

Action research within east London post-compulsory provision

WARREN KIDD

Cass School of Education, University of East London (UEL), UK.

Abstract

This is an attempt to disseminate the methodologies and outcomes of a piece of practitioner-based action research which was conducted at Newham Sixth Form College ('NewVIc') in the Plaistow area of east London. In order to best advance levels of teaching and learning, and to encourage innovation in the classroom, the college launched a peer-led coaching project. The action research initiative was established at the end of the 2004-05 academic year, and came to a close after a very successful two-year period. The project aimed to improve the quality of teaching and learning in a way directly transferable to practice inside classrooms, yet, philosophically, the project emphasized the cross-subject, general, transferable nature of good teaching and learning, leaving behind the mechanisms and cultural change needed for sustainable impact leading to future development work. It emphasized the value and role of collegiate professional dialogue in moving the culture of an institution forward.

Background to the project

Understanding the background to any institutional change or educational curriculum initiative is essential in order to be able to understand the real ways in which change impacts upon the working lives of a discrete group of professionals. In order to best advance levels of teaching and learning, and to encourage innovation in the classroom, the college launched an initiative based upon principles of peer coaching and mentoring: an *Advanced Teaching Practitioners' Project* (ATP), with a view to raise the professional dialogue amongst colleagues. The college appointed, after competitive interview, some staff as peer-coaches. Their overlapping remits were to mentor, coach and work with staff to develop innovative solutions to creative teaching and learning problems – as set and negotiated by the voluntary participants themselves. The project intended to offer support from within the college community, rather than buying in external trainers. It operated on the principle that experimentation with teaching and learning techniques and resource development is an essential part of teacher peer development – and is essential for a creative, flexible and reflexive organization to develop. It emphasized peer dialogue and mutual observation as a way of enhancing quality in teaching and learning. The intention was not to encourage teachers to be conservative; the intention was to support risk-taking.

From its onset, the nature of the action research was seen to be confidential and experimental. A practitioner-researcher team was built – the members themselves having different sets of experiences and expectations and coming from different subject and faculty areas. Up to 51 participants were involved at one point in the academic year – all from outside of their own personal

subject team specialisms. Forty five participants were involved at some stage in the second year of delivery. The role of the practitioner-researchers involved more than aiding the development of peer observation. There were formal quality mechanisms devoted to this already in place. The purpose of the project was to play deliberately with the notion of 'subject-specialism'; while the teachers were their own specialists, in command of their subject, the experimentation and playfulness of the risk-taking and innovation came from outside their immediate subject teams and even wider faculties.

While conducting our research, we were conscious of how the role of researcher-practitioner situated us within the college community rather differently than before. This ambiguity located the practice and the dialogue between practitioner and researcher and between researcher and participant within a space characterized by an attempt to work together to share good classroom ideas and to allow colleagues to experiment and 'enjoy playing with new ideas'.

Project methodology

The project was confidential, bottom-up and rooted in negotiation and a reflexive individual target setting process. Primarily, the project was cross-faculty – combining practitioners together from as varied pedagogic and subject backgrounds as possible. There was something both unsettling about this and yet in time, quite liberating. This decision to make the project and its support cross-faculty deliberately challenged common-sense notions within the college community with regard to what was seen by many as the uniqueness of subject-specific practice.

The simple remit for the project was to affect change. The intended outcome was cultural – it was to create a dynamic institution open to change. Increasing teacher talk, teacher reflection and teacher dialogue were seen as goals in their own right.

A key challenge to the project from the onset was how it was met by the community at large, how it was perceived by colleagues. Initial concerns of colleagues spoke of suspicion of these new 'advanced' teachers and it was certainly the case that the designation 'advanced teaching practitioner' did little in the first instance to reduce concerns regarding the de-professionalism of potential participants and the seeming construction from on high of a hierarchy of expert practice and knowledge. This was a battle to be won many times over through the two year duration of the project. The project was launched across the whole college with open invitations to take part and initial meetings were held with all who expressed an interest. Prior to this, the researcher-practitioner team themselves met on a number of occasions to build a team approach – to share thoughts, insecurities and ideas on teaching and learning. Slowly, a consensus emerged, albeit a consensus articulated and acted out in a variety of ways. We felt as a team that we agreed more than disagreed on what good teaching was and on what the shape of the project should be.

What resulted from these initial team meetings was a statement of project support which was then made available, formally, to all who had expressed an interest. In this statement we made clear the aims of the project and its negotiated, optional and individual basis. Individuals were able to choose the aspects of teaching and learning they wished to focus upon. In many cases the focus changed over time. We set up a space – a forum – to allow discussion between the research team members that was absolutely confidential and completely open. The only documented outcomes were the joint

resources created 'anew' and whatever reflections participants themselves wished to log with us for wider institutional consumption.

At the start of the project we tried to interview and meet with all participants as quickly as possible – to develop a relationship and to build rapport. It seems that this initial, early meeting was as welcome from the participants' viewpoint as it was valuable from mine. It was good to establish a working relationship quickly, productively and to be able to reassure colleagues about the more sensitive and confidential aspects of the support on offer. More than this, quite simply it was interesting. We do not spend enough time as professionals talking about teaching – about what we think about learning, what we see as the challenges, what we are trying to achieve in our own classrooms. It was also nice to have the opportunity to share, reflect and bounce ideas off others, in the same way as my role was to act as a point of reflection for them. (Researcher journal entry)

Our challenge as a team was to document the support, outcomes, new ideas, experiments and dialogue in such a way that the participants were unthreatened. We promised confidentiality, yet at the same time were initially frustrated by the extent of the good practice being hidden away. We hadn't so much opened up debate and dialogue across the whole community as opened up classrooms for one other person. Our second challenge was to remove the 'advanced' status from how we were perceived – to reduce the hierarchy of power between 'coach' and 'participant' and move towards a more fluid and organic dialogue.

The documentary work undertaken by the team and the participants was a combination of narrative or journal writing and a regular showcase of new materials and ideas posted onto the project's pages on the college intranet – open to be viewed by all. Over time, we developed a huge set of online materials and resources and by the end of the second year of the project team members were running staff training sessions on a regular basis. The research team also wrote logs and diaries, sharing comments regularly. It was also equally important that as a team of practitioner-researchers and certainly as a group new to the role, we set up a private and mutual space within which we could support each other.

Dissemination was at first a challenge for the project. Given its original confidential nature and the need to make participants feel comfortable in opening up their classrooms, the project was voluntary and support was directly between the research team member and the participant. It became clear, over time, that this very confidentiality stopped many aspects of dissemination – if the project was not openly visible to the college community then there could be no exchange of ideas and innovation to other colleagues and teams not initially involved. Capturing the data of the project was seen at the time as of secondary importance to the increased hours of reflection and professional dialogue. Data capture was thus problematic; after having promised confidentiality it was ambiguous how to go about this. We tried to allow the voices of the participants themselves to be heard. Essentially these 'voices' were captured in two main forms. Firstly, on a semi-regular basis, participants and the research/coaching teams were asked to write reflexive statements. Secondly, in both years of the project a 'teaching and learning road show/fair' event was created to give the project more of a public focus rather than a private and personal one. Another outcome of the project was the subsequent production of a 'Toolkit' of ideas that the team felt were useful and worth disseminating to other colleagues not involved directly in the project.

The project has certainly caused me to introduce more variety into my teaching and having someone with whom to discuss my efforts and encourage me to keep trying when things don't work out so well has been invaluable. (participant statement)

The students have responded well so far to most of the new strategies, which is a further encouragement to build on successes but also to continue experimenting. (participant statement)

One of the best aspects of the project has been trying new ideas and having another objective voice in the room to help me reflect. (participant statement)

Colleagues have spoken about having really enjoyed opportunities to share with others. It has been refreshing for many to feel supported and able to discuss their teaching openly. Many colleagues, over time, opened up their classrooms not just to the research team but to others: swapping ideas and approaches. The clear aim of the project has been to enable and empower participants to feel supported in experimentation. Another outcome has been the value for the ATP team members themselves in sharing ideas on teaching and learning

Helping other teachers to develop...has enabled me to reflect on my own performance...I am now more analytical and can identify why I succeed in specific areas. Where I am successful, I have had to analyze exactly what I do to share this with other teachers. As a result I am far more aware... (Researcher journal entry)

As the project has progressed, I have experienced a shift in the dialogue that I am having with the participants of the project; increasingly they are developing new ideas and strategies for themselves...this is really exciting and I have decided to try some of these out myself. (Researcher journal entry)

Participating in this project has led to increased focus and reflection about my own teaching. I have been inspired to try many new ideas... (Researcher journal entry)

The role and ambiguity of the practitioner-researcher

On reflection, the landscape of the research always felt confusing and not fully formed. It was ambiguous. Each week was very different from the one before and the foci negotiated with participants were under a seemingly constant process of review and change. For practitioners used to the structure of a teaching timetable these were both exciting and also unsettling times.

Making initial contact with the teachers that I was assigned to support was a little daunting because I felt that there was a danger that they would misunderstand what an ATP was expected to do. I knew that it was imperative to build a working relationship built on trust. Most of the initial meetings went well however there were a couple of teachers who seemed to be concerned that the project would be a form of monitoring akin to inspection. I learnt that

when dealing with co-professionals it is important to address their concerns (sometimes even before they arise), to be willing to be flexible within the brief (within given parameters) and to recognize that it may be necessary to be patient by dealing with issues over a period of time. (Researcher journal entry)

I have very much enjoyed working with teachers from different teams. I frequently found myself absorbing new ideas to apply to my own teaching and indeed questioning my own approaches. I have also gained a great deal from meeting different groups of students and working with them in the classroom. I discovered that sitting with students during a lesson offers a very different perspective on the teaching and learning taking place. I will be ensuring that next term I invite peers to sit with the students in my lessons and provide me with some honest feedback. (Researcher journal entry)

I really do respect the realities of taking risks in the classroom. I do not underestimate the amount of courage and commitment required when teachers are taking a risk and trying something new in their classroom. (Researcher journal entry)

As new practitioner-researchers we needed to find ways to navigate through the new college landscape created by the new management and organizational structures.

Working through the project for a year, it has become obvious that the best and most productive work has been achieved when both parties (ATP Team member and participant) have a full and equal interest in the experimentation being undertaken – this has been best achieved by joint planning sessions between the ATP and their colleague. On the most successful occasions I have met with colleagues and we have planned lessons and materials together. We have both made resources and contributed ideas and finally I have seen the outcome of this collaborative work in others' classroom practice. In this way, lesson 'observations' become less about observing as such, and more about reflecting and evaluating while practice takes place. (Researcher journal entry)

Whilst being keenly aware of the confidential nature of the project, I have been able to transfer and spread new and exciting approaches to teaching and learning amongst the teachers that I have worked with and across the ATP team. I have been particularly proud of the work that I have done in collaboration with another member of the team to encourage and support teachers to try out practical warm-ups with students. (Researcher journal entry)

Sustainability

Looking back at the project these two years after it has finished, what has been sustainable is the notion, the spirit within the institution, of it seeing itself as a professional working and learning community. Subsequent to the closure of the research the college has invested further in curriculum development projects based within the faculty structure rather than across them. Perhaps the single biggest change has been the willingness and openness of colleagues to share practice beyond their immediate teams and to be willing to engage in dialogue and to see its value in moving forward teaching and learning.

Warren Kidd is Senior Lecturer in Post-Compulsory Education and Training (PCET) at The Cass School of Education, University of East London. For the duration of the action research project that this article discusses he was the Teaching and Learning Development Manager of Newham Sixth Form College, running the action research alongside a team of five colleagues [email: W.Kidd@uel.ac.uk]. Colleagues interested in hearing more about the project and exploring ideas for mutual work should contact Andy Cole, Assistant Principal [email: acole@newvic.ac.uk].