ENABLING PEDAGOGIC RESEARCH: THE IMPACT OF A MASTERS IN EDUCATION (MED PROFESSIONAL PRACTICE IN EDUCATION) ON THE PRACTICE OF ACADEMICS

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Abstract

Using the model of action research explored by McNiff and Whitehead (2009), this article investigates its application within the MEd (Professional Practice in Education) programme at the University of Central Lancashire (UCLan). The paper suggests that not only does the programme develop skills of educational research for academics on the award, it also supports them in developing as *scholarly professionals*. Using abstracts and comments from participants on the course, the article discusses the ethical and methodological choices they make during the process of completing their Master's pedagogic research projects. Finally, the paper highlights the evidence of impact, showing how such formal environments contribute positively to academics' profiles as educational researchers and as practitioners, and, more importantly, contribute to the learning experience of their students. It raises again the challenge for pedagogic research to demonstrate direct quantifiable impact upon student learning but adds to a growing body of evidence that this is nonetheless happening.

Introduction

Stenhouse (1983) wrote of research (McNiff and Whitehead, 2009,11) that it was systematic enquiry made public. McNiff and Whitehead (2009) apply this to educational action research commenting that action research is systematic enquiry undertaken to improve a social situation and then made public. They situate *action* firmly within improvement of educational practice; *research* involves a systematic process of enquiry using formal methods of data collection purposefully applied; on the basis of this, practitioner-researchers attempt to explain the why and how of practice, to *theorise* in other words; and finally, through sharing of findings through journals, papers and presentations, communities of peers engage in *critical review* of their research and it becomes part of a practitioner 'body of knowledge' about practice for both the individual practitioners and their peers. This definition sets the framework for the following reflection on how it applies more broadly to pedagogic research. The article explores particularly how this definition might be understood and applied within a Master's programme resulting in genuine impact upon practice and benefit for practitioners and students alike.

What is also important about research within the reworked definition by McNiff and Whitehead (ibid) is the *social, educational,* application of it, and the consequent, necessary, associated ethical and professional consideration of that research: research within a moral framework that must involve reflection and judgement on the part of the researcher. These are characteristics that reflect action research for McNiff and moreover they are, I maintain, fundamental to any pedagogic research which is undertaken to benefit and explore educational practice.

This short article uses an examination of research projects undertaken by academic staff at UCLan for the award of Masters in Education to illustrate that pedagogic research can have a real impact upon practice and that it is indeed appropriate, significant and meaningful research in terms of the above definition.

Participants used in this article have given permission to use their Master's research projects as examples on which to base this reflection, and they have in almost every case been able to offer statements substantiating how their localised practitioner research has added to a research informed professional body of knowledge through papers, conference presentations, and further application to practice.

A Training Platform for Educational Inquiry?

The MEd (Professional Practice in Education) is a Master's programme designed to encourage and support academic staff in acquiring skills and confidence in the process of systematic educational enquiry and, as a result, to contribute to the development of a professional body of practitioner knowledge for teaching and learning in their subjects (Ponte in Campbell & Groundwater-Smith, 2009). Since its validation in 2006, thirty UCLan staff have completed elements (modules) from the award to develop aspects of their practice.

There are currently sixteen members of staff on the MEd completing Master's projects. In contrast to usual Master's project experience, MEd projects are not undertaken solely using one-to-one supervision. The MEd

requires participants to participate in Learning Sets and workshops throughout their project year so as to engage in a process of reflexive critique and collaborative review of 'Work-in-Progress'. This ensures project processes and educational purposes are constantly re-examined in a social context with active membership of a Community of Practitioners (Wenger, 1998).

Projects have investigated a wide range of issues and challenges for practitioners. Characteristically they share a strong focus on individuals' discipline and localised concerns for their students, or their teaching practice. Examples of project work to date include: how students inform their career plans; the role of the facilitator in problem-based learning (PBL); transferability of skills training to clinical settings; students' perceptions around formative feedback. Projects have also involved research into perceptions by staff of diversity, and an investigation into how the practitioner herself can support colleagues' learning in clinical settings.

The next section of the paper presents examples of practitioner research undertaken as part of the MEd and discussed research issues raised by projects: the choice of methodology, ethics, impact of the research and practice development.

MEd Practitioner Research: making choices about methods

Educational research is often associated with qualitative research methodologies and whilst this trend certainly has predominated within the projects so far, this is not always the case. The methods used by Master's projects have included quantitative data collection using surveys, for example, with, in one case, the positivist approach of the home discipline culture exerting particular influence in this decision. In terms of exploring practice, surveys can generate valuable data on trends, broader perceptions and attitudes, and hence raise questions and issues for more detailed exploration around our practice (Thomas, 2009). Semi-structured interviews are also a frequently chosen method for data gathering within projects, not only because they allow a qualitative and detailed exploration of views and perceptions, but also because the structure makes them manageable for relatively short intensive research projects (MEd projects normally complete over a calendar year). The data that can be gathered through this method often complements survey activity, or literature review, triangulation inevitably being a concern for those undertaking projects. This association of methods is valuable for generating multiple viewpoints which typify educational research using case study, and with a local focus of interest. Furthermore, interviewing is attractive to the practitioner-researcher in that it provides an important means of making the student voice heard, and exposing perspective to critical interrogation. Less usual methods of research have included appreciative inquiry (Cooperrider & Srivasta, 1987), adopted to avoid ethical challenges of power and influence, or the use of the Delphi technique (Thangaratinam & Redman, 2005), again drawing upon the home subject discipline as a resource. An important characteristic of all the Master's pedagogic research projects are that they reflect the influence and, of course, teaching and learning concerns of the home subject, as well as taking an educational research stance.

The section below gives examples illustrating how some projects reported the methods of their research:

◗ Data collected from five semi-structured interviews was analysed using a grounded theory approach. The study replicated previous findings, e.g....

◗ Using appreciative inquiry and two nominal groups staff on a XX Unit were asked for their perceptions of the benefits to their personal and professional development of working with a lecturer practitioner.

◗ From the literature there appears to be some debate on what facilitation is [in the PBL context] and who should undertake the role or what the skills are required in order to perform the role effectively.. Seven lecturers .. who act as PBL facilitator were interviewed.

◗ Participants completed a postal questionnaire

◗ Case study methodology underpinned this project design (Yin, 2003); a questionnaire survey (n=30) and semi-structured interviews from a purposive sample of four students were used as data collection methods for this qualitative study.

The Challenge of Ethics when Researching Practice

Ethics created challenges for many of the projects and this is increasingly a concern within HE teaching and learning research as is evident in the recent plethora of books addressing this issue for the sector (Macfarlane, 2004; Cousin, 2009; Norton, 2009). At UCLan, outcomes of the RAE and the raised profile of

research, restructuring into Schools and the reduction in the role of the Faculty as co-ordinator of ethics, have meant Schools assuming management of ethics for its staff and students' research at a local level. Within the MEd award ethical processes and concerns created tensions between the need to research one's practice appropriately and flexibly and local (department/school) ethical requirements. As Macfarlane suggests in his book 'Teaching with Integrity' (2004), we have a duty of care to learners. At the same time, as researching or inquiring practitioners, HE academics need to develop a professional knowledge base and to be flexible and able to research what and how they teach. The professional standards framework (UK PSF) makes this a professional responsibility (UK PSF, February 2006). For this reason it is important that ethical processes are in place to enable practitioners to research the experience and perspective of their learners. In the projects, reflection and the interrogation of process, researcher bias, power and influence are assessed components. This ensures attention is paid to rigour and professional accountability. The narrative of pedagogic research is one in which the researcher articulates and engages with the tensions and challenges of researching those (s)he also serves.

Outcomes from reflecting on participants' projects suggest that this is rightly a deep concern. The following quotes – again from abstracts - indicate that participants were aware of the tension around ethics, and that they responded to it appropriately as researchers and as professionals. The projects are motivated by professional concerns for learning and the student experience; the findings invariably influenced participants' practice positively and contributed to the learners' benefit.

◗ The implications of these findings are discussed and a number of possible interventions (including the ethical issues they raise) are suggested.

◗ The challenge is engaging policy into daily practice whereby both staff and students feel confident about parity within the environments in which they work.

◗ The particular uniqueness of this project has been its student centred approach which highlighted some issues that had not been previously considered.

◗ Findings suggest that participants generally felt less secure about using PBL compared to traditional teaching methods.

Support and engagement with ethical process also came from co-participants on the programme, through critical review. This exposure of projects to critical review begins at the level of the project cohort as participants share and explore 'Work-in-Progress' as part of learning sets within the MEd researcher community, and often extends beyond the MEd to discipline and sector level. In this way, participants were (are) able to influence the development of *pedagogy* and practice at a number of levels.

The Impact of Project Research

Wider critical review for most projects involves formal presentations to the cohort, in the first instance, and subsequently to the university through departmental or school forums, or at conferences. One participant reports presenting findings at a Nurse Educators conference, a Business Management and Accounting conference and to the internal School Research Interest Group, spanning two years of refinement of their project and the data acquired. Another produced a journal article to the Journal 'Psychology Learning and Teaching' as well as a conference paper. Every one so far has involved wider dissemination at the very least through papers at discipline conferences. There are growing numbers of discipline conferences that have a teaching and learning strand to them facilitating wider dissemination and review; Subject Centres offer small grants and remuneration for articles for their e-journals and websites, and there are increasing numbers of journals about educational practice and the learner experience.

In the words of participants, it is clear that the MEd provided an important platform for developing participants' skills in researching their practice. This reflection also offers evidence that through programmes like this pedagogic research is contributing significantly to the UCLan HE experience of students, and the development of its staff. Participants reflect in the subsequent quotes on the contribution and impact of their research.

Participant A strongly emphasises the scholarly contribution of their research to practice and the community:

> Scholarly activity underpinning the study has ensured that practice is research informed. Whilst implementation of findings from the study has enhanced feedback practice consequently improving the student learning experience. Presentation of findings at the Nurse Educators conference (September 2009) generated academic debate which hopefully encouraged practitioners to reflect on their practice.

> The study was undertaken in a school of nursing however it could be argued that the findings are applicable to other student groups. This argument has recently been substantiated by acceptance for the Business Management Accounting and Finance conference (April 2010). To maintain the inter-professional agenda a second abstract has been submitted for the Higher Educational Academy conference (June 2010).

> The school is currently reviewing assessment and feedback practice. It is hoped that presentation at the school research interest group (May 2010) will provide the opportunity to debate issues highlighted in the study which might then have the potential to contribute to changes to practice.

Participant B reflects on the value of the MEd and its contribution to the student experience:

> The opportunity to research and write on professional development within higher education is rarely available. However such a chance was offered in seeking to gain the award of Master of Education (Professional Practice in HE) with staff development support. The chosen research dissertation topic conducted an empirical study into equality and diversity with specific reference to the implementation of HE policy into the teaching practice of today. The findings had a direct impact upon my own professional development, in designing curriculum content and the implementation of increased variety in teaching, learning and assessment strategies. A clearer recognition of the student experience and the implications of contemporary society informed not only *what* I did, but *how* I did it. I feel fortunate to have achieved such an insight into a 'real world' understanding of education as it is lived by those who invest within it daily. The overall programme provided a broader educational understanding, that in practice reinvigorated greater innovation and creativity into the classroom.

Participant C reflects on how researching his/her own practice highlighted wider sector concerns:

> Problem Based Learning has always been of an interest to me since starting in HE and still is. I still use this methodology within a pre-registration nursing module. However the same issues are still evident. I have presented my dissertation as a paper at the Nurse Education Today (NET) conference in September 2009. By doing this, it highlighted that the many issues I worked through seem to be common place within many HEIs and it really seems that people just get on with it and do the best they can.

Finally, Participant D considers the significant contribution made by the project to his/her teaching and learning practice:

> This MEd project provided an opportunity to explore the services available to students and the extent to which students are aware of and engage with these services. This understanding has shaped the manner in which I discuss these issues with students and encouraged greater promotion of these facilities.

> An oral presentation based on this work was presented at the Psychology of Education Section Conference, British Psychological Society in October.

Conclusions

Evidently the research prompted by these practitioner-led Master's projects impacts on many levels. In returning to McNiff and Whitehead (2009), the quotes reinforce the view that educational research into our own teaching and learning practice,

◗ can inform our understanding of how students learn, the impact of our work and how we can enhance teaching activity;

◗ that such systematic inquiry into our own practice allows us to theorise our practice and transform it on the basis of rigorous investigation and reflection; and

◗ that it can subsequently inform the wider understanding of practice for the organisation, our peers and the educational communities to which we belong.

The experience of these participants highlights the personal and professional value of their research projects. This appears to confirm both the initial parameters about research as applied to the MEd, but it also suggests that the MEd is an important platform for pedagogic research training and activity, and for supporting and enhancing the student experience through research and professional inquiry. For academics whose primary concern is often about teaching and learning with respect to the subject, and the engagement of students in a motivating and transformative learning experience, the MEd is able to provide an invaluable and impactful proving ground for educational researchers wishing to develop their practice, contributing to the development of a Community of 'Scholarly Professionals' for HE (Gregory, 1995, cited Doncaster and Thorne, 2000, 392). It confirms that the professional orientation of such programmes has a significant role to play in building a body of practitioner knowledge, and supporting the growing numbers of 'Scholarly Professionals'.

One of the challenges for those researching practice and pedagogy, is the difficulty of providing quantifiable, tangible evidence of impact within a field that explores the subjective nature of human learning. However, the paper and evidence here does add to a growing body of evidence on this issue. Within the context of pedagogic research, however, this paper is only able to discuss the impact of formal study. A valuable area for further inquiry would be to evaluate the extent to which less formal environments such as the Pedagogic Research Forum (PRF) at UCLan can contribute equivalent impact, support and community. The findings in this paper might also prompt readers of this journal to consider priorities in this direction, for example,

◗ the extent to which as members of the PRF they feel comfortable and able to generate similar outcomes,

◗ the extent to which they use educational research as a tool to develop practice,

◗ and the extent to which they are engaging with communities of practice to benefit their own pedagogic research.

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