Developing research capabilities in FE lecturers through practitioner led action research

Ian Minty[*]
Lewes Castle College, UHI Millennium Institute,
ian.minty@lews.uhi.ac.uk
Tel. 01851-770415

Elisabet Weedon
Centre for Research in Education, Inclusion and Diversity, Edinburgh University,
Elisabet.weedon@ed.ac.uk
Tel. 0131-651-6170

Kate Morss
Centre for Academic Practice, Queen Margaret University,
kmorss@qmu.ac.uk
Tel. 0131-317-3517

Pete Cannell
The Open University in Scotland,
p.a.cannell@open.ac.uk
Tel. 0131-226-3851

Abstract

This article reports on a small-scale collaborative project to develop research capabilities in Further Education lecturers. The majority of the participants were lecturers in constituent colleges of the UHI Millennium Institute (UHI) who were new to research. Research capacity building in FE is a developing area of interest and is particularly relevant in the

[*] Corresponding author

UHI where many staff teach in both FE and HE. This paper charts the development of the project which engaged each of the participants in action research supported by an experienced mentor and online peer support. The findings of the project suggest that action research can facilitate the development of research skills but that there may also be wider benefits in terms of professional practice.   The article ends with a set of recommendations for practice.

Key words: FE, Research Capacity, Action Research, Mentoring

Introduction

The main aim of this project was to help develop research skills in Further Education lecturers who are involved in both Further Education (FE) and Higher Education (HE) delivery. The project was supported by a grant from ESCalate and the full report is available from ESCalate (Minty et al. 2007)

Recent developments in FE have recognised the need to develop research capacity within FE institutions, and the Scottish Further Education Unit (SFEU) has responded and created the FE Regional Research Network (FERRN). Eliot (2005), in a research report for the Scottish Further Education Unit, notes the importance of development which is appropriate to the context of the Scottish colleges and the need to develop research skills of staff if research results are to be 'credible and relevant'. UHI Millennium Institute (UHI), a federal institution consisting of a network of fourteen FE colleges and two research establishments, also recognises the need to develop research capacity. Many staff within the colleges that form UHI now teach at both FE and HE level and are increasingly expected to engage with research. However, there are limited links between the two research establishments and staff in the colleges. Traditionally, college staff have not engaged in research and have therefore not necessarily developed the required skills.

Although a variety of models have been proposed for developing research capacity in

colleges (Anderson, Barton and Wahlberg 2003), an effective approach seems to be the linking of small scale research to issues in practice. For example Cunningham and Doncaster (2002) report on an institutional case study where staff were encouraged to participate in accredited learning which consisted of undertaking research that linked to practice. These authors argue that this research-teaching linkage benefited both the individual and the institution.   A positive effect of such an approach on teaching and learning is highlighted by Hillier and Jameson (2003) and Coats and Stevenson (2004).

Action research was therefore chosen as a methodology for the project reported here as it, by definition, involves small scale research and is rooted in practice (Denscombe 2003). Action research can be defined as:

> *'C*ritical (and self-critical) collaborative enquiry by
> *R*eflective practitioner being
> *A*ccountable and making the results of their enquiry public,
> *S*elf-evaluating their practice and engaged in
> *P*articipative problem-solving and continuing professional development.'*
> Zuber-Skerritt (1992a, p. 5)

In other words, action research involves individuals in research activity located in their everyday professional environment. This was important in our project since college staff typically have heavy teaching timetables and research activity needed to be designed so that it fitted into day-to-day practice rather than involving an extra commitment.

We drew on an action research model that was tested within the Open University in Scotland in the 1990s partly because one of the authors was involved in that development and had experienced positive outcomes, including publication of the research (Weedon 2000). In this model there is a strong emphasis on supported individuals or groups of practitioners engaging in research into their own practice and reporting on it. Although Kemmis and McTaggart (1988) have critiqued this approach by stressing the systematic nature of research and the need for research skills, which they suggest go beyond those of the teacher, we would contend that practitioner led action research is a constructive approach for motivating and engaging teachers as novice researchers and for starting up

the development of a research culture.

The overall aim of this project was to support the development of basic research skills through the planning and execution of a small-scale project that related to one aspect of the individual's teaching practice. Thus, action research activity could fit into the daily work of the participants. Participants were expected to identify a topic for investigation, write their research question(s), plan their study, engage with relevant literature, identify suitable methods for collecting and recording data, analyse that data and draw some conclusions. Support included mentoring and a framework of workshops and online discussion boards intended to encourage the development of a community of researching practitioners loosely based on Wenger's ideas on communities of practice (Wenger 1998). Therefore, in accordance with the key characteristics Wenger attributes to communities of practice, participants would be supported to share and commit to a domain of interest, engage jointly in activities to exchange information of use to others, build relationships and develop a repertoire of resources to help each other in their practice.

The specific objectives were to:

- develop research capacity in FE staff engaged in FE and/or HE teaching;
- make use of small scale action research projects to contextualise this development within the staff's own professional practice;
- engage with aspects of learning and teaching as part of the process of capacity building;
- encourage staff to disseminate their findings through publication in academic journals and/or presentations at conferences.

With a brief summary on the nature of the project, details of which can be found in the full project report (Minty et al. 2007), this paper focuses on participants' experiences of support, on outcomes and challenges for participants and on mentors' experiences. Based on these results and the extent to which the initial objectives were achieved, recommendations for future practice are provided.

Participants

Six members of staff were recruited initially; one male lecturer withdrew citing pressure of work. All were new to action research and the remaining volunteers were all female. Participants 1, 2 and 3 came from different small island colleges; Participant 4 was a non-UHI participant who worked in a small, city-based higher education institution; and Participant 5 came from a large UHI college. Participants are referred to by number to ensure anonymity.

The four UHI members of staff were all full-time lecturers and the participant from the other HEI is Head of Student Services, a unit which provides schools and community liaison, student learning support, disability advisory services, student counselling and medical services.

Mentors

The core mentoring team of the project initially consisted of two people who put together the proposal, one from a UHI institution and one from HE. They were joined by two colleagues from another institution (HEI) and by a further two UHI members of staff. One of the UHI members of staff did not have time to continue working with the project; the other did stay as a mentor and attended the first workshop. The team therefore represented a substantial body of experience from a wide range of educational sectors, straddling secondary, FE and HE.

Procedure and support offered

The participants were supported in a range of ways:

- Two workshop meetings – one at the start and one at the end of project. All participants attended the first meeting and were allocated to mentors at this meeting. Prior to the first meeting, participants were asked to respond to a series of questions

about planning their research, and this proforma, adapted from Coats (2005), served to guide subsequent discussion between participants and mentors.

- A Blackboard online discussion forum which was managed by one of the project team
- One video-conferencing meeting during the middle of the project 'attended' by three of the participants
- One-to-one mentoring at a distance mainly via email but also by phone

Evaluation

Two members of the team took responsibility for ensuring that evaluation was embedded throughout the project to ascertain participants' perspectives of their experiences. Data was collected by observation at the workshops, through structured written feedback from participants, analysis of interactions on the discussion forum and through structured telephone interviews after one year of participation in the project. At each of these points of data collection, participants were asked to reflect on the following by using broad prompter questions: their achievements; problems, difficulties and/or barriers to progressing their research and actions taken to overcome those barriers; support within their institution and within the ESCalate team; what and how they might do things differently.

Findings

The findings reported here include the practitioners' views on the support offered, the challenges and outcomes for the practitioners and the issues faced by the mentors

Support

As mentioned above the practitioners were supported through two workshops, a video-conference meeting, individual e-mail/telephone discussions and an online discussion board. The first workshop was attended by all and all participants felt that this had been a

valuable experience. One of the participants felt that the discussion had helped her clarify her own understanding of what she intended to do:

> *'I liked the discussion of other people's thoughts on their research subjects and the methods that they were intending to use for their research questions.' (Part. 1)*

The others agreed and another participant noted that it helped her in the development of her research questions:

> *'To clearly define the research question and evaluate what kind of research I will use, where to find these things and to set down a plan for my research.' (Part. 4)*

The first workshop clearly was valuable to all participants and it is likely that the project would have been less successful if it had not included a face-to-face initial meeting. Feedback from the participants suggested it helped establish relationships and clarified issues around research. However, with hindsight, it seems that more emphasis should have been placed on establishing viable research questions and considering the relationship between previous, published research and the development of research questions.

The online discussion board was set up immediately after this meeting and was managed by the project leader. It was well used by two of the participants and two of the mentors and it clearly provided useful support for these two participants:

> *'The online discussion boards were helpful too, for the same reason. I could talk to other people about my ideas and get different perspectives. It also let people talk who might have been a bit more reluctant or shy'. (Part 1)*

However, it was not used on a regular basis and those not using found it difficult to handle the online environment. It was therefore only partially successful in creating a community of practice and much of the video-conferencing meeting was taken up with discussing how to make this tool more effective.

The individual mentoring was arranged by each pair and therefore varied. It was mostly done via email but telephone conversations were also used. Participant 1 felt that she

needed regular contact and that phone conversations were particularly helpful and that prompting questions from her mentor helped:

> *He prompted me often: 'How are you getting on? Do you want to talk on the phone?' He helped me keep on time and target. I completed it in time and [name] kept me right. He also let me know when he would be away. He was very good at asking questions to make me think: 'How will you do that?' What's your time frame?' types of questions. Sometimes he would say 'that's rubbish', but that was fine – it was. (Part. 1)*

Participants felt that mentors did not need to come from the same subject area but one of them felt that local support would have helped. One of the participants, the one who did not complete her project also noted that whilst her mentor had tried hard to contact her, she had not responded because she felt she had not done enough work. It was clear that the participants recognised that working with a mentor was a two-way process that needed engagement by both parties. However, this can be more difficult when the contact is at a distance.

The final workshop was attended by four of the mentors but only two of the participants. The other participants were asked to contribute through written comments. The lack of attendance highlighted one of the problems that was evident throughout the project – lack of time. Whilst we had managed to get all to attend the first meeting, it proved impossible to identify a date that was suitable for all for the second workshop. As the project was nearing its completion date it was decided to go ahead with only two participants. This final workshop was used to explore what the participants had gained from participation in the project and that is explored in the section that follows.

Outcomes and challenges for the participants

Four out of the five participants completed or part completed their projects. The fifth participant did not. However, she took part in the evaluation and it was clear that she had gained important skills through engaging with the process of developing a research project in spite of not seeing this through to a final product. Prior to the final workshop all participants were asked to reflect on their experiences including what they felt they had

achieved and what problems they had encountered.

Four of the participants either responded to these at workshop 2 or in a later telephone interview. They all reported an increased understanding of research but in somewhat different ways. Participant 1 felt it had really moved her understanding forward and she had discussed aspects of it with colleagues in other colleges and was intending to take her research forward as part of her professional development. Participant 2 felt she had recognised that you needed to think through the topic and make sure you did not make it too limited. Participant 4 was still working on her project. Her institution had demanded that she seek ethical approval and this had taught her how to sharpen up her project and had helped her develop a more effective questionnaire. Participant 5 who did not progress with her project felt that she had learnt the need to think through and define research questions. She, along with one other participant, had opted to use a reflective research journal and she had found this immensely helpful.

In terms of problems it was clear that all participants had suffered from a lack of time; however, this was compounded by the fact that none (including the HEI participant) were considered as researchers by their institution and it was therefore not easy to justify engaging in research during work hours. Another difficulty identified was the unpredictability of research:

> Participant 1: *The problems I've encountered have been more to do with the changes I have tried to implement through my research and it not going the way I expected, but that's OK because now I know that certain things won't work.*

> Participant 2*: I haven't found any barriers, except, as I've said, my own motivation and, of course, pressure of other work taking precedence (HMI etc).*

Participant 2 also noted that she found reviewing the literature challenging. This was not mentioned by the others but the mentors generally felt that this was an area that the project had not developed effectively.

Issues for the mentors

As mentioned above, participants were allocated to a mentor at the first workshop and the pair then worked together through the duration of the project. This worked generally well and there were opportunities for interaction between all on the discussion board. However, for one pair, there was a potential of clash of roles as her mentor was also her tutor on a course that she was undertaking. The mentor felt uneasy about this but the participant did not see it as problematic. In addition, one of the mentors found it difficult to handle mentoring 'at a distance' and it was clear that one of the participants would have welcomed more local support.

Another issue for the mentors was when to intervene and contact the participant and when not to do so. This is possibly particularly challenging when mentoring 'at a distance'. It is difficult to know whether a 'silence' is due to work going well, whether the participant has hit a snag or if there are problems in other areas such as work or domestically. Making contact can be seen as helpful as it can act as a prompt for action or as interference at a time when there are other more pressing duties. The mentor team concluded that it might have been helpful to develop a set of guidelines and initial ground rules for mentors and those that are being mentored. The team also considered other ways of organising the mentoring so that mentees could have access to all members of the project team as they offered different skills. It was felt that the discussion board could have been used more effectively for this purpose.

Summary and Conclusion

It was clear from the accounts of the participants, even the one who did not submit, that they felt that they have developed research skills. They had learnt not just new skills that they could apply but also what did not work. All the participants engaged with some aspect of their own practice and explored aspects of their teaching (or intended to do so in case of Participant 5). In many ways this confirms the emphasis by Glaser and Strauss (1967) on 'the importance of the understanding lecturers develop from their action research emerging out of the specific teaching and learning contexts they are working in …'. Project outcomes

also underline the reflective dimension of action research (Schön 1987) and it is interesting to note that two of the participants commented on the value of using a reflective journal to support their development as researchers.

Whilst the participants experienced some level of success it was also evident that developing a more widespread research culture in a context which has not previously included research activity is not an easy task. Institutional pressures and culture impinged on mentors and mentees. The project team member who was involved the least explained this in very similar terms to one of the participants:

> *'I wanted to support and mentor my colleagues, but it just didn't work; I couldn't find the time and have been doing a lot of 'fire-fighting'. I didn't feel I did very much. … I would think long and hard next time about whether I could commit and make a real contribution. I'd love to do it, but only if I felt I could really manage it.' (Mentor)*

This raises an important issue for staff working in FE and HE, especially one like UHI that encompasses both in a tertiary environment.   It is often tempting to respond positively to research initiatives, but creating and managing the time in an already over-loaded schedule can simply compound the problems of organising one's time. Scaife (2004) explores the development of research in an FE setting and also comments on the lack of 'organisational 'space' or time' available in FE for ongoing research. He argues that FE colleges operate in a 'culture of the now' and that this is based on three factors. The first he refers to as 'structural instability', the second as 'the management of risk' and the third that FE colleges do not treat their employees as their most valuable assets.   Whilst our project did not collect data to explore Scaife's views it is clear that many Scottish FE colleges (including some UHI colleges) have experienced financial difficulties which are likely to impact on the extent to which they would engage in research which may not bring in income at this stage. A number of them have also undergone restructuring which impacts on staff deployment. It is not for this project to comment on the extent to which college managers value their staff. One further interesting point made by Scaife though was that there was a great willingness and creative imagination amongst at least some staff in the colleges. This is clearly what we have also seen in our project.

Cunningham and Doncaster (2002) are more optimistic about the development of a research culture and demonstrate that linking action research type projects to staff development can have an impact. They had a more ambitious programme within a single college which offered accreditation for the work undertaken. They argue that student experience had been enhanced as a result of these types of projects but warned that the demands on staff time is considerable – equally so for those supporting those engaging in research and those undertaking the research.   UHI also has an accredited Masters in Professional Development which includes research modules. The model suggested by Cunningham and Doncaster thus presents a possible option for UHI.

Zuber-Skerritt (1992b) argues that, in order to develop the complex skills required of academic staff now and for the future (as teachers, researchers and managers of learning and teaching and curricula and budgets), we need to think more creatively about how we provide staff development. She concludes (p 219); "*My research has shown that action research has been considered as a more effective approach to staff development than any of the traditional methods we have used…*"

From our experience here we would agree with the advice of Hillier and Jamieson (2003) on empowering researchers in FE: undertake small scale action research, focus on topics that aid teaching and learning, and belong to a research community. McArthur et al (2004) also suggest the need to establish a "...*framework, techniques and support for people who may not have undertaken research….*"   Hamilton (2006) comments on the positive experiences and skills developed by those that participated in practitioner research, but identifies the difficulties imposed by constraints on time and a lack of funding which can become barriers to this type of research. In addition to these same constraints, we have also identified contextual factors such as the lack of an institutional research culture and/or financial commitment.

It seems that developing research capability through the use of an action research type approach does have an impact on those that engage in it. Our findings and the research briefly reported above thus supports this approach as one means of developing research capability. However, it requires institutional commitment in terms of resources and support.

Recommendations

- Action research helps those engaged to develop research skills if suitably supported. It can also act as a form of CPD. It would therefore be worthwhile for institutions that wish to develop a research culture to explore the use of action type research in relation to teaching and learning;

- However, any institution that decides to take this forward should consider the support provided for those participating and develop networks which include those already reasonably proficient in research to mentor those developing skills. There would also be a need to develop an attitude within the institutions which values research amongst all staff;

- If networks are established it is important to consider using a range of ways of supporting them including the development of online facilities. This could include further development of a dedicated space to include links to research literature or research tools developed by others, e.g. through the TLRP research capacity building network;

- Institutions considering this approach also need to consider allowing time (e.g. as CPD) for developing these skills and also how development of research skills might impact on future career developments. Incentives for staff to participate should also be considered. We offered a small sum of money; however, time to conduct research is likely to be the most important support that can be offered to staff;

- It should also be noted that there is a risk involved when using project money to develop research capacity. It can be useful to provide a starting point; however, unless the institution is willing to support further development, for example through staff development, engagement in research is likely to dwindle.

Finally the views of the least engaged project team member provides a fitting conclusion:

> *I think it's a good idea. I think some people are 'frightened to start research' so small scale projects like those Escalate was meant to support provide an opportunity for a 'first step'. I think it's probably much less scary that way. And it's important to have mentoring or support from others when you are starting out.*

Acknowledgement

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