience they could gain from teaching. Key skills and employability could be enhanced, since students would have to think more about communicating their ideas effectively to a particular audience and presenting information appropriately. This would be particularly relevant to English students who are interested in a teaching career, and would offer similar opportunities to find out about the FE context and environment that are offered by teaching exchange.

Currently, students on the Attitudes to English module (in which the exchange session was included) are required to give a presentation which is formatively assessed. These presentations would be relevant for A-level students, since they relate to topics that they are likely to study. From informal discussions with colleagues, it seems that it may be possible to do something similar with other modules that have a presentation element. Colleagues in both sectors seem to be interested in the potential of this idea, and although it needs to be planned carefully I feel that it offers another interesting possibility for collaboration that would be beneficial to staff and students, and further encourage a student-centred approach to teaching and learning.

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Exploring the 'Ups' and 'Downs' of seconded students' experiences of workplace support

Jacqui McKenna

J.M.McKenna@salford.ac.uk
School of Health Care Professions

Abstract

This paper explores the experience of workplace support for part-time students seconded to the BSc (Hons) Occupational Therapy at the University of Salford. The research has been conducted within the action research paradigm with this first, planned cycle seeking to understand how work-based support is perceived, experienced, utilised and evaluated by students. Data was gathered via a self-administered questionnaire which facilitated comment on the mentorship system and identified situations/issues where students perceived the need for support. Data was analysed following Miles and Hubermann' (1994) general framework for conceptualising qualitative data.

Preliminary evaluation reveals variation in the operation and management of the mentor scheme and student concerns regarding workplace support, often relating to workload, holidays, role, attitudes, access and resources. Whilst identifying a wide variation in the quality of support on offer the dialogic and informal nature of the research process itself has engendered 'corridor conversations' which could form the basis of informal peer support to enable students to make better use of existing arrangements. The findings will be of interest to Educational Bodies, Managers, students, commissioners and others concerned with widening access, and the support of recruitment, retention and success of seconded students of Occupational Therapy.

Background

In 2000 Salford University was commissioned by Lancashire and Cumbria Strategic Health Authority to develop a part-time programme of study offering a seconded route to Occupational Therapy (OT) training. This programme reflects Government concerns regarding the current and anticipated shortfall of health professionals, including OTs (DES, 2003). The part-time programme supports widening access (DES, 2003) and participation in HE in accordance with the University's Equality and Diversity Strategy (2006 -2015) actively encouraging applications from varied educational backgrounds. The programme also aligns with the ethos of lifelong learning (DoH, 2000a; 2000b), the knowledge and skills framework (DoH, 2004), and the skills escalator (DoH, 2003) within Health. A large proportion of applicants are mature and qualifications and experience are considered on an individual basis. The predominant teaching, learning and assessment strategy is a form of supported or hybrid Problem-Based Learning (PBL) (Savin – Baden et al, 2004) complemented by skills and practice placement experiences. This reflects the occupational therapist's belief that 'doing' equates with 'becoming' (Programme Document, 2004).

Individuals undertaking the seconded route often have a wealth of life and employment experience, they hold down responsible jobs within health or social care settings and discharge their employment duties on the days they are not seconded to attend the University. The programme lasts for four years during which significant work/ life balance issues are encountered. Disruption in this balance may result in symptoms of stress and inability to cope (Hacker and Doolen, 2003; Mitchie and Williams, 2002,) therefore the Directorate of Occupational Therapy at Salford believes that the support of both educators and managers for individuals who choose to develop their careers in this way is vital.

Rationale

The Directorate has tailored its personal tutor system to meet the specific needs of the part-time student group. Strategies adopted include regular time slots/ tutor surgeries for part time students only, telephone tutoring and programme leader liaison regarding work-based issues. However, the workplace mentorship scheme is not managed by the University and any support offered to managers in facilitating secondment is ad-hoc relying entirely upon my own personal knowledge, time and resources as Programme Leader. Students and managers alike view my role as the point of contact for work-based issues and as mediator between different stakeholder interests. Various issues have been raised by students and/or managers via personal tutoring (role and workload, study time/ annual leave and resources, confidence, stress, and staff attitudes/reaction), manager telephone contact and placement visits.

The primary focus of this research is the reality or lived experience of workplace support in the context of the workplace/HE interface. However, it is acknowledged that enabling someone to participate in the seconded part-time route is undoubtedly a challenge for employers. Anecdotal evidence suggests that many departments are working under pressure coping with increasing workloads, financial constraints and constant change and although the financial costs of the secondment are covered at a basic level, sometimes it is difficult to find a

replacement with the same level of experience as the seconded individual. Since the Strategic Health Authority (SHA) suggests a mentoring scheme be in place for seconded students its potential in providing support is an element of this research. However, the term support assumes a view not confined exclusively to the functions of a mentor. Ultimately this research seeks to enhance the student experience of learning at Salford *and* the managers experience of seconding students from the workplace, by seeking appropriate mechanisms to support both of these groups of stakeholders more effectively. This stance is consistent with the action research paradigm which is founded on the principle that improvements in practice are generated by exploration rather than a predetermined view of how to make things better.

Literature Review

Currently accepted practice identifies mentoring as a way to facilitate a one-to-one relationship which fosters personal and professional development through experiential learning (Megginson and Clutterbuck, 1995) in a variety of professional contexts (Dancer, 2003; Garvey and Aldred, 2003; , Clutterbuck, 2001). Mentoring aligns naturally with the principles of self-development and lifelong learning implicit within a progressive problem-based learning programme. The key characteristics of this model of mentoring are the use of multi-faceted skills and power sharing with the mentee rather than the mentor taking the lead in a respectful relationship which according to Talbot (2000:127) "involves counselling - helping the mentee through inevitable difficult patches"

Megginson and Clutterbuck (1995) suggest that what defines mentoring is the ability of the mentor to adopt different roles at different points in the mentoring relationship. It is not always an easy task to achieve a good mentoring relationship and things can and do go wrong (McDonald and Hite, 2005; Oliver and Aggleton, 2002). Nevertheless there is a growing body of evidence to suggest that the benefits outweigh the pitfalls (Ehrich, Hansford and Tennent, 2004; Ilot and Allen, 1995). For example, Nielson, Carlson and Lankau (2001), investigated the influence of having a mentor on employee perceptions of work- family conflict. They found that individuals with mentors reported significantly less work-family conflict than those who did not have mentors. Much of the research done on role conflict is based on the premise that having multiple roles inevitably creates strain (Frone, 2000; Frone et al, 1992; Katz and Khan, 1978). Certainly, seconded students discharge multiple roles - student and worker in the workplace; partner, parent and carer in the home. Balancing these roles is a significant and demanding challenge and strategies to maintain a balance, or to at least manage and accept the inevitable imbalance is something that could be addressed within a mentoring relationship (Hacker and Doolen, 2003).

Exacerbating the potential for role conflict is role ambiguity. Part-time seconded students are going through a period of transition from unqualified to qualified in professional terms, and that transition impacts in the educational, work and home settings. Many students already work in occupational therapy or other health departments as assistants and their development requires adjustment of self - perception and that of work colleagues and managers to enable them to fit into new professional schema. This accommodation does not always occur in a synchronous way between parties, and can lead to stress for the student as they try to deal with others' perceptions that may not correspond with their own. Alred et al (1998) claim that mentoring is felt to be particularly useful in times of change and conflict like this.

Ilot and Allen (1995) describe the introduction of a work-based mentoring scheme for part-time students. Students valued mentors who were able to provide support in an adaptable way. Moderators, line managers, mentees and mentors recognized the value of mentoring as a way of sustaining, supporting and encouraging experiential learning (Ilot and Allen, 1995).

However there is also a growing body of literature to suggest there are risks involved in any mentoring relationship or programme. Studies have reported difficulties surrounding lack of time and commitment on the part of mentors and mentees, lack of training, and poor matching of mentors and mentees which may all mirror ethical issues related to access, choice and power (Ehrich, Hansford and Tennent, 2002; McDonald and Hite, 2005; Ilot and Allen 1995). In Milner and Bossers (2004) study involving occupational therapists criticisms were expressed when mentors allowed personal issues to come through, were not responsive, were not seen as approachable or flexible, or valuing their role as mentor. Equally, evidence suggests that mentors sometimes feel 'inadequate' because of a perceived failure to provide the level of support suggested by guidelines (Ilot and Allen, 1995:294). Dancer (2003) indeed warns that mentoring could be harmful to a mentor: "... if they do not acknowledge their realistic

commitment to the process in terms of workload, time factors and the psychological pressure to help." (Dancer, 2003:30).

And goes on to advise that

'Poorly trained mentors and poorly prepared mentees resulting in misapplication of the principals may lead to a disastrous first encounter with the process, clouding ones judgment regarding further involvement for self and others.' (Dancer, 2003:29)

Kram (1985) similarly emphasises the importance of educational programmes in developing successful mentoring relationships arguing that they can:

'Increase understanding of mentoring and its role in career development and create a learning context in which relationship skills and positive attitudes towards mentoring can be developed' (1985:112).

Many of the issues raised in the literature have been the subject of student feedback and problems brought to the programme leader by both students and managers.

Historically workplace mentors for part-time seconded students of Occupational Therapy at Salford University have been named by the students' line manager, have not (to the University's knowledge) had any formal mentor training, have not been matched under any criteria, and have not received any formal support. They are frequently the mentee's manager or supervisor, which may according to some authors (Dancer, 2003; Clutterbuck, 2001) inhibit the achievement of an effective mentoring relationship. Oliver and Aggleton (2002) advise that in order to be successful, mentoring programmes need a clear policy framework with good operational definition of what mentoring is, what it is expected to achieve, how people are to be matched, ground rules for the mentoring relationship and proper training and support of mentors.

Methodological considerations

Action research has its origins in social science and has become popular in health and social care as the professions recognise the importance of being evidence-based and realise that enquiry into their own work can inform this base of evidence (Atwal, 2002). By its nature it is ongoing and cyclical through iterative stages of evaluation, action and change within a phenomenological philosophy. Essentially, it is about looking, thinking and acting, facilitating reflective practice by exploring the practical problems which are of professional concern in day to day work and ultimately prompting action to improve practice or bring about change (Meyer, 2000; Schon, 1983; Stringer, 1999).

The Critical Emancipatory model which promotes praxis among participants - linking the problem to the theory used to explain and solve it, empowering participants to identify problems and raise their collective awareness - provides the broad methodological framework for this study which deploys a five stage approach (plan, implement, observe, evaluate and critically reflect) adapted from Lewin's (1952) organisational change model. The reflective element is paramount allowing the cyclical process to evolve and further stages of research to be identified (Atwal, 2002; Holter and Schwartz-Barcott, 1993; Lewin, 1952).
The application of action research principles is a theoretical challenge when there is an objective truth in play - in this case the solution to the problem is pre-determined by expectation of the existence of a mentorship scheme. However, exploring my own understanding of the problem and the understanding of other collaborators will create a dialogue about the nature and form of the possible solutions and meets the criteria of action research in allowing us to use experience to make sense of the situation, generate new insights and consider improvements (McNiff 1993).

Ethical versus data considerations

In conducting ethically sound research the protection of the interests, identities, dignity and well being of participants is paramount (Robson 1993). The avoidance of harm, deception and misrepresentation and the seeking of real, informed consent is key, alongside providing the opportunity for withdrawal from the study and debriefing of participants (Denscombe 1998). According to Kemmis and McTaggart (1981) action researchers should follow clear ethical guidelines in terms of: observing protocol, involving participants, negotiating with those affected, reporting progress, and finally negotiating both outcomes and dissemination. I have tried to immerse myself in the insider-researcher role and have throughout all stages of the research process been acutely aware of my responsibility for confidentiality. The nature of action research means that ethical considerations demand both self - awareness and a willingness to invade the privacy of others, this is particularly relevant to my study as I hope to generate qualitative data relating to individuals' experience of a shared phenomenon. I feel that since I am asking participants to reflect on their

experiences particular consideration needs to be given to the ownership and editing of this reflective material.

To provide for informed consent a research pack including an invitation and information letter - introducing the study and providing rationale and background details - informed consent form and questionnaire was placed in the mail tray of all seconded students on programme. I followed this up by attending a programme tutorial where I talked through the study providing the opportunity for students to ask questions. According to Robson (1993) connection with participants in this way can improve response rates to questionnaires. However, I faced a potential dilemma in balancing the needs of the research against those of the participants. My primary concern was that students should not feel pressured by this face-to-face contact particularly given my role as Programme Leader which creates significant power and authority issues (Denscombe 1998). This initial concern was ameliorated by the fact that I had discussed the topic informally with students who had raised issues over the past few months and they had tentatively voiced the opinion that action research might be a useful way forward. The consent form presented to potential participants provided information pertaining to the nature, purpose and process of the study (including basic methodological detail) and outlined the rights of the participants. In this way I hoped that when consent was given it was genuinely informed.

The influence of power and control within my pre-existing relationship with students as Programme Leader proved a perennial concern although collaborative processes in themselves helped to resolve issues. For example, we, as a group, opted for a questionnaire to collect data in order to avoid the possible bias that might have arisen in interviews where the interviewer/interviewee relationship might have emulated the Programme Leader/student relationship despite the best of intentions. I acknowledge that in some ways adherence to sound ethical principles might have been to the cost of the research. Clearly, in this instance interaction and discussion which provides a rich source of information in itself was removed from the data gathering process and absence of the dialectical may have reduced the sense of my own participation in the research. However, there have been compensations not least freedom of expression for the participants. Also I have tried to be reflexive in designing the questionnaire in the style of a reflective review thereby again, acknowledging my influence and role in the process and context of the research (Denscombe, 1998).

I realised that my own experience had led me to a fairly positivist outlook, which shocked me initially. The very act of acknowledging my interests, attitudes, values and the inherent bias in research design and analysis of data did not sit well with notions of objectivity. However, these are considered positive attributes of action research enquiry. So for the positivist within me objectivity is an issue, but by the same token I must confess to feeling from the outset that this was truly a shared problem. Essentially, I was enmeshed in the context of this problem. I was active in dealing with everyday issues which arose for these students, and so felt that despite my Programme Leader status I could readily be perceived as legitimate participant in exploring the problem and that we could work collaboratively in an honest and truthful way. At the same time I was conscious of how shared ownership extended beyond the students and myself. I did not want to exclude the workplace manager/mentor from our shared goal of exploring and improving work-based support but I had assured the student participants of complete confidentiality. This was yet another dilemma which at times was difficult to negotiate and I found myself frequently reminding participants of shared goals whilst reinforcing assurances of confidentiality.

Data collection and analysis

Purposive theoretical sampling was used (Robson 2002) and existing part-time seconded students (N = 50) were invited to participate. The response rate was 60% (N = 30) which I feel reflected a genuine commitment to participate in exploring this problem. The returned questionnaires were numbered and random sampling techniques used in order to identify 15 to be analysed. I used a grounded theory approach and followed Huberman and Miles' (1994) general framework for conceptualising qualitative data. It involved data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing/ verification. I struggled with the tensions of action research versus 'proper research', I felt comfortable using grounded theory as this method embraces the principles of action research by generating themes and knowledge from data gathered, yet it also satisfied my anxieties surrounding 'accepted methodologies' and 'proper research'.

Figure 1: A representation of the emerging themes drawn together with student comments

	UPS/ positives	DOWNS/ negative	
I have one to one meetings requested by myself, feedback on plans… support with career progression, a listening ear.	Mentor	Mentor	*My current NHS employer who I have worked for for… years gave me no support.*
My mentor is also my supervisor and as such Uni is always top of the agenda. If any problems are highlighted I am fully supported in resolving them			*Mentor put name forwards…on the occasions I have needed her/ the support I have found it very hard to access.*
Extra study time can be requested and this was a very positive aspect.	Clear guidelines	No clear guidelines	*We don't have guidelines. There is no formal supervision or appraisal.*
It's great that my workplace adheres to the study time policy and doesn't expect me to work on the days during the holidays			*There is conflicting advice/ policies/ procedures from different Head O.T.s re important issues around terms and conditions.*
I have access to the in-house library, in-house courses and lunchtime learning.	Access to facilities		*My workplace would ideally like 5 days work done in 3 days.*
Other staff are interested in what I'm doing on the course and they ask my opinion on things	Feelings		*I would have liked a workload that reflected the time I was in the department.*
There is an acceptance that I can actually be used as a resource	Reaction of work colleagues	Poor access to facilities	*I'm not given any time to attend the library.*
	Conflict of role		
		Feelings	*My supervisor…has been promoted…and now has many more demands on his time*
		Reaction of work colleagues/	
		Conflict of role	*I'm just coming up to 6/52 placement- I will have some unfinished cases to pass onto qualified OTs/ other support staff who already have enough work of their own to do*
I don't work in a health care setting, however my employer allows me to be flexible in the hours that I work, are allowing me time off for placements and allow me to use the internet for my studies.	Flexibility	Inflexibility	*Yes needs have been met, but weaknesses used against me at a later date Staff have a negative attitude to my development.*
I can spend some time at work doing University work and I can also do some of my day-to-day work at home as long as the work gets done!			*There is a conflict of roles as a support worker and a student*
The management are very supportive of the development of all staff.			*I have to use my holidays for revision.*
			I am still expected to work in the same level for three days, which normally takes 5 days. My workplace would ideally like 5 days work done in three days
			Everyone in the department is off doing one course or another there's no one left to do the work.

Member checking was used to reduce bias and threats to internal validity, researcher bias was minimised via participant feedback and peer de-briefing/support and themes were drawn out and then regrouped/ reduced to develop the analysis further. As themes emerged there was a progressive accessing and reading of relevant literature in order to draw comparisons to confirm or challenge theory and to understand the research situation (Huberman and Miles 1994). Basic triangulation can be claimed from the feedback offered by students via year tutorials, personal tutorials and manager phone calls, although these have not always been adequately recorded, themes and concerns reflect those generated within the action research investigation.

Discussion of findings and further research

This discussion explores the themes identified from the data in order to generate insights into issues which require further consideration and/or have implications for practice. Figure 1 summarises findings - 'ups' describe the students' positive aspects of the support experience, and the 'downs' describe the negative aspects. Each element of the experience for conceptual clarity, may be characterised as either intrinsic (internal or reflecting values-based feelings of students) or extrinsic (organisational/managerial).

Key themes will now be discussed briefly and should be considered utilising the quotes provided in Fig. 1 for illustration.

Mentors/Support

The data suggests wide variation in students' levels of satisfaction with the mentoring and support experience. Areas of difficulty identified include access, expectations and skills. Specific issues generating a need for support included workload, academic assignments, study time, staff response and attitudes, role - conflict, and feeling valued. Although the current literature espouses the use of mentors as an aid to support, development, self-knowledge and reflection and its use in developing reflective practice (Ilot and Allen 1995) mentoring is a term which is generally ill-defined. This might be one factor influencing the variable operation of the mentoring role in the workplace. Further research could explore perceptions of the work-based managers/ mentors of students support needs and include exploration of their understanding, opinions and application of the concept of mentoring in the workplace.

Guidelines aimed at supporting students

Respondents seem to value clear structure and guidelines in the workplace around contractual arrangements and support mechanisms. Yet some respondents are reluctant to seek support for fear of burdening the mentor. Maslow (1943) discusses the importance of safety and security in facilitating individuals' progression through the 'hierarchy of needs' towards 'self-actualisation'. In this context clear guidelines and knowing what is expected of you may be critical. Again exploration, clarification and perhaps comparison of expectations and systems underpinning the provision of support in the workplace would appear a logical focus for a further cycle of action research.

Access to facilities

Practical issues such as access to facilities and to individuals with expertise within the workplace are clearly important to some respondents. In many cases students are enabled and actively encouraged to use the facilities and resources available in the workplace, including people. However, some expressed frustration at not having permission to access facilities such as a photocopier or library and Internet facilities in the work environment. Clear protocols and procedures regarding facilities are vital when students are studying via PBL and need to communicate and access information via the *Blackboard* Virtual Learning Environment (VLE). Further research collaborating with work-based managers would explore their understanding of the technology available at the University and its interface with a PBL curriculum, thereby lluminating the problem areas and clarifying learning needs of students and possibly managers as well.

Students' feelings, reaction of work colleagues and the need for flexibility within the 'learning organisation'

Comments from respondents suggest that feeling valued within the work environment has a positive effect on confidence and motivation. White and Mackenzie-Davey (2003: 232) have found that:

'personal recognition of an individuals contribution seems to be more important to feeling valued than pay… Trust and organisational support also give people a feeling of being valued, by giving them a sense that the organisation values and supports what they do' (2003:232).

In the secondment setting some students experience feelings of guilt and almost indebtedness to the employer largely based on the perception that the manager has gone to a lot of trouble to enable them to secure the secondment in the first place and that their secondment in practice has also had detrimental effect on the workload of

colleagues. Indeed, one respondent reported that so many members of staff were undertaking further training within her workplace that there was insufficient staff left in the department to cover the work load. In such an environment the student feels obliged to compensate for this 'favour' by trying to fit their previous workload into their current days in the workplace. Furthermore, a number of respondents perceived that employers had unrealistic expectations of workload possibilities but felt powerless to address these issues with their manager. A mentor's role would include confidence building and counselling (Ilot and Allen 1995), and could facilitate improvement of communication between student and manager. However, this research suggests that flexibility in the workplace is an important factor in the provision of effective support for secondment. In Improving Working Lives (DOH 2000a), the government discusses the importance of flexible working practices as a mechanism for supporting employees to develop and maintain their optimum level of functioning within the workplace and facilitate 'lifelong learning'.

The response of colleagues and others in the workplace to the seconded students' development is important. Many respondents report that colleagues and other staff react positively to their development and this has a corresponding effect on their self-esteem and confidence. However, some respondents report negative reactions to their professional development with attendant consequences. Whilst respondents value encouragment of learning the greatest challenge in the 'learning organisation' - defined by Senge (1990) as an organization where people are continually learning to learn together - the important factor is to achieve an equitable balance between promoting everyone's development and maintaining sufficient resources to get the job done.

Further research exploring the feelings of departmental staff to the students' changing role and knowledge is the first step in understanding how students' learning can be acknowledged, celebrated, and shared in such a way as to foster the equitable balance.

Clearly, further research to understand the complexity of the issues and events which lead to and perpetuate the students' perception of the impact of their secondment is required. This could be achieved via semi-structured interviews although the participants in this study identified that the opportunity to continue the dialogue they had started to have with each other via focus groups would be more valuable. New insights generated could in turn form the starting point for an exploration of similar issues with managers and departmental staff. Data generated could potentially assist the Directorate in preparing students and their managers (possibly from the point of application) to deal effectively with the potential impact of secondment upon work- place staff. As managers become more empowered to deal with the impact of secondment this may be helpful in educating and preparing the workplace personnel to ensure this educational opportunity is maximised for all parties.

Conflict of role

Students not surprisingly struggle with balancing their varied roles. Lack of role clarity, role ambiguity and role overload in any area of life can be associated with ill health and associated absence from work (Michie and Williams 2002). Lazarus (1999) suggests that stress processes are best understood when placed within the context of the significant roles that people occupy. Hacker and Doolen (2003) suggest that the effect of striving to maintain balance is a stressor in itself. They conclude that it is less stressful for individuals to recognise that there will be times when they are more focused on one activity or role than another, and that it is quite normal for other areas of their life at that stage not to be maintained at the same level. The usefulness of reflecting on issues such as these is something that could be addressed through a formal support mechanism such as developmental mentoring (Megginson and Clutterbuck 1995, Dancer 2003). Further research to identify coping strategies students have and/or could utilise to deal with the stressors which result from role - conflict could be identified with specific reference to the workplace and the potential use of a work-based mentor.

Conclusions

Participants identified varied experience of support within the workplace. 60% of participants reported having a workplace mentor allocated. Experiences where support did not meet their perceived needs were reported more frequently than experiences where students reported satisfaction with support. At Salford University the provision of a workplace mentor for seconded students is encouraged to support the students through the period of transition from unqualified to qualified member of staff. This is not and cannot be a condition of registration, as it would penalise a student for a lack of provision in the seconding workplace. The comments made about mentoring and support, suggest that having someone in the workplace to facilitate reflection and encourage development would be of value to the students. The current literature on mentoring supports these skills as central to the role of a mentor and supports the potential value of a mentoring system in the workplace. From the findings and the literature clear mentoring guidelines, training of mentor and mentee, and the mentor not having a direct supervisory responsibility for the mentee, are essential (Megginson and Clutterbuck 1995, Clutterbuck 2001, Dancer 2003). These conditions are not currently being met and this first cycle of action research suggests that further exploration of the operation of support and mentorship in the workplace is required from both student and workplace manager/staff perspectives.

Evaluation, reflection and implications for practice

In this paper the process of action research is evident as described by McNiff (1993) where experience and practice are explored to make sense of the situation, generate new insights and consider improvements. Initially I felt that I was controlling the process but group sharing, planning and action became stronger as the study continued. Collaborating in this way with seconded students has enhanced communication and has allowed them to honestly express views as they have become more aware of the Directorate's interest and commitment to improving the situation. They have also begun to share these experiences and appear to have become more comfortable in doing so. The 'sharing' of experience has been reflective and in this way reflective skills have been facilitated in practice. In effect, the process of praxis has begun to emerge for a group of students.

Those students with effective work-based mentorship and support have been able to share the potential benefits of this with their peers and encourage them to understand what might work for them and to explore this in their own workplace. Again the experience of sharing and common ownership of a problem appears to have opened up new channels of communication which have informed the findings in this study and could be used in further research cycles.

Throughout this research I have experienced tensions working within a paradigm potentially in conflict with my own positivist approach but I have developed an appreciation of the value of action research in exploring everyday, real-life practice. As for my position within the wider research community on reflection I find myself back with my own initial concerns, that true 'academic' research is valued in terms of how snugly it can sit in the 'high ground' and stay out of the 'swampy lowlands' (Schon 1995), and that in order for this research to count in terms of my own research profile a more scientific approach would have been more acceptable. However, I support McNiff and Whiteheads' (2006:19) suggestion that "practitioners' theories of practice are core to sustainable development,"

I have learned that the development of new theories depends on exploration of unique situations which are ultimately influenced by a unique researcher and that this is to be celebrated - rather than scientifically critiqued - on the grounds of its value as a rich and creative way to generate new insights and potentially sustainable theory.

On reflection at the end of this first cycle of action research I feel that the aim of improving the mentorship scheme may depend rather less on well - referenced documentation and supporting materials and more on understanding how students perceive and utilise the support mechanisms currently on offer. The mentoring system has faults and the task of addressing them may be enormous. Initially I had assumed responsibility for this, now I acknowledge that this was presumptuous and unrealistic. I can however, generate new insights for myself and the student group which might help them make more effective use of what is currently in place. It seems that students may be able to make the support they receive work better for them as a consequence of the dialogue and informal support group which has evolved in the corridors. Although tempted to formalise this 'support group' I suspect it is best left to

operate informally with encouragement from myself, rather than producing a nice, tidy policy and procedure and finding everyone has lost interest due to the formality and constraints imposed.

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Teaching at a Distance using New Video Technology: Investigating Viability, Attitudes and Impact on Teaching and Learning through Action Research

Joanne Taylor

J.Z.Taylor@salford.ac.uk
Salford Business School

Research Context and Aims

'It is the excitement and interest of learners, teachers and the sector in general that drives our e-learning strategy' (HEFCE, 2005)

'E-learning is fundamentally about learning and not about technology. Strategic development of e-learning should be based on the needs and demands of learners and the quality of their educational experience' (JISC, 2004)

These two statements were the starting point for an action research project initiated to gain further student feedback and continually improve a distance learning MSc Hazard Analysis and Critical Control Points (HACCP) programme. In an international e-learning course where tutors do not usually meet their students, the on-line forum is the only means of delivering teaching and supporting learning. For this reason we, the programme team, have considered it important to develop the most interactive and exciting course material, including audio and visual *Powerpoint* presentations. Very recently we have also been able to develop our own *Nuggets* or video clips from a range of industry settings supported by funding from the Learning Technologies Centre (LTC). The HEFCE (Higher Education Funding Council for England) statement echoes this aim but the JISC (Joint Information Systems Committee) statement highlights the need to consider any use of new technology in light of the quality of the student learning experience – not just for impact and aesthetic appeal.

Methodology: An Action Research Approach

Henry & Kemmis (1985) define action research as 'self-reflective research that is being done in a social situation as a collaborative enquiry to improve our practice'. Whitehead (1989) illustrates it with the question 'How can I improve the quality of my practice here?' and McNiff et al (2004) refer to a 'special kind of research question', and explain action research as 'an intervention in personal practice to encourage improvement for oneself and others… which recognises that individuals are always in the company of others'. These descriptions bring out key concepts of self-reflection, self-improvement and collaboration with others. Action research differs from traditional approaches as it is research from within, with oneself as a part of the community, and it is cyclical rather than linear. It does not have a clear 'end' but becomes an iterative process of continuous improvement. For all of these reasons, it is a most appropriate research paradigm for the project aims.

Method: Questionnaires, Meetings, Group Discussions and Reflective Journal

Participants

The effective deployment of learning technologies in teaching and learning relies upon collaboration between a wide range of professionals across institutional structures. In evaluating impact on the quality of the learning experience various stakeholders should have a voice. This project involved a wide range of individuals both internal and external to the institution in order to provide multiple perspectives on the intervention in curriculum. Programme Leaders and administrators, lecturers and learning technologists and those carrying responsibility for quality assurance and management all have a perspective to offer in addition to the student voice (which in this case is international and home). I have actively sought to capture these multiple perspectives in group discussions, meetings and questionnaire surveys.

Video-Clips

The questionnaires, discussions and meetings were initiated by three video-clips embedded in three on-line modules for the purposes of this project. All were put into the Nuggets format, which is a 60-second clip with questions and associated learning outcomes attached. In addition to this, an associated discussion thread was developed for students to answer the question, and for the tutor to assess from this whether they had met the learning outcomes. All participants had seen the clips on the course or were asked to watch them as an observer. This provided a starting point for the discussions and a focal point for the questionnaires.

Questionnaires

Three short, simple questionnaires were developed; one for students, one for tutors and a slightly adapted one for administrators. Experience has taught us that anything that looks arduous or complex will not prompt a response, so the questions were brief and straight-forward and asked about the video-clips that were being trialled for the purposes of this project. All questionnaires asked for opinions on the video-clips, and students were also asked whether they would want to see more of them (and if so, what kind) as well as whether they had any problems with them. Tutors and administrators were

also asked whether they would be willing to use them and/or develop them in their own material, and what the advantages or concerns might be.

Discussion Group

A student-tutor discussion group was held in London on the 12th June 2007, and notes were taken on what was said by students and tutors when the issue of the video-clips was raised.

Meetings

Several meetings were organised, with senior members of the Faculty and members of the Learning Technology Centre, to demonstrate the video-clips and gain their feedback. Notes were taken on what was said in these meetings.

Reflective Journal

To capture individual reflections in a more structured manner several tutors kept a journal, used as a 'vehicle for reflection' (Moon, 1999), which they wrote in at various stages throughout the research process. Biggs (2003) maintains that teaching is a reflective and personal activity and that individuals have to work out their own solutions. In view of this it was important to use individual reflections to add to the data gathered from other people. Following ideas of Thorpe (2004) and Hutchinson & Allen (1997) they tried to not only describe things that had happened and initial feelings, but also to critically reflect after critical events articulating feelings and trying to think of new ideas or outcomes.

Findings, Analysis and Practice Implications

Questionnaire responses and notes were analysed using a themed approach based on Hollway & Jefferson (2000), whereby individual sentences are analysed and described, and common themes highlighted in different colours and then drawn out for comparison and a deeper understanding of the issues behind them. There were eight main themes that emerged from this process, four positive and four constructive. These are described below, with relevant literature and diary extracts brought in to 'triangulate' and add depth to the findings and implications.

'Attention grabbers'

One of the first things many participants commented on was the 'attention grabbing' and exciting quality of the video-clips. Comments like *'just enough to grab your attention'*, *'fantastic, so exciting', 'dynamic slides of action for the play-station era'* were observed in administrators, tutors and students alike. This is a positive response in the context of the image of the course and the enthusiasm of those involved in both teaching and learning, which can be important as a motivator. However, the original research aim was to find out if the clips did more than this.

Student satisfaction

Student satisfaction was another observation from students, tutors and administrators. Modules with clips seemed to have better informal feedback from students than those without. Tutors felt this would be an advantage, as did other members of the faculty and LTC. The students corroborated this assumption with almost all comments revealing an attitude of greater satisfaction.

Comments such as *'fantastic', 'excellent', 'more practical', 'really useful', 'thank you'* and *'well done'* were frequent in student responses. Student satisfaction is an important factor in both retaining students and engaging their interest throughout the course. Satisfaction does not necessarily link directly to improved learning, but it is still an important benefit of using the new technology and an argument in their favour.

Overcoming Language Issues

The video-clips developed for this trial are visual only; there is a musical background but no use of language. This overcomes one of the problems of material in a distance learning, international course – that of the language barrier. Some terms are not the same from country to country, and some students struggle to understand rapidly spoken English. In helping students through the administrative process and first steps on-line visual images could depict these processes without the need for language thereby *breaching any gaps* this was not mentioned directly by the students, although many complimented the practical, visual nature of the clips. The administration process and initiation process for using on-line learning does cause many problems for our international students and it is an interesting suggestion that video-clips could be used for these as well as teaching purposes.

Increased Interaction On-line

On the on-line modules there are weekly activities that students can discuss on the *Blackboard* discussion board, and one of the constant programme aims is to develop questions or debates that get as much interaction and engagement as possible. Because of this, one of the themes that emerged repeatedly in my reflective journal was an assessment of how many students were contributing to the video-clip discussions. At the end of the module I noticed that the on-line clip had generated more discussion than any other clip, and the module as a whole had a higher level of interaction. There are a range of reasons and potential variables behind this, but it is a positive outcome.

20th May

On a course with 20 students, in the last ten weeks there has been an average of 16 discussion board responses per week. This is high for these modules, as often only about half of the group are 'active' in interactions throughout the module. This time even a student who could not access them joined in – he said he could work out what had happened from the question and other students responses and wanted to join in anyway! The week I put the Nugget on-line had more responses (25) than any other week. I have also had informal feedback through emails and telephone conversations about how much students are enjoying the discussions on this module, especially the clip.

Deeper Learning

The concepts of deep and surface learning were introduced by Marton & Saljo (1976) when they distinguished between students using simplistic or strategic memorising of facts (surface) and those trying to gain an understanding of the whole picture (deep). The Higher Education Academy (HEA) (2007) have compiled a detailed list of factors involved in each, based on the work of Biggs (1999), Entwistle (1998) and Ramsden (1992). This includes elements of deep learning such as 'focusing on central concepts needed to solve a problem', 'relating new and previous knowledge', 'linking course content to real life' and on the part of the teacher 'relating new material to what students already know and understand' and 'engaging students in active learning'.

It was apparent when reading this list how much 'deep learning' had emerged as a result of one of the video-clip activities. I filmed a setting that the students were not used to seeing and asked them to apply their manufacturing knowledge to it. The fact that the clip showed the process in real time forced them not to assume it would be the same as in manufacturing and to re-think the principles of HACCP in a different setting. The impact of this was startling - the students were learning at a 'deeper level' than they had been before.

11th March

I put the first 'nugget' on-line just one day ago and there are already 7 responses. It is a man cooking a steak on a stove until it is brown all around the edges. Usually I get about 10 contributions by the end of the week but this looks like it will generate a lot more discussion. But its more than that – it's a deeper kind of thought process going on. Jane admitted that she wanted to answer with the usual 'temperature probe' as a critical limit but because the video-clip only showed someone cooking a steak she was forced to rethink the meaning of a critical limit. She said it was 'really strange looking at HACCP from a different perspective'. Viv said he had to 'remove his manufacturing hat and put on his catering hairnet' in order to answer the question. Other students joined the debate and Ethel said her 'head was hurting' but she finally understood what a critical limit meant. It is fantastic that the manufacturing students are learning how HACCP can apply in a totally different context, without the machinery, and understand its fundamental meanings. This has not happened before!

The enthusiasm and satisfaction of students is one thing, but moving students towards a deeper learning experience is a very rewarding outcome of this new form of technology. There were several other factors involved – such as the use of a different practical situation than those they are normally taught with – but the video-clip is the vehicle that forced students not to assume the old ways of thinking could still be applied.

Accessibility Problems

All lecturers were concerned with access and download times for students based overseas, and justifiably so. Approximately one third of students who have responded say they have had problems accessing the clips, which is more than I would have anticipated. Problems go from *'shaky screen'* and *'slow downloads'* to not being able to see the clips on work-based PCs or not being able to see them at all.

At a meeting with LTC they explained that *Nuggets* had not been used on a purely distance learning course or for overseas students before and they did not know how well they would work. They are very interested in this feedback and will hopefully look towards ways of improving access. There have been no complaints as such (there was only one clip per module) but students are keen to see what the other students are talking about, and one person admitted feeling very frustrated that she could not access them at work where she liked to study.

In terms of equity and shared learning experiences, accessibility across the whole student group is essential. We cannot progress with new technology at the cost of other forms of learning, and the cost of fragmenting the group's learning experiences. We also cannot develop a course that is only accessible to specific groups of students, as one of the main aims of our course is to widen participation internationally and across all sectors of the industry. Widening participation is also a key government strategy and one of the great advantages of distance learning (HEA, 2007). The integration of new technology clearly must be slow and measured, and continually improved.

Barriers to E-Learning in Academics

Black (2005) argues that encouraging teachers to take responsibility for their professional learning will empower them to make the changes that seem necessary in their practice, rather than imposing changes from above. She says that informal reflection is engaged in - but not the systematic reflection and recording of data as used in action research. Barriers she explains as the reason for this are a lack of time and a fear of mystique surrounding the word research.

Interestingly, there emerged in the questionnaires and discussions with staff (and also the fact that some did not want to be involved) a similar set of barriers for the new on-line technology. Several staff mentioned 'time' and 'cost' and although they said they were willing to use Nuggets they had not all embraced opportunities for training or involvement.

The barriers need to be identified and targeted solutions need to be developed to overcome them. For my own part, I will work closely with immediate colleagues to help them overcome their fears and any lack of self-efficacy, and also try to disseminate the positive outcomes of integrating a small number of video-clips and assessing their impact.

Lack of Support

A theme that emerged in one of the questionnaire responses was that *Nuggets* were a great idea but *'I would not be allowed to do this,...*

There was also a frustration felt by some lecturers that other members of the school and faculty did not want to get involved, and were not interested in sharing these new developments.

This is clearly a factor in motivating staff to develop new technology, especially in light of overcoming the barriers discussed above. It is something that needs to change, as the culture of an organisation has a vital impact on the innovations and potential developments within it. It is also supported within the literature as it has been recognised that its success at the University of Salford and on a wider scale is dependent on an intricate web of success factors and wider institutional culture and strategy (Lisewski, 2004)

Timing of Clips

The main problem identified by students was access, but a secondary theme emerged that several students felt the clips were not long enough. The Nuggets are up to 60 seconds long to ensure easier download, and also to make them specific learning tools with specific learning outcomes. However, comments such as 'very short movie, I would have liked it to continue a bit more' seem to suggest that this has not been readily understood. It may be necessary to explain the purpose of the video-clips more clearly when using them, and also to investigate the potential of longer extracts for different purposes.

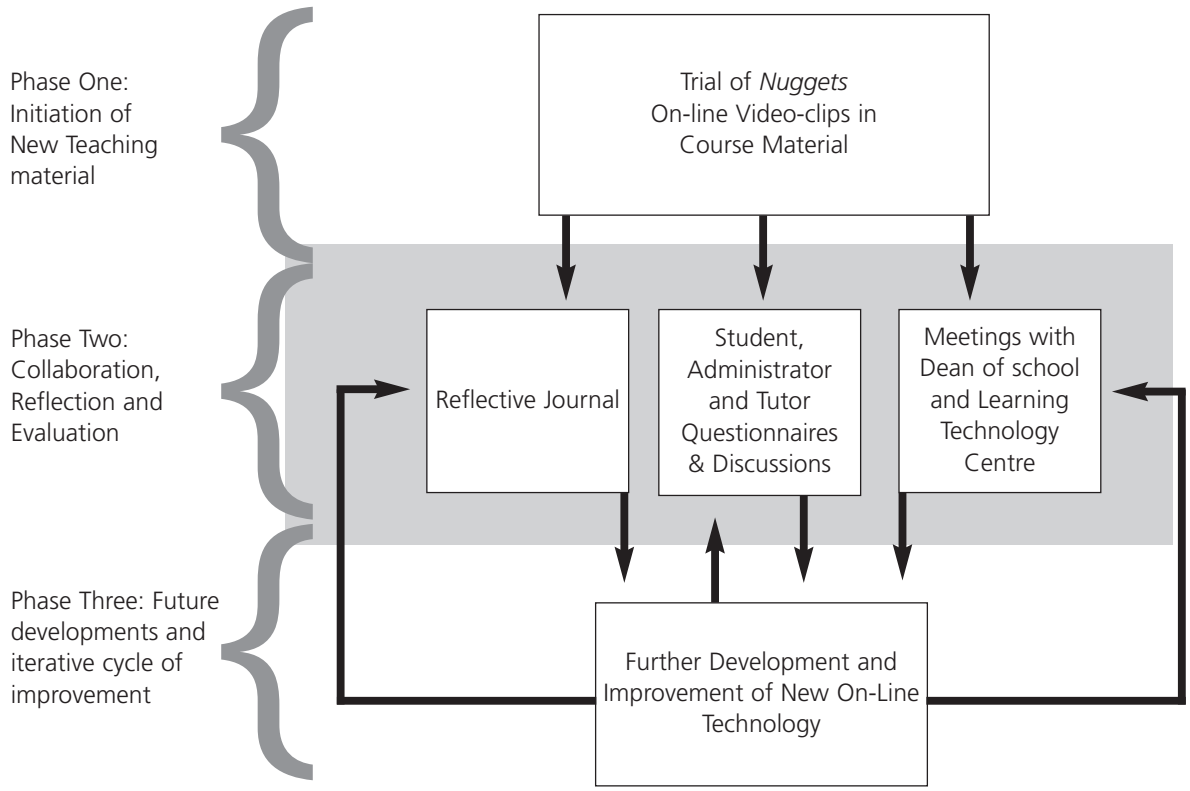
Outcomes

The outcomes of this project so far have been wide-ranging, from different people involved in the process and from different perspectives and angles. It is a richer, deeper picture than could have been gained from only talking to tutors, or students, for example. It is a far deeper picture than would have been gained from just assuming that the new developments would work and waiting until the Module Evaluation Questionnaires (MEQs) had been completed to find out that not everybody liked the Nuggets or could even see them. These are some of the main strengths of this research project – inclusion, reflection and depth. As the research process continues it is considered that implications for practice so far identified will be refined further as the cyclic process of evaluation and development continues.

Future Development

Figure 1 below highlights the cyclical nature of the research that has been initiated in this project. The first phases have been carried out but they do not end here – they will be used to inform further developments which in turn will be reflected on, evaluated and improved.

Figure 1: The Action Research Process



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Pre-Course Material to develop the Academic Writing Skills of First Year Diploma (HE) Nursing Students: Is There an Appetite?

Claire Williams

c.williams@salford.ac.uk
School of Nursing

Abstract

This paper presents the findings of an action research project examining attitudes towards the use of pre-course material to facilitate the development of academic writing skills for new first year students on the pre-registration Diploma in Nursing programme at the University of Salford. Students and lecturers were invited to collaborate and share their views within focus groups, and through the completion of open structured questionnaires. Analysis of the data reveals that academic skills are a concern for both students and staff, and that current support mechanisms may be failing students due to lack of clarity, equity and consistency. The notion of pre-course was welcomed by students. However, concerns highlighted by the students suggest the scope of this material could usefully extend beyond the development of academic writing skills to encompass more general organisational issues for students embarking on Higher Education programmes.

Introduction

The need for students studying within Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) to acquire an academic writing style, is usually considered to be of paramount importance (Whitehead 2002; Hegyvary, 2000; Closs and Draper, 1998; Booth, 1996). Within pre-registration nurse education there is a fundamental requirement for students to participate in the activity of academic writing, as essay writing is an important tool for student appraisal, and assessing suitability for progression (Whitehead, 2002; Brennan, 1995). Rolfe (1997) highlights the importance of academic writing for nurses beyond registration, and throughout their careers. Not only does it provide an effective medium for communicating ideas, and demonstrating a critical and questioning approach to the existing knowledge base, it also assists with meeting continual professional development (CPD) requirements; which must be fulfilled in order for registration with the Nursing and Midwifery Council (NMC) to maintain currency (Hughes, 2005; NMC, 2004a).

As a new lecturer within Nursing, witnessing the time and resources invested in measuring and testing the ability of students to produce academic writing throughout their programme of study; I have begun to question how effectively students, at the start of their pre-registration training, are assisted in identifying and developing the necessary skills. It is these thoughts which have provided momentum for this study, that aims to explore the opinions of students and lecturers on the development of pre-course material, to support new first year Dip (HE) Nursing students to develop their academic writing skills.

Background and Context

In accordance with government recommendations (DoH, 1999), a large degree of theory content delivery on the pre-registration Diploma programme is organised around small group teaching. Each new intake is divided into Base Groups of about 15 students, and each group has an affiliated lecturer to guide and facilitate learning. Since assuming this role of Base Group Facilitator for the first time, I have gained a deeper insight regarding the issues confronting new pre-registration diploma students, and for students in my Base Group, concerns about academic writing emerged early on.

Within each semester there is, as stipulated by the NMC (NMC, 2004b) a 50:50 split between time allocated for theory and practice. Within each semester, students are required to pass a theoretical assessment in order to progress, and typically this summative assessment takes the form of a written assessment. The details of the assignment are given to the students early within each semester, to allow maximum time for them to complete and submit their work. With regards to the first semester of the programme this means that students are provided with the assignment details within the initial three-week theory period, before commencing their first clinical placement block. Contact with my own Base Group within these early weeks of the programme revealed considerable levels of anxiety within the group, concerning all aspects of writing within Higher Education. Although taught sessions were provided to introduce the students to study skills and academic writing, they were coming back to the base group sessions with concerns and issues, and a need to seek clarification and reassurance. In response to this, I found myself deviating from the timetabled content of some sessions, in order to spend more time discussing the assignment, its requirements and academic skills in general. In a bid to provide further support I also prepared a reading list and handout material. However, I was mindful throughout that this ad hoc provision represented a solution that was neither elegant nor equitable.

Insights from the Literature

Against a background of poor recruitment to nursing, and reports of many National Health Service (NHS) Trusts experiencing severe shortages of nurses which impact negatively on service delivery, the Government pledged to increase the number of nurse training places to substantially increase the nursing workforce (DoH 2000; DoH, 1999). Although the targets have been met for pre-registration places the number who stay the distance once on programme, completing their studies and subsequently joining the qualified nursing workforce has been a perennial cause for concern nationally (Dreary et al, 2003; Last and Fulbrook, 2003).

A plethora of studies have explored the reasons why student nurses leave prior to completing their pre-registration programmes (Dreary et al, 2003; Last and Fulbrook, 2003; Glossop, 2001; Litchfield, 2001; Coakley, 1999; Lindopp, 1999; White et al, 1999; Hughes, 1998; Hamill, 1995; Braithwaite and Elzubier, 1994). Academic performance emerges in all, as the principal reason for discontinuation. Of the students interviewed by Last and Fulbrook (2003) 94% felt more guidance and structure with relation to academic work was needed in the programme, especially during the first year when students experienced particular anxiety. Similarly, White et al (1999) report students who chose to leave within the first 12 months of the course felt disillusioned and let down due to academic support which was insufficient, or failed to recognise their educational background and consequent needs.

In recent years the demographic characteristics of students entering nursing have been changing, as the dwindling supply of school leavers has provided the opportunity for more "non-traditional" students to enter pre-registration programmes (Kevern et al 1999). An increasing number of entry pathways have become available, including routes via Access to Nursing courses, National Vocational Qualifications, and opportunities for experienced Health Care Assistants to be seconded from NHS Trusts (Steele et al, 2005; Gould et al, 2004). Consequently students on pre-registration programmes display greater diversity in age and educational background than ever before. More mature students and those who lack experience of recent study initially suffer from a greater fear of academic failure, in comparison to their younger more recently studied contemporaries (Glackin and Glackin, 1998). As a result they often have higher demands of their educational experience, and an expectation that lecturers will support their needs with regard to academic development.

In common with policy at the University of Salford, the literature identifies the primary support mechanism for academic guidance within pre-registration programmes, as the allocation of a personal tutor (Rhodes and Jinks, 2005; Litchfield, 2001) but reliance on personal tutoring to provide academic support has inherent difficulties (Gidman, et al 2000). Typically the onus rests with the student to make contact with their personal tutor, and arrange a convenient time to meet. This can be problematic since personal tutoring competes with other responsibilities in both research and practice which may assume a higher priority than academic support (Litchfield, 2001). Conversely, not all lecturers feel sufficiently knowledgeable regarding the stylistics and conventions of academic writing. Therefore they may be reluctant to engage with this aspect of the personal tutoring role (Phillips, 1994). For some students approaching a lecturer to seek guidance is a daunting experience particularly if the relationship lacks rapport, or feels uneasy due to unequal power relations between student and lecturer (Grayson et al, 1998).

The use of learning support services by students to develop academic writing skills, also receives consideration within the literature. A study by Blair et al, (1998) reveals that where offered, at least 50% of students choose never to make use of these services. This may reflect students' negative perceptions of the "remedial", "quick fix" and "academic bootcamp" nature of such provision. For students who wish to avail themselves of support access can be problematic. Typically the resources are available only during campus hours, and for nursing students on placement this can be restrictive (Stewart et al, 2001). As a Base Group Facilitator I was encouraged to tell new students about learning support services but in my experience so much information is given to students during their initial weeks on programme that they are unlikely to prioritise anything perceived as "extra" or sitting outside the immediate curriculum requirements.

Reference to the literature seems to suggest then, that the problems and tensions surrounding academic writing skills and new nursing students, identified within my own brief experience, exist within pre-registration education as a whole. Students consistently report difficulties in developing their

academic writing skills and support provided by personal tutors and dedicated services are often ineffective for a variety of factors. With reference to the students in my Base Group I have felt that time is an additional contributory factor. After only a short period of engaging with their new programme, students are "detached" from the university setting to undertake their first clinical placement. However, with regard to their first summative assessment, the clock is already ticking, and by the time they return to the university the submission deadline is fast approaching. The time spent away from the University can make arranging contact with personal tutors more onerous since the original difficulty of trying to make arrangements which fit around the commitments of their tutor is compounded by the demands of full-time clinical placement. From my own experience students require something tangible and structured to effectively develop academic writing skills. The handouts and reading lists I had hastily produced for my Base Group students had been a response to this. They had been well received according to module evaluation by students although many individuals lamented that the information had not been made available earlier. This led me to speculate whether support during the period of time prior to actually starting the course could be beneficial. Would providing students with information about academic writing prior to commencing the pre-registration programme assist them in identifying and developing the necessary skills? Would such an approach be useful in circumventing some of the barriers to support, resulting from the timetabling arrangements? In order to validate this idea I would first need to explore the thoughts and opinions of students before considering formulating any concrete proposals. With its emphasis on participatory and collaborative enquiry, the process of action research seemed to offer a most appropriate way forward.

Research Methodology

For Waterman (2001) action research is "a period of inquiry that describes, interprets and explains social situations while executing a change intervention aimed at improvement and involvement. It is problem focused, context specific and future orientated". The approach is often conceptualised in terms of a spiralled framework, consisting of sequential phases of planning, acting, observing, evaluating, reflecting and re-planning (Williamson and Prosser, 2002). This iterative process can continue for as many cycles as are required. In order to inform the reflective phase, and the subsequent re-planning and next cycle, many authors recommend keeping a personal journal throughout the action research process. This can be a valuable way of recording progress and capturing reflections (McNiff et al, 2003). I followed this advice and maintained a journal throughout in the hope that recording anecdotal notes, observations, interpretations and impressions would enhance the quality of critical reflection.

Participation and collaboration are characteristic features of action research, setting it apart from other research approaches. In both qualitative and quantitative research, emphasis is on data collected "in the field", from "research subjects", which is subsequently analysed and given meaning by "expert" researchers (McKie, 1996). Williamson and Prosser (2002) suggest that even when qualitative researchers acknowledge their proximity to those they are studying, and attempt to make data collection more democratic, separation and boundaries between the researcher, and the subjects continue to exist. These are much less evident in action research, as the researcher is part of the situation as well as being an observer of it.

Data Collection and Analysis Strategy

Participant sampling

My base group students were approaching the end of their first semester, and had recently submitted their first theoretical assignment for summative assessment. It was my hope that this experience would relate closely to the research question, and therefore yield rich data. In this sense my decision to approach them was indicative of a purposive sampling technique, where participants are chosen on the basis of specific experience or characteristics (Higgenbottom, 2004). However, there was also a strong element of convenience sampling pervading since they were a pre-formed group to which I had ready access.

Data collection methods and analysis

I have employed a mixed methods approach in order to enhance the trustworthiness of the work, deepen analysis and overcome deficiencies inherent to all data collection methods (Williamson, 2005). Firstly, I organised a focus group in order to gather data from my own base group. Carey (1994) describes focus groups as "a semi-structured group session, moderated by a group leader, held in an informal setting with the purpose of collecting information on a designated topic". She suggests they have the potential to provide

rich data, due to the interactive and participatory nature of the process.

Focus group size is usually recommended to be between four and 12 individuals with six being the optimum (Carey, 1994). My entire base group agreed to take part, which resulted in a focus group of 13 participants, plus myself as moderator. Morgan (1988) suggests that large group size can be detrimental to data collection as the group has a tendency to become unwieldy and hard to manage, and will typically fragment. I did consider dividing the student group into two but was unsure what criteria, if any, would be appropriate. I discussed my dilemma with the students who favoured maintaining the existing group. They felt that since they were well established, had worked together and had observed ground rules decided by themselves, any change would fundamentally alter the group dynamic, possibly impacting negatively on interaction and discussion.

To triangulate data and complement insights from the focus group I engaged 12 students from another base group in a questionnaire survey. The questionnaire was loosely structured, utilising open-ended questions which would provide data wholly qualitative in nature. Cohen et al (2000) recognise the potential of open-ended questions to capture authenticity, richness, depth of response, honesty and candour but suggest that any questionnaire represents an intrusion into the life of the respondent in terms of time and effort. This may be especially true of open-ended questionnaires. I therefore kept the number of questions to a minimum, and adopted a sentence completion approach, advocated by Oppenheim (1992) framing each question within an incomplete sentence, and asking respondents to complete it in their own words.

Colleagues' insights were provided by responses to an open-ended questionnaire completed by three respondents and an impromptu exchange of thoughts and ideas. In contrast to the student questionnaire I felt it inappropriate to utilise Oppenheim's (1992) sentence completion approach which might appear too simplistic or even patronising, and alienate the respondents. Therefore the questions were presented as questions, and respondents were invited to reply.

A variety of different techniques exist for analysing qualitative data, each set within its own philosophical and theoretical framework (Priest et al 2002). As a novice researcher I had little experience of organising data, making sense of it and drawing conclusions but Marshall and Rossmans' (1999) generic data analysis strategy, provided guidance in identifying salient themes and recurring ideas in the qualitative data. Marshall and Rossman (1999) suggest that the researcher immerses themselves in the text through a period of prolonged engagement reading and repeatedly re-reading it whilst constructing notes and memos. Having gained a heightened awareness of the data, recurring themes can be identified and categories generated. For the purposes of report writing they suggest these categories be considered as buckets or baskets, into which segments of text can be placed.

In order to structure the data I treated student and lecturer responses separately whilst in each case, examining the data holistically since I anticipated that similar themes and categories would emerge from different data collection instruments. Transcribing the focus group tape provided the prolonged period of engagement with the data suggested by Marshall and Rossman (1999), and allowed me to become intimate with its content. I read and reread the transcript in conjunction with the student questionnaires and kept notes of recurrent ideas and emerging themes. I followed a similar process with the lecturer data, although not having a tape to transcribe seemed to make the process more difficult, and I found it harder to "get into" the data. Fewer categories emerged from the lecturer data, which may be indicative of its lesser quantity and quality.

Study Findings

Student Categories

Anxiety

Feelings of anxiety and worry are apparent in both focus group and questionnaire responses. All questionnaire respondents made at least one reference to it, and it commonly emerged in response to the incomplete sentence "When I think about academic writing I feel…"

scared and worried.
anxious that I won't be able to do it properly and get chucked off the course.
sick with worry.
really stressed.
worried, writing in the right way seems very important.
Worried, I just want to pass

Within the focus group it emerged strongly during discussion of student feelings before starting the course:

It (academic writing) was the thing I was worried about most.

the essays definitely the essays, I heard you had to do loads and they were hard, it was a worry.

Writing essays seems like a really big deal at university, you have to do them a certain way or you fail. I was so worried.

For students coming onto the programme who had not formally studied for an extended period, feelings of anxiety seemed heightened:

I was worried, its been ages since I've done any stuff like that, what if I can't do it, if I can't understand, just can't get it?

Its exciting (going to university) but scary really scary, I couldn't sleep for a few nights before.

Can't remember the last time I'd done an essay

Unclear about support

Student support was an abiding theme in questionnaire responses. In most cases it was comments concerned lack of clarity about how such arrangements work. This is illustrated within some of the replies to the incomplete sentence "the support I have received to develop my academic writing skills…"

Is ok, I think. I'm not sure what to expect though.

Don't know really.

Is that my personal tutor?

Where do I go for this?

Non-existent. I couldn't get hold of anyone when I was on placement, so I just did what I thought was right

Within the focus group discussion support was discussed for some considerable time. Again it seemed most students had notions about academic support being available, but were unsure about who provided it and what form it would take:

my personal tutor, isn't she just for stuff to do with my placement?

I'm sure my personal tutor would help, but I don't know exactly what it's ok to ask

I think your personal tutor is for everything

I think its you (points to base group facilitator) who helps me with my essay isn't it?

Will they (lecturers) read your work and give you comments?

I think the library could help, don't they have leaflets and stuff?

they (reference made to lecturers at a College of Further Education) told me that you don't get much help at university with your work, you don't get spoon fed.

Everyone (refers to academic staff) seems so busy, dashing around everywhere. I didn't like to disturb them.

Belonging

Many of the students expressed a desire to feel a sense of belonging with the University. Within the focus group discussion students talked about the period between being accepted onto the course and starting, and the desire to instantly identify themselves with the university and the course.

I was so pleased to be accepted, so excited. It (the university) was my first choice and I'd got in. I kept reading the website, looking at the pictures.

I got my letter offering the place, but then nothing more came. I thought they'd be more.

We (reference to student and her partner) came down on a Saturday to look round, I even took some pictures to show the kids.

I was expecting information to come telling me what to do, what to buy. I wanted to get books and things.

I had one of those badges made up, you know with Student Nurse on.

Those months went so slowly, I just wanted to get there, and be part of it.

I remember going to town and buying the Nursing Times and feeling so excited. I wanted to read Nursing stuff, to find out what it was like.

The issue of belonging was also apparent within the questionnaire data, especially in response to the incomplete sentence "receiving information about developing my academic writing before starting the course would…"

have been great, really useful. It would help me know what Salford wanted.

be a good idea, it would have made me feel like a real student sooner.

yes I agree with that. I heard nothing after my acceptance and I wanted to.

Been so useful. I had more time then and I could have got reading and looked at things like referencing.

Feeling prepared

The desire to feel prepared was highlighted by many students as being important to academic success. This was also related to lack of time once the course had commenced. Comments within the focus group included:

If I'd known about the reading lists sooner I could have got some books, done some reading.

I wish I'd known about that (reference made to handout material I'd prepared to support academic writing development) sooner.

I wasn't doing much then (reference made to time prior to commencing the course) I could have got prepared, started reading, got to grips with my computer.

I didn't know so much information would be computer based, I could have got more acquainted with email and stuff, learnt how it works. It's hard to find time now, with so much else going on.

The desire to feel prepared also emerged within the questionnaire data. In response to the incomplete question "the information should include…"

lists of books, so you know what to get.

examples of essays, that would be really useful, you'd know what to expect

tips about things you could do to get ready

examples of essay titles

stuff on referencing. I could have read about it beforehand.

Lecturer categories

Concern

Concern emerged as a theme throughout the questionnaire and informal meeting data, and in the main this related to issues regarding students' inability to engage with the academic writing process. Within the meeting the level of students' ability on starting the course was discussed, as was the worry of how this should be addressed. Responses to the question "Do you think students academic writing skills are a problem?" included:

Yes, in my opinion. I am often shocked by the standard of their written work in the first semester. Getting them up to speed can seem like a huge undertaking.

Yes, it causes them to underachieve, they know what they want to say, but don't have the skills to articulate it.

Definitely, they are unable to engage with the academic process, and this can prevent them from progressing.

Dissatisfaction

A general sense of dissatisfaction was apparent within the data concerning the current level of students' academic writing skills and also the strategies available to assist with their development. No consensus was reached within the meeting regarding the best way to offer equitable quality support. This was reflected in the replies to the question "In your experience what strategies are effective in developing students' academic writing skills…"

I don't think there is anything that is wholly satisfactory. It depends on the individual student and their levels of motivation.

I'm conscious we often refer students to their personal tutor, but I wonder how satisfactory that is. I don't like teaching academic skills, I hope others feel differently but perhaps they don't

Time wasting

The final category to emerge from the meeting and questionnaire data was time wasting. In response to discussion on using pre-course material there was concern that it would require additional work to develop and then students would fail to engage with it. In response to the question "Could pre-course material add anything new…" responses included:

Hopefully not more to my workload

I think probably something most students won't use

Possibly, but it will take time to develop and implement

Discussion, Conclusion and Further Research

Students seem to view the experience of academic writing as an obstacle or barrier to be overcome as best they can, with failure to navigate it correctly resulting in being removed from the course. They perceive it as a feature of Higher Education, a kind of "necessary evil" but there seems to be limited understanding of why they are being asked to engage with the process. Whitehead (2002) suggests that this is not uncommon, and it often results in the academic style itself becoming the overriding concern for the student in assessment, rather than the content of the assignment.

In terms of getting support and guidance both students and lecturers indicated problems with current strategies. The students identified a lack of transparency regarding support whilst the lecturers suggested that support is likely to be subject to

variation depending on relative enthusiasm and knowledge. Rolfe (1997) concurs with this, recognising that not all nurse educators appear to appreciate or endorse the process of academia, suggesting that in some cases this may be because they are unsure of what this actually entails. It may well be that many nurse educators themselves could benefit from further support with their own academic writing skills so they can fully understand the demands which are being placed on their students.

A need for belonging emerged strongly within the student data. Students expressed a keen desire to become part of the University as soon as they had been accepted onto the course. The period between successful application and course commencement can be lengthy - with some students waiting a year to start their programme - during which time they search for information and ways to establish links with the institution. Trotter (2003) recognises the potential for relationship building within her work on enhancing the early student experience. She suggests that beginning it sooner rather than later can be beneficial to student retention and progression. It seems that by failing to communicate with our students during the period between acceptance and enrolment we are missing a valuable opportunity. The development and implementation of pre-course material could be a way to seize that opportunity to the benefit of both institution and student.

The use of pre-course material might go some way towards helping students to 'feel prepared' avoiding the frustration surrounding lack of time once the course began, and the sense of "if only I had known about that before". A prime example is the reliance on Information Technology for communication that students could have begun to address earlier had they been given prior knowledge. Glackin and Glackin (1998) suggest this need to feel prepared is more prevalent among mature students, who often doubt their ability to cope with academic study, and feel an acute fear of failure. Again pre-course material could provide a useful way of addressing this, and considering the issues raised by the students its scope could extend beyond academic writing skills, to provide information about organisational arrangements.

In summary this study suggests academic writing skills are a concern for both staff and students, and current support strategies are perceived as not working as well as they might, due to problems with equity, consistency and transparency. As for the development of pre-course material per se, this was less enthusiastically endorsed within the lecturer data, and I got a sense of "innovation fatigue" which is understandable. Yet I feel that our responsibility for the learning needs of our students begins before their arrival on campus and addressing these needs through provision of pre-course material might assist in enhancing the on-campus experience for both staff and students alike.

Reflections on the Research Process

Collaboration issues

On reflection I feel that I failed to collaborate sufficiently with students and colleagues at the planning stage of this study. My reflective journal suggests that on commencing my action research journey I did not fully appreciate the participatory nature of the process. I perceived myself as a lone researcher, taking responsibility for all decisions. Therefore my approach at this point was reminiscent of the technical collaborative approach articulated by Holter and Schwartz-Barcott (1993). They are intensely critical of this approach, suggesting that where practitioners pre-plan research without recourse to their collaborators, the participatory and democratic spirit of action research is lost. However, Williamson and Prosser (2002) suggest that the requirement for action research to be a wholly group activity at every stage can be problematic. Asking other practitioners to become involved in a project, when they are already struggling with their own workload, can be difficult and tense. To some degree this resonates with me. As a new lecturer I felt reluctant to ask my colleagues to give up too much of their time to assist in planning and implementation. Although most of those I approached were happy to corroborate my decisions, and respond to specific queries or requests for data, none questioned me about their role in the study, or requested more involvement. This could be indicative of a lack of interest in my initial research question, a lack of interest in action research per se, or perhaps a lack of understanding regarding the action research process.

In terms of the students I worked with I am not entirely sure that they assumed the role of collaborators as such. When introducing the research and asking them for their support, I was keen to stress that they were being asked to collaborate with me, rather then become my research subjects. However, on reflection I am not sure I did enough to ensure that their participation went much beyond responding to my requests for data. Within my base group, following the focus group, several students asked me about the research, how it was progressing and what direction it was taking. There were also some limited

exchanges between students on the discussion board that the group use within the Blackboard Virtual Learning Environment (VLE). Clearly, they were interested but perhaps I did not provide a sufficiently robust framework to facilitate their engagement.

Moderating the focus group

Moderating the focus group was more difficult than I had anticipated. Whilst the audio tape captured verbal communication I had intended to compile field notes at the same time. In practice this was impossible. Nyamathi and Shuler (1990) advocate the support of a note-taker during focus groups to ensure context is recorded and data collection is as rich as possible, and I would certainly consider this with future groups. I also found issues surrounding my own involvement with the group problematic. I noticed that some participants, after making a comment or contribution, would look to me for validation, much as they would in a teaching situation. Responding to this may have biased the data collection, but conversely by not showing any response the participants may have felt inhibited. On reflection I think the duality of my role with the group as Lecturer/ Base Group Facilitator and researcher/ focus group moderator, served as a blessing and a curse. My familiarity with the group and the familiarity of group members with each other meant a rapport existed from the start, and it was not necessary to devote time to "warming up", in order to facilitate interaction (Holloway and Wheeler 2002). However I also think this familiarity resulted in a focus group that was laden with expectation regarding patterns of behaviour and interaction.

Engaging colleagues

I had originally intended to replicate the focus group and questionnaire approach adopted with students to gain insights from colleagues. I deliberately targeted 5 lecturers I perceived to be most approachable and was pleased when all agreed to take part, but on reflection this seems to have been the undoing of this particular aspect of my data collection. It was incredibly difficult for the 5 lecturers and myself to find a mutually agreeable time (within the time-frame for completing the study), to hold the focus group meeting. Eventually two lecturers suggested an impromptu get together to explore ideas and share thoughts. However, this met few, if any, of the criteria for the conduct of a focus group, as it lacked any attempt to instil structure or moderation.

Data analysis

Data analysis is the process of bringing order, structure and interpretation to the mass of collected data. As Marshall and Rossman (1999) highlight it is messy, ambiguous and time consuming, and I would say this is an accurate reflection of my experience. The data I generated was voluminous; I had a lengthy focus group transcript, a pile of questionnaires, field notes and a journal, and the prospect of trying to make sense of it all seemed overwhelming initially.

Impact on Continuing Professional Development (CPD) and future direction

The study has enthused me to pursue the idea further, and aim for piloting the use of pre-course material in the near future. In addition, it has also allowed me to explore the use of action research to solve problems and initiate change. Were I to engage with the process again I would aim for much greater effectiveness with regards to collaboration. I am conscious of the fact that this first cycle has lacked clear collaborative effort, and has mainly been undertaken as a solo research project with data input from specific groups and individuals. Although interesting data has emerged, I think greater collaboration and participation would have strengthened and added to it.

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Education Development Unit
University of Salford
Salford, Greater Manchester
M5 4WT
United Kingdom

T +44 (0)161 295 2331
F +44 (0)161 295 2332

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