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Practitioner Research In Higher Education

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Editorial

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Within the field of Education there are ongoing debates about the value of relatively small-scale practitioner research projects. It is important that researchers build their projects on previous work to develop generative research that contributes to the a robust body of evidence. On the other hand it can be argued that knowledge can be created in the workplace and building a body of focused practitioner research contributes an important distinctive and critical element to the overall evidence base as well as driving change in practice on the ground. In general, there is broad agreement on the value of practitioner research as a form of professional development. However, a significant risk exists in relation to practitioner research because of the Neoliberal agenda that powerfully influences contemporary academic workplaces. In reflecting on the history of action research by teachers Stephen Kemmis expresses concern that such activity may become 'domesticated' within managerialist workplace contexts and is critical of action research that 'aims only at improving techniques of teaching...without seeing these as connected to broader questions about the education of students for a better society' (2006: 460).

The editorial board here at the Practitioner Research in Higher Education journal would encourage practitioner researchers across the sector to continue to pursue their approach with energy and determination whilst critically reflecting on the level and nature of their academic autonomy. The journal requires authors to review relevant literature and locate their findings within the existing evidence base. Beyond that we would welcome papers on empirical studies that apply and evaluate a well-developed theoretical framework because, as Kurt Lewin so neatly asserted 'there is nothing so practical as a good theory' (1951:169). The journal also welcomes fairly pragmatic evaluation papers that adopt a scholarly approach but are unashamedly focused on change in practice. The value of a particular practitioner research paper may therefore be in its contribution to knowledge and / or in its relevance to practice. The open access format of the journal means that we would encourage established researchers to consider submitting papers aimed at end-users of their research.

This issue of Practitioner Research in Higher Education presents inquiry projects investigating aspects of teaching, learning and assessment across the range of undergraduate, Masters and Doctoral level students. These kinds of practitioner research projects have key characteristics linked to effective professional development and to leadership of change in practice: they are generally sustained over a period of time, enquiry-based, collaborative and involve critical engagement with external knowledge. In the case of teaching teams and academic developers in higher education it

seems particularly appropriate for professional development and enhancement of programmes to be pursued through research-based activity.

In the first paper Alison Brown investigates how final year undergraduate students in a professional field make sense of 'criticality'. The students used analogies and metaphors, including the culinary delights of chocolate and curry, to express their conceptions of 'criticality'. Picking up on the tendency of the students to identify linguistic binaries, Brown offers 'The Criticality Wheel' as a tool to work with students as part of their academic induction.

The second paper by Janet Haresnape evaluates a collaborative online wiki task that has been adapted from a practical face to face tutorial activity focused on the troublesome concept of 'genetic drift' which is an important element of evolutionary theory. The perspectives and learning of a range of undergraduate students were analysed in relation to the visual, authentic and collaborative aspects of the activity. The wiki allowed students to build on each other's ideas and the study showed that it was of particular benefit to those with lower current levels of achievement.

In their paper Carol Bailey and Rachel Challen consider the use of text-matching software (Turnitin) as a tool for supporting undergraduate students' development of academic writing rather than simply in relation to detecting plagiarism. Their evaluation showed that introducing such software within the context of a module provoked much higher engagement by students than using stand-alone workshops. Third year undergraduate students were still reporting considerable concerns around plagiarism and academic writing and the authors argue that it is all too easy to underestimate the need for ongoing support for academic skills.

In her paper Elaine Campbell evaluates a determined effort to go beyond normal 'student-led' seminars and allow Masters level Law students to plan and facilitate sessions on a clinical legal module. This approach increased the level of interaction within the sessions and helped to increase the confidence and contributions of quiet students within and beyond the session they designed and facilitated.

In two short reflective papers Carey Philpott critically evaluates gaps and weaknesses in research and professional discourse around doctoral study in the light of his own generally enjoyable but somewhat extended experiences as a part-time PhD student. Firstly, he argues that the nature of traditional and 'professional' doctorates are converging so that supervisor awareness of differences in student motivation and identity formation are likely to be more important than different routes. In his second paper he exposes limitations in the literature on doctoral non-completion centred on differences between the conceptions of research held by students and their supervisors.

These papers illustrate the value of practitioner research approaches to enhancement of teaching, learning and assessment in higher education. As a community we need to encourage academics, academic developers and institutional leaders to embrace practitioner research as a strategy for driving educational development and for transforming what counts as educational knowledge. We also need to make clear the need for academic autonomy, a critical stance and adoption of an ethical framework that are essential characteristics of such an approach.

References

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