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**Practitioner Enquiry as part of Professional
Development:
'Action Research' re-visited and re-viewed in the
context of
Outcomes-Based Education**

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Practitioner Enquiry as part of Professional Development: 'Action Research' re-visited and re-viewed in the context of Outcomes-Based Education

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Abstract

In the past five years there has been considerable change in curriculum design and delivery in universities in the UK, as the sector moves towards an outcomes-based approach. This is having a marked effect on teaching and learning, and particularly on assessment strategies and methods. Accompanying the curriculum change we have seen an increased emphasis on the role of teaching in HE, with central funding to support academic staff through 'subject networks', key publications and resources. At the same time there has been high profile recognition for 'teaching excellence' and a move towards the 'accreditation' of HE academic staff with mandatory continuous professional development (CPD) as part of quality enhancement.

Staff in the Centre for Outcomes Based Education (COBE) at the UK Open University have attempted to make links between the two areas of change - curriculum development and academic staff development - through a university wide project on Learning Outcomes and Their Assessment (LOTA). This has led us to re-visit and re-view an action research approach. What started as one relatively small, but very effective, initiative has now developed into a range of different activities across the university, encouraging practitioner enquiry as part of professional development and as a contribution to quality enhancement.

Unlike much of the earlier action research work in higher education - in South Africa as well as Australia and the UK - the enquiries have been carried out by academic staff into their own practice as part of their own professional development. Several patterns have emerged in a range of projects involving central and regional academics, part-time tutors and their students in most faculties and regions of the OU. The emphasis has been on collaboration - through shared enquiry, shared findings and, most significantly, through sharing experiences that enhance practice.

In previous papers, including one presented at the SAAAD conference at Rhodes University in 2000, we have argued that making outcomes more explicit to students and designing the appropriate assessment of them can enhance the learning experience, particularly where reflective and meta-cognitive processes are encouraged. We are now exploring the extent to which the same outcomes-based approach to curriculum design and delivery, accompanied by 'action research' enquiries and reflection, might encourage meta-cognitive awareness of our own professional practice.

Introduction

There are several themes that run through this paper:

- It is about 'work in progress' at the UK Open University (UK/OU); the story and the lessons learned are continually changing. This paper tells the story so far - and points to some of the challenges for the future.
- There are many issues for discussion and debate but no clear or simple answers to the questions we are exploring; no guidelines to be followed; no blueprint for 'success'. Indeed, the definition of 'success' is itself contested.
- This kind of work must be understood against the historical, political and social context in which higher education is located within a society and the position of the UK/OU within UK higher education. While the situation in South Africa is very different to that currently experienced in the UK, it may be possible to draw parallels and identify shared areas of interest.

The Higher Education context in the UK

Undoubtedly the most significant event for Higher Education (HE) in England, Wales and Northern Ireland was the publication of the report of the National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education – the Dearing Report (1997). An equivalent report, the Garrick report (1997), was produced by a similar committee in Scotland. The reports led to the setting up of a new agency – or rather a merging of other agencies with a new remit – known as the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA), responsible for the HE sector. The initiatives that have been instigated by this agency and the responses by the sector have a direct bearing on higher education as a whole and therefore on the work we are doing in the UK/OU. (For details of the work of the UK QAA see their website www.qaa.ac.uk).

The main areas of their work that impact directly on the higher education curriculum are:

- The development of National Qualification Frameworks that describe the outcomes, abilities and characteristics of students gaining either undergraduate or post-graduate awards within those Frameworks.
- The compiling of Subject Benchmarking statements that specify what outcomes students should demonstrate on completion of an BA or BSc Honours degree in the subject concerned.
- The requirement that all HE institutions produce and publish 'Programme Specifications' for all of their named awards that include, among other details, the intended learning outcomes of the award together with information on the teaching, learning and assessment strategies and methods involved.

Compliance with these requirements and other quality assurance issues are maintained in EW and NI through a new system of 'Institutional Audit' introduced in 2004 and in Scotland through a rather different approach where the emphasis is on 'quality enhancement'. The significance and the implications of these two different approaches and the terminology used will be discussed later in the paper. What they have in common is a requirement that curriculum design and delivery in higher education throughout the UK is outcomes-based. Institutions identify and describe their own learning outcomes with reference to the frameworks and specifications listed above.

While these requirements have major implications for the design of the higher education curriculum, a two other recommendations in the Dearing Report have had a different kind of impact - less obvious and yet potentially as significant.

We recommend that the representative bodies [within HE] should immediately establish a professional Institute for Learning and Teaching in Higher Education (ILTHE). The functions of the Institute would be to accredit programmes of training for higher education teachers; to commission research and development in learning and teaching practices; and to stimulate innovation.

We recommend that institutions of higher education begin immediately to develop or seek access to programmes of teacher training of their staff, and that all institutions seek national accreditation of such programmes from the ILTHE. (NCIHE Report 1997).

In 2004 the ILTHE and its role will become part of the new 'Higher Education Academy' which is described as '... a new body created to support quality enhancement and the student experience in higher education'. (Press release on www.heacademy.ac.uk 28.1.2004).

The requirements of ILTHE have already had considerable significance for those of us engaged in academic, educational or professional development provision within higher education in terms of status, focus and requirements.⁽¹⁾ The work of the new Higher Education Academy is expected to be equally, if not more, significant.

Summarising some of the developments of the past five years indicates the increasing attention being paid to teaching and learning within the UK higher education sector, much of which has been accompanied by targeted funding.

- Since 1997, with the move towards an outcomes-based approach, we have seen greater emphasis on the description of outcomes, explicit information about learning and teaching strategies and more emphasis on the importance of assessment as part of the learning process.
- Government funded initiatives through the Higher Education Funding Councils, the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA), the Learning and Teaching Subject Networks (LTSNs) and ILTHE have focused much more on the quality of teaching and learning in higher education; national and institutional Teaching Awards and Fellowships have been created and there is now dedicated funding for the implementation of Learning and Teaching Strategies within each institution.
- There has been a renewed interest in research and more publications on learning and teaching in the HE sector with specifically more research on learning and teaching within particular disciplines. References to the 'scholarship of teaching' are increasing in frequency and the work of Boyer(1997) is often quoted and discussed.
- References to the 'reflective practitioner' are common, though there are still many untested assumptions about the links between reflection, performance and development.
- The change of emphasis from quality *assurance* (ie ensuring that something is done well) to quality *enhancement* (ie ensuring that it is done better) is subtle but significant.

The UK Open University: implications of an outcomes-based approach

These national developments in higher education form the background to the work of the Learning Outcomes and Their Assessment (LOTA) project in the UK/OU and have transformed the brief of the project from one of exploration to one of implementation. Working with academic staff in all faculties and schools to transform curriculum design and delivery throughout the university into an outcomes-based approach was a massive academic task in an institution that offers almost 200 undergraduate courses to over 125,000 students, plus a range of post-graduate provision.

The students of the OU are all adults, studying part-time through distance learning, supported by local part-time tutors, also known as Associate Lecturers (ALs), who are all part of a regional network staffed by academics and administrators. The programmes of study towards OU awards (certificates, diplomas and degrees) are compiled from the accumulation of credit through studying different courses. Course teams of academics based mainly at the central campus in Milton Keynes plan and produce the courses which are delivered directly to students, but their learning is mediated and supported by their tutors through tutorials, individual contact and, most importantly, through the marking and feedback on assignments. Any curriculum change that involves the specification and the assessment of learning outcomes is going to affect those involved in the design, as well as those responsible for the delivery, of the curriculum.

The intended learning outcomes for all courses and all programmes of study have now been documented in course and programme specifications. Currently the challenge is to ensure that assessment strategies and assessment methods support the development of the stated outcomes and enable them to be appropriately assessed. The LOTA Project has always seen assessment as part of the learning process through both formative and summative assignments and the role of the tutor is crucial in this.

Like all higher education institutions in the UK, the Open University has been involved in significant curriculum change, both in response to external requirements and due to internal constraints. Similar responses have been necessary in the provision of relevant academic professional development. Specific funding from HEFCE to implement the OU's *'Human Resource Strategy'* enabled us to explore different ways of enhancing the professional development of our staff during this period of change. At this point, LOTA-related work moved almost unnoticed from a 'quality assurance' focus to one of 'quality enhancement'. One strand of this has been to encourage both full-time and part-time colleagues, individually or collaboratively, to engage in action research projects that focus on learning and teaching. The rest of this paper describes and discusses the action research activities of our part-time tutors linked to their professional development.

Action Research: a look at the literature

Action research is an approach that has been used extensively in many educational settings, although the precise definition and description of the process is often contested. In essence it is a process whereby a 'practitioner' (eg a teacher, in any context and at any level) and their 'learners' (eg students in any institution or setting) carry out 'research' into some aspect of their teaching and learning with a view to improving it. In terms of a research method it remains a minority approach, although those using qualitative approaches or 'grounded theory' (Glaser and Strauss 1968, Altrichter 1989) are more likely to appreciate its value as research. In terms of professional development, however, it retains a major role especially in teacher training. During the 1990s and through to the present time, papers linking action research to teacher training and teacher practice are common. (eg Aspland et al 1996, Sachs 2000, and Tubbs 2000). Examples involving academic staff in post-compulsory and higher education are less common but there are some interesting examples in from both the UK, Canada, Hong Kong and Jamaica. (McMahon 1999, Swann and Eccleston 1999, Harland and Staniforth 2000, Kember 2000, George et al 2003). We understand that an action research approach is still widely used in different contexts in Southern Africa. (Adler 1997, Zeichner 1998, Walker 2000, Weiler 2001, Reed 2002).

There is no agreed definition of exactly what constitutes action research; advocates of some positions use a narrow definition; other are happy to include many different approaches providing certain common principles are adhered to. Carr and Kemmis (1986), drawing on earlier work by Habermas, describe three possible categories of approach - technical, practical and emancipatory. Moving to a wider context, they also provide us with five 'dimensions' of curriculum research:

1. *Different levels of educational study (from macro to micro perspectives).*
2. *Different perspectives on the character of educational situations (as systems, programmes, human encounters, historical moments).*
3. *Different views of educational events as objects of study.*
4. *Different degrees of emphasis on education as a distinctively human and social process.*
5. *Different degrees of emphasis on intervention by the researcher in the situation being studied.* (Carr and Kemmis 1986 p21)

In describing our work in the UK/OU later in the paper, our positioning on each one of these dimensions will become clear as we seek to locate our approach within a wider theoretical context.

Whether action research is seen as technical, practical or emancipatory, focussing on development or radical action, it is, above all, seen a participatory and driven by a desire to both *improve* and to *involve*. At the start of their very comprehensive book on action research, Reason and Bradbury (2001) write:

Action research is a participatory democratic process concerned with developing practical knowing in the pursuit of worthwhile human purposes It seeks to bring together action and reflection, theory and practice, in participation with others, in the pursuit of practical solutions to issues of pressing concern to people, and more generally the flourishing of individual persons and communities. (p1)

We would claim that our approach to action research is 'participatory', but what do we mean by that? Who 'participates' with whom? Reason (2001) suggests that action research can be an individual enquiry into our own practice, an enquiry with others as part of a 'community of enquiry' or an enquiry involving larger groups in a wider community where participants may not be personally known.

Collaboration in action research can be with colleagues or with participants - or both. The distinction is important because emancipatory action research must see the 'subjects' (eg students) as participants in a collaborative sense rather than recipients of in the traditional research paradigm. Park (2001) takes the discussion further by considering not just the objectives of action research but also the kinds of knowledge that are generated in the process. He suggests that this goes beyond the 'describing, explaining or understanding of a phenomenon as an object' (objective knowledge) to an 'emancipatory' knowledge that includes representational knowledge (functional and interpretive), relational knowledge (between people and in relationships) and reflective knowledge (leading to action and to change).

A further theme that emerges from discussions about the nature of action research is the involvement of 'self' in that process, thus challenging many of the assumptions of the 'scientific method'. Kincheloe (2003) reinforces this point -

. . . . I would argue that an awareness of self and the forces that shape the self is a prerequisite for the formulation of more effective methods of research. Knowledge of self allows researchers to understand how social forces and research conventions shape their definitions of knowledge, of inquiry, of effective educational practice. Knowledge of the self allows the consciousness to choose between research traditions which depersonalize the process of knowing in hopes of gaining certainty, pure objective knowledge, and research orientations which assert that since the mind of the observer is always involved, it should be utilized as a valuable tool. (p51)

In her keynote paper at the 'Academic Development - Challenges and Changes' Conference at Rhodes University in December 2000 Melanie Walker wrote:

Importantly, changing what we do involves changing ourselves. How we come to see and understand ourselves in a particular way, (and not in others), must then be central in action research and its processes of social relationships, discourses and practices. The self is part of the change process; as the study unfolds the self changes so that action research involves acquiring new identities or reworking existing ones. The self who began the project is not quite the same self who finishes it. It follows that to understand change in action research we need to theorise the self in the change process. (p11)

Action research as professional development

Questions of power and emancipation, considerations of collaboration and of change, are crucial to any understanding of action research as part of professional development - indeed, it can be argued that the terms 'professional' and 'development' also need to be de-constructed. There are those who feel that professional development sits uncomfortably with emancipatory action or a social justice perspective (Walker 2000) although elsewhere she argues:

Thus, as a methodology, action research in higher education raises questions about knowledge production, for whom and by whom, and potentially reconnects questions of professional development and pedagogy to academic disciplines and research. It potentially embraces personal development, professional development and the assumption that 'all educational works are political works' (Noffke 1997). Action research offers teachers working in higher education the possibility of developing an evidence-informed, critical view on their own educational action. It involves researching practice in order to change or improve practice, and at the same time critically reviewing practice. Teachers in higher education might on the one hand create and advance knowledge through situated case studies, and at the same time improve practice and their understanding of practice in a creative process of professional learning. Walker (2001, p 23)

There are several ways of linking action research with professional development particularly in an educational context. Carr and Kemmis (1986) appear to simplify the process -

Action research is simply a form of self-reflective enquiry undertaken by participants in social situations in order to improve the rationality and justice of their own practices, their understanding of these practices, and the situations in which the practices are carried out. (p162)

Action research by teachers into the learning of their students may provide information that leads to more targeted teaching and thus to enhanced performance. Action research enquiries in which both teachers and learners participate can reinforce and develop relationships both within and between the groups involved.

The process strengthens and deepens the learning relationship between tutor and student, with the result that the dynamics of responsibility shift and students genuinely begin to play a more active part in the learning-teaching interaction. The tutor learns to be a better facilitator, but the students too become facilitators of their own learning consciously and effectively. (George 2001, p59)

Engaging in action research can contribute to the teachers' professional knowledge and their understanding of learning theory although the links between theory and practice are complex. (Argyris and Schon 1974, Schon 1983, Eraut 1994)

A further component of action research is that the enquiry and the outcomes can provide a direct link to the notion of 'reflective practice' and meta-cognitive processes, although McMahon (1999) argues that action research and reflective practice are not the same. In his view

Action research is distinguished [from reflective practice] by a deliberate and planned attempt to solve a particular problem (or set of problems). (p167)

The assumption that reflection inevitably leads to enhanced practice is seriously under-theorised; it is often taken for granted that all practitioners can engage in reflection on their performance and thus improve it (Leicht and Day 2000). Two issues need exploring; (i) how can a practitioner evaluate their own performance without feedback and (ii) how effective is reflection without 'evidence' from practice, whether provided by their colleagues or their students? Collaborative

action research can provide both feedback and evidence, as well as the opportunity to engage in shared reflection leading to changes in practice.

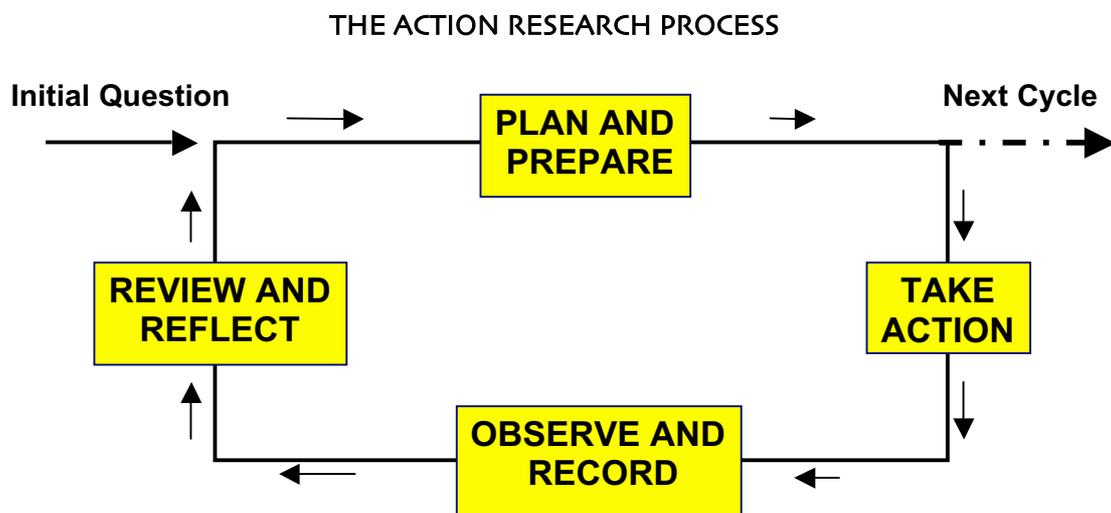
It can be argued that three conditions are individually necessary and jointly sufficient for action research to be said to exist: firstly, a project takes as its subject matter a social practice, regarding it as a form of strategic action susceptible of improvement; secondly, the project proceeds through a spiral of cycles of planning, acting, observing and reflecting, with each of these activities being systematically and self-critically implemented and interrelated; thirdly, the project involves those responsible for the practice in each of the moments of activity, widening participation in the project gradually to include others affected by the practice, and maintaining collaborative control of the process. (Carr and Kemmis 1986, p165-6)

Later in the paper we will re-visit the 'cycle' described by Carr and Kemmis in the paragraph quoted above but it is clear that reflection is seen as a key part of the process.

There are a number of studies that explore this aspect of action research in detail in relation to a higher education context. In two separate papers, Harland and Staniforth (2000) and Staniforth and Harland (2003) describe examples of professional learning by university teachers in the UK and in New Zealand and conclude that a 'research approach to development' can enhance professional learning but that the reflexivity involved can be challenging and potentially threatening (McLaughlin 2003). Clegg (2000) presents an analysis of 'reflective practice statements' produced by higher education lecturers in a UK university. McAlpine et al (1999) document work with university teachers in Canada, based on a detailed metacognitive model of reflection that leads them to a refined definition -

We now define reflection as a process of thinking about teaching and learning by monitoring cues for the extent to which they are within a corridor of tolerance and making decisions to adjust teaching as appropriate to achieve teaching and learning goals. (p110, emphasis in original)

This encouraged us to unpack the difference between reflection-in-action, reflection-on-action and reflection-for-action (Cowan 1998) and led us to develop our own model linking the action research cycle described by Carr and Kemmis (1986) to reflection.



The UK/OU Action Research Project

Background

While the LOTA-related work has had implications for both central and regional academic staff as well as (part-time) tutors, the biggest challenge has been how to involve tutors in explorations of teaching and learning that are their particular concern. The focus on assessment was an obvious starting point because of their role in continuous assessment through 'Tutor Marked Assignments' (TMAs). While these assignments are set by the central course teams, the tutors are responsible both for marking and feedback. Their work is monitored for quality reasons but many course teams are unaware of how much individual teaching is done by tutors or of how this is received by students. Current work within the university is looking at how the assessment of learning outcomes can enhance student learning (*assessment - as- learning*) as well as tutors' teaching (*assessment -as- teaching*).

The HELD project - methodology and findings

The LOTA work had encouraged us to focus on the assessment of learning outcomes, especially identifying the extent to which cognitive processes and skills were made explicit to the students and to the tutors who provide the feedback. This process is known in the OU as 'correspondence tuition' - teaching through written feedback. Despite the crucial role of this in the OU relatively little research has been carried out on the effectiveness of correspondence tuition - 'good practice' guidelines are given to each new cohort of tutors but these are based more on folk wisdom than research evidence. The Higher Education Learning Development Project (HELD) - an internally funded initiative - gave us an insight into how selected groups of students on several level one courses reacted to the feedback from their tutor and the extent to which it enhanced their skill development.!

In our experience tutors involved in action research develop justified confidence because their self-judgment of strengths and weaknesses is soundly based. Their enthusiasm and motivation are enhanced by the sheer excitement of the insights into the process of student learning. They gain the sense of always being at the cutting edge, at least in relation to their own practice, which must be at the heart of good continuing professional development; and they have the satisfaction of seeing their students' motivation and effectiveness increase in step with their own. (George 2002 p59)

At the same time both the students and the tutors told us how useful they found their participation in the project and what they had gained from it. In particular, tutors identified the changes they hoped to make in future based on their students' responses.

Taking part in this action research had a significant impact in the tutors' practice of marking assignments and supporting their students' skill development; they became more aware of their students' needs in a precise and focused way and were beginning to become more responsive. They were also developing ways of enquiry about their students' learning that would enable them to ask good questions about their own effectiveness, whatever the focus. This is providing tutors with a powerful tool for self-development on a rigorous and well-informed basis. (George 2002 p58)

At this point we bid for funding provided by the Higher Education Funding Council for England and designated for the implementation of an approved 'Human Resources' strategy proposed by the university. Our bid made specific reference to dissemination of the HELD project findings linked to 'staff development' to support LOTA-related curriculum change. In describing the workshops and the action research

opportunities that followed as *'Practitioner Enquiry for Professional Development'*, we moved our work from 'quality assurance' to 'quality enhancement'.

The HELD Dissemination Workshops

At the first of three HELD dissemination workshops, open to tutors throughout the UK who had not taken part in the HELD project, participants were given a presentation summarising the project. They were then asked, in groups, to explore possible enquiries into their work as tutors. These workshops were subtitled *"Correspondence tuition - what do students really want?"*. Several of the tutors in feedback from the initial workshop said that they had expected to hear details of the HELD project and to be given information based on the projects findings on how to improve their practice rather than being invited to carry out their own action research.

"I came today to learn more about what students want from correspondence tuition so that I could build ideas into my own practice"

Although almost all the participants at the first workshop did as requested and produced a written outline of ideas for their own action research questions by the end of the workshop It was explained that the proposals whilst requiring approval, would not be criticised or judged The proforma also asked for the names of colleagues with whom tutors thought they might collaborate during the research work. Very few tutors provided this information and only one tutor from this first HELD workshop went on to actually complete an action research project. Whilst we did not know that this would be the ultimate result, we were aware from our experience during the workshop and the feedback given by tutors at the end that there was a wide divergence of expectations between the workshop presenters and participants. It was apparent that few of them had any previous experience of action research or of carrying out practitioner enquiries.

The two subsequent HELD workshops retained the same title but a copy of the written report of HELD was sent to all participants prior to the workshop together with a letter explaining that the workshop's principle aim was to enable tutors explore how carrying out their own action research might help improve their practice. Tutors were not asked to identify a personal project by the end of the workshop or to identify colleagues with whom they might work. Instead, summaries of the questions produced during group work activities were sent to participants after the workshop and those interested in pursuing their own action research, either into a topic identified at the workshop or by individuals subsequently, were asked at this stage to return a written outline of their proposals. Eight tutors who had attended the second workshop went on to complete action research projects and four from the final workshop.

The Action Research regional workshops

Description

We also offered another series of workshops in ten of the thirteen OU regions. Although the materials advertising both series of events made reference to action research, for those not related to the HELD project, we deliberately chose a very general title *'Exploring learning and teaching in the OU'*. The feedback from tutors as to their expectations from the event coincided far more closely with that of the presenters.

"Hoped to come away from the workshop with a concrete idea of an action research project that I could undertake with my own students"

The regional nature of these events meant that the tutors attending often knew other colleagues present and it would appear that collaborative approaches were easier to initiate. From these events, a total of sixty-one tutors submitted proposals and subsequently carried out enquiries with their students.

In all, three hundred tutors attended the workshops, of whom 72 have completed an enquiry and produced a written report of their experiences. Fourteen enquiries involved collaboration between tutors and the issues investigated fall into four categories:

- Correspondence tuition; e.g. *"How can I get my students to engage with the feedback that I provide on their scripts?"*
- Tutorials; e.g. *"Does information that is sent to students about tutorials encourage or discourage their attendance?"*
- Learning skills including reflective learning; e.g. *"Supporting Third level Students' Understanding of Critical Evaluation"*
- Student support; e.g. *"The long term effectiveness of Initial Contact Practices"*

All the projects were small scale, most involving groups of less than twenty students. The length of the final reports was not stipulated but there was a requirement to clearly identify how participation had affected the tutor's own practice. The 72 reports illustrate a wide range of topic, style and quantity of reflection on practice

Evaluation

Our evaluation took several forms:

1. Feedback from workshop participants

We did not expect that all those attending would go on to engage in action research but we hoped that all those attending a workshop would gain something of value from it. The feedback forms asked what expectations had been prior to the workshop. Tutors were also asked to give comments on their experience of the workshop before leaving. Apart from the earliest HELD workshop, where expectations of several tutors had clearly not been met, almost all tutors were very positive about what they had gained from the workshop even though they did not intend to pursue action research further directly after the workshop. For example:

Expectation - *"No particular expectations but I knew that about 30 colleagues would be present..."*

Final Comment - *"After sharper focus on feedback to students - particularly on PT3s [feedback summary sheets returned to students with their assignments], I have been stimulated to be perhaps more self-critical of the quality I achieve"*

2. Discussion of workshop format and emphasis

After each workshop we reviewed the workshop overall. This incorporated impressions gained from both observing and participation in group work and feedback from tutors. The emphasis on the HELD project was lessened, LOTA project work was given a lower profile and more links between workshop activities, action research and professional development were made. Thus the design and delivery of the workshop were aspects of our own action research as we questioned what had worked well or not so well and why. The answers to the questions informed the presentation of the next workshop.

3. Questionnaire to workshop participants who had not opted to carry out an action research project

Although we had not expected that all the workshop participants would engage in the action research process, we wanted to identify the reasons for non-involvement. The reasons, we hoped, would enable us to identify support that might encourage future participants to be better able to carry out an action research project as part of their professional development. The response to this questionnaire was very good with eighty seven questionnaires returned.

The questionnaires were sent to all tutors who had not committed themselves to submitting a final report of an action research enquiry. This group therefore encompassed tutors who had -

- not formulated an action research question at all
- produced an action research question at or shortly after a workshop
- refined an initial question into a proposal with an outline methodology
- begun a project alone but found themselves unable to continue
- been unable to begin a project because they needed to work with a colleague and setting up such a collaboration proved impossible
- begun a collaborative project but had experienced difficulties sustaining the collaboration.

Reasons for not completing an Action Research enquiry

The reasons given may be divided into five broad categories:

- i. Personal/ family problems
- ii. Lack of time
- iii. Lack of confidence
- iv. Isolation
- v. Mistrust

(i) Personal/ family problems may hinder any work but for part time workers who work at home such as OU tutors, these impact far more seriously on any additional work. Work such as action research may be perceived by the tutor as primarily for personal benefit and hence be the first to be sacrificed when problems arise.

(ii) Lack of time is an increasing problem in a climate of unpredictable workloads such as a last minute increase in the number of students allocated to a tutor of a particular course. New courses may also involve extremely large workloads and many tutors work for other institutions as well as the OU, so these problems are compounded. Within any student group there is always the potential for individual students to demand far more time from a tutor than the tutor initially expected.

(iii) Lack of confidence may be related to the fact that an individual may not have carried out any sort of formal research in the past. Those in science based disciplines may feel that only the 'scientific method', involving the collection of large quantities of data and subsequent statistical analysis, is valid as research. Some tutors may have no academic background in teaching and learning and hence lack the confidence to explore these issues in the context of their own experience.

(iv) All OU tutors work in isolation to a greater or lesser extent and for those who actually enjoy the solitary approach, establishing a working relationship with a peer may prove daunting. Even some of those who did establish an initial collaborative partnership for the purposes of their action research reported that such a relationship was hard to sustain.

(v) Mistrust of the OU by tutors manifested itself when a few asked why the OU wanted them to carry out research. What was the 'hidden agenda'? Would the OU, as opposed to the tutor ultimately gain benefit from their work? As the tutors were to be paid the equivalent of two days for work that would most likely take considerably longer to complete, was this exploitation of staff by the institution?

How we might have supported them better

Respondents identified the following as possible additional means of support that might have enabled more tutors to have completed an action research project as part of their professional development:

- A list of action research projects already undertaken
- More information about action research
- Pre-workshop support to enable tutors to come to a workshop already having related action research to their own work in some preparatory way
- Follow up support after workshops to enable tutors to discuss the development of ideas and methodologies and retain motivation
- Further face to face collaborative working sessions

Some of these suggestions have already been incorporated in "*A Guide to Action Research for Associate Lecturers*" that is now available on line to all OU tutors.

The final part of the questionnaire asked for further comments and this proved a rich insight into the tutors' experiences of the workshops and possibly their first introduction to action research -

"Any workshop that causes ALs to stop and think about good practice in distance tuition is worthwhile"
"If I was to embark properly, I would value a mentor - at least for the beginning of the project."

Dissemination

We are planning a dissemination event in the form of a university-wide symposium during which those tutors who have completed action research projects will be given the opportunity to work with fellow tutors in presenting the findings of their projects to regional staff who have responsibility for providing staff development programmes for tutors. It is hoped that the symposium will enable them to demonstrate the value of action research as part of their continuing professional development. We hope that recognition of this value by regional staff will, lead a cascade of more regional action research events, perhaps led by the experienced tutors. Following the symposium, the action research reports will be posted on a web site which is available to all OU tutors. As the new *Higher Education Academy* becomes established, we hope that our continuing work with action research as part of professional development for our part-time tutors may be recognised as valuable in the wider HE community.

Discussion: professional development, action research and reflective practice

Roles and relationships in the OU: centre and periphery?

Curriculum design in the OU rests with the staff of faculties and schools, where a 'course team' comes together to produce a course that may be presented over a number of years. Most tutors who are recruited to 'teach' the course will not have been involved in its production although some course teams do deliberately involve experienced tutors in the writing process or as 'critical readers' as drafts of materials are produced. Historically, the divide between central design and regional delivery was considerable - tutors were (and sometimes still are) expected to offer what was termed 'learning support' rather than 'teaching'. LOTA work showed us just how much individual and group teaching, particularly related to learning outcomes, is done by tutors who mediate the package for individual learners. However, the use of feedback from experienced tutors to the course team concerned is very variable - some teams systematically record and value the feedback; others consider it anecdotal and ignore it. Yet tutors have detailed knowledge about how students handle the course materials and real evidence of their learning and performance through their assignments.

Just as regional centres are sometimes seen as remote outposts of the OU and their staff simply as 'administrators' of tutors and students, so individual tutors can feel isolated and undervalued. For an extensive study of how tutors perceive their role refer to the OU *Competence to Excellence* website (www.open.ac.uk/ctoe) where our approach is informed by the work of Lave and Wenger (1991) and Wenger (1999).

Professional development and reflection

Once the two-year probation period is completed, tutors are expected to develop themselves through regional events, specially designed materials and university-wide initiatives. Above all they are expected to become 'reflective practitioners' but with very little feedback on performance and no evidence of the effectiveness of their teaching. Indeed, in some instances, completing pro-formas or writing personal descriptive accounts are taken as 'evidence' both of competence and of reflection, an approach encouraged by the requirements of ILTHE.

The underlying aim of the Action Research project was to discover if action research - enquiries by practitioners into their own performance - could contribute to the professional development of our tutors and whether they could identify the difference it had made to their practice.

The [second] thing we had learned from the earlier work was that the process of the action research activity was as much, if not more, important than the findings from the point of view of staff development and consequent developments in student support. Tutors learned something from the reported work of others. But only by engaging in action research themselves did they significantly transform their own practice, becoming energized and enthused by the insights they gained into their students' learning and genuinely developing the habit of critical reflection and self-development. (George p53)

Overwhelmingly those that participated in an enquiry agreed that the action research activities had a significant effect on their teaching and indeed their relationship with their students; many said the benefits had persuaded them to complete another cycle or to carry out another enquiry into a different aspect of their work in the following year. Many of them wanted their regional managers and their course teams to know of their findings and we actively encouraged this both individually and collectively as a major part of our dissemination of the action research project.

Some comments from tutors who participated:

I feel that the benefits to my professional development have been much greater than I expected from such a small project and have far surpassed the initial scope

Communities of practice?

To what extent will the action research project influence relationships within the OU? In itself it is unlikely to change attitudes dramatically in terms of the established academic hierarchy and the roles and relationships between central academics, regional staff and tutors. Even if the value of action research as practitioner enquiry leading to professional development is recognised and encouraged, it is possible that this may further 'marginalise' the position of tutors since 'continuing professional

development' activities for academic staff consist mainly of research opportunities, refereed publications and conference presentations - opportunities not easily available to part-time staff. There is a tension between practitioner research and 'real' research and it is possible that our dissemination activities will raise questions about the generalisation of findings and their significance for future practice.

At present the action research activities, although apparently successful and well received, are marginal - a couple of one-off projects involving comparatively small number of tutors out of a potential 7,500. However, the quality of the enquiries and of the reports is exceptional; the relevance to practice is clearly identified in most reports through meta-cognitive and reflective comments.

But this is 'work in progress' and many questions remain:

- How will the efforts of the tutors be recognised and rewarded?
- Do we collectively have something to say about the value of critical reflection?
- Will course teams acknowledge their insights and their evidence?
- Has the periphery - through this activity - made links to the centre?
- Have our participants joined the 'community of practice'?
- Will their experiences contribute to claims for membership of the Higher Education Academy?

The optimistic view is that the university will recognise the value of the approach and encourage it as one approach to professional development. It is very likely that, eventually, the Higher Education Academy will require mandatory continuing professional development for all staff once probation leading to initial accredited status is established.

LOTA: outcomes-based education and enhancement

Elsewhere we have argued that a move to an outcomes-based approach to curriculum design and delivery can enhance learning by making the process more transparent and by seeing the assessment of outcomes as both formative and summative. By providing a language for both tutors and students to use in dialogues about learning, self assessment and reflection is made more overt. Greater transparency in terms of outcomes can encourage and facilitate a meta-cognitive approach. This argument underpins all our work on 'learning how to learn'. (Coats 2000)

Our experience of the HELD project (George 2001) suggests that the language of outcomes provides an opportunity for tutors to be more focused and explicit in their teaching and feedback; it provides a mechanism for exploring with students the effectiveness of that teaching. Reflective comments from the action research participants echo the same message. To some extent the 'learning how to learn' process when shared with students mirrors the action research process experienced

by tutors - both encouraging clearer communication about learning outcomes and therefore leading to enhanced practice.

Just as the student's reflection on learning is enhanced by evidence of their achievement and by identifying ways to improve, so the tutors reflection on their practice, based on evidence from their students and others, can lead to enhancement. These are not simple one-off activities but an embedded approach to learning and to practice. For practitioners it may well be part of professional development; it may also be part of a journey from 'competence' to 'excellence'.

This suggests that action research approaches to professional development, rather than being a marginal activity, might become a mainstream part of professional development and if appropriate for course tutors, why not effective for other academics in higher education? And if it is appropriate for our colleagues, why is it not an essential part of our *own* development as we support them in our academic, educational or professional development roles? Throughout the action research project we were aware of how much we were learning as we sought feedback, made changes, collected evidence and revised our approach.

Just as the tutors were encouraged to work collaboratively with their students as active participants in the explorations, so we worked with the tutors to refine and develop the process. For those of us involved in facilitating the events and supporting the process, our question was 'Can practitioner enquiry contribute to the professional development of the participants?' The answer is yes, and we have evidence to support our claim. We also have evidence, in our records and journals, in presentations and papers that the whole process contributed significantly to *our* professional practice. We became convinced that this project was about quality enhancement.

Conclusion: Quality Assurance and Quality Enhancement

We began this paper by describing some of the changes that have affected higher education in the UK over the past few years, referring particularly to the role of the QAA in that change process. The LOTA project played a significant part in the quality assurance procedures within the UK/OU. But as we moved from curriculum development into academic development so we have changed our role from one of QA to QE. What is the difference? Quality assurance (QA) is about checking the standard of what is done; identifying 'good practice'; awarding classifications or scores. Quality enhancement (QE) is about improving and developing; not just doing things well but doing things better. Enhancement is moving from competence towards excellence; 'from A to E - from *assurance, accountability, audit and assessment* to *empowerment, enthusiasm, expertise and excellence*' (Elton 1992). Over ten years later we see Scottish higher education moving quite deliberately from quality assurance to quality enhancement while the rest of the UK hesitates. We want to state that in our action research project we have seen quality enhancement in the colleagues with whom we worked, with clear evidence of empowerment, enthusiasm, expertise and excellence.

Note

(1) Academic development, educational development, staff development and professional development are terms that are sometimes used interchangeably but that have different meanings in the UK and South Africa, depending on whether they refer to provision for students or for staff. In this paper we use the term 'professional development' throughout, partly because this is a term gaining in popularity in UK higher education but principally because we want to recognise the professionalism of our colleagues who are part-time tutors.

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