

SRHE 2014 Symposium research and scholarly activity: negotiating the challenges of engaging in research for college-based HE Lecturers

Developing Communities of Research and Practice in College-Based HE

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The Further Adult and Vocational Education (FAVE) sector is undergoing a period of transformational change at a time of significantly reduced budgets. Against this backdrop, practitioner-led research needs to provide education leaders, teachers and trainers across the sector with opportunities to develop practice at the local level, while also contributing to whole-organisational responses to improving teaching, learning and assessment through the cost-effective use of CPD budgets.

But changing and improving professional practice is not as easy as it sounds. Voices from across the field of educational research warn that such development is hard won and what appear to be 'quick fixes' seldom, if ever, 'fix' anything and never 'quickly' (Coffield, 2007). Eraut (2004, p. 211) alerts us to the 'profound ignorance about the nature and amount of new learning involved' in developing a practice. Korthagen (2001, p.6) draws attention to how 'educational change is a problematic issue' because it is hard to establish the conditions where teachers can develop for themselves and make the best use of research. Coffield (2010) points out that it can be difficult from a personal perspective to face up to the challenge of change. William (2009, p. 4) is critical of a range of 'ineffective' school improvement strategies for the way in which they misdirect resources away from the classroom. Behind these remarks stands a familiarity with a range of past improvement strategies in the English system of education and a concern about the limited impact of these initiatives. Such criticism is tempered by the realisation that the challenge of changing professional practice is not to be underestimated. The focus of this symposium is upon challenges FAVE practitioners face in becoming research active (Bathmaker, Hillier and Turner).

Since April 2010, the University of Sunderland's Centre for Excellence in Teacher Training (SUNCETT) has led an HE-supported Practitioner-Research programme for teachers and education leaders in the FAVE sector. This Research Development Fellowship (RDF) programme was sponsored for the first three years by the Learning and Skills Improvement Service (LSIS) and most recently in 2013-2014 by the Education and Training Foundation (ETF). Each year the RDF programme has supported the research of between 20 -35 practitioner-researchers working in FAVE sector in England, in contexts ranging from Further Education colleges, sites of work-based learning, offender learning, and Adult and Community Learning. SUNCETT supports ETF sponsored practitioner-researchers engaged in the RDF programme using a systematic, research-informed model for educational improvement, which was first applied in schools by Fielding et al (2005). Fielding and his associates describe this approach as 'Joint Practice Development' (JPD). The SUNCETT team of research-active, teacher educators have adapted and developed the JPD approach so that it can be applied and used to support change and improvement FAVE sector contexts. Members of the SUNCETT team have now developed extensive expertise in using the principles of JPD to work alongside FAVE policy professionals and practitioners to incrementally improve practice across the sector in research-informed, realistic and sustainable ways.

Improvements in practice achieved as a result of the SUNCETT-JPD approach have been recognised among the RDF practitioner-researcher community and externally in the form of the LSIS Legacy Report (2013), and by the British Education Research Association in, *Why Educational Research Matters* (BERA, 2013). By establishing and sustaining an atmosphere that is open to new ideas and based in the realities of practice, the RDF programme creates a community of research and practice where the big issues in teaching, learning and assessment can be discussed honestly and immediately. Furthermore the relationships established between the members of the SUNCETT team and the RDF's are based on mutual respect, a willingness to learn from each other, equality in argument, and a desire to improve everyone's practice for the sake, not of self-interest or promotion, but of getting better at teaching so as to improve the quality of students' learning. In other words, the relationships and central ideas of the approach advocated in JPD are the force which animates the RDF programme.

One of the strengths of the SUNCETT-JPD approach to improving teaching and learning through HE supported practitioner-research is that it does not dismiss the merits of tutors' current practice, but seeks to build on it and extend it by sharing it with colleagues. "Central to JPD is the recognition that changing and improving practice involves more than the simple transfer of information" (Nixon et al 2012, p.10). Another strength of this approach is that this it builds upon Dewey's (1916) views about communication as participation and Biesta's (2006, 2007, 2012) notion of education in the form of 'conversational encounters' which take place in 'spaces of emergence' through an interactive dialogic process. The SUNCETT-JPD approach poses a key challenge to technicist, individualistic and deficit models of professional development, which are characterised by the absence of a model of learning to underpin professional development often predicated on the existence of prescribed outcomes, Hetherington (2012). Professional development based on conversations and debate such as the SUNCETT-JPD model troubles the technical-rational approach because it takes teachers' development to another level through the injection of the process of research. By doing research, together teachers develop the means to question taken for granted practice more deeply and find the evidence they need to support make judgments about how educational practice might improve in the future. Following four years of empirical research and evidence collected from over 140 RDFs who have successfully tried out this approach in the contexts of their practice, SUNCETT has distilled JPD into a six-step cycle of improvement. The SUNCETT –JPD approach provides rich and robust evidence for helping colleges to build more sustainable and, crucially, teacher-led ways to develop professional expertise which harness the power of collective working. The SUNCETT-JPD model not only offers a systematic and structured approach to improving teaching and learning, bringing teachers and academics together over a period of time to collectively address a set of questions, it also demonstrates how a sustained commitment to creating a community based on trust and respect for each other's expertise and shared concerns can bring about real and sustainable change. Findings also show that this approach takes time and requires sustained commitment by educational managers. Evidence from the RDF also indicates that the SUNCETT –JPD approach offers a powerful vehicle for enhancing the research base of ETF and others interested in research-informed, and systematic change and improvement across the FAVE sector.

1057-words

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