

Diane Thurston wanted to enable practitioners in the lifelong learning sector to research more into their own working contexts - she accessed ESCalate funding in order to do this and explains here how the CETTnet Research Network came about ►

# The origins of the CETTnet practitioner network

*If we are serious about making the most of learning opportunities, including the idea of improving them, then we need very good information about what people currently do, why they do it, and why they keep doing it. (James and Diment, 2003: 407)*

In summer of 2008, I had a familiar and typically heated discussion with a colleague about the need to support research in the lifelong learning sector (LLS). Both of us were in the role of lecturer and student (I was completing my MA in Education and my colleague was and is working on her PHD) and both of us were keenly aware of research activity in our sector, support

needs felt by individuals and teams, and the substantial interest from practitioners in undertaking research of varying sorts.

We made two decisions as a result of this discussion – we needed to seek funding to support a research network for practitioners in the LLS and we needed to learn more about the work of ESCalate.

For us the importance of the network was to engage practitioners in researching their own working contexts, and to increase research capacity within the sector. We knew of the wealth of research on FE by external researchers, and were acutely aware of the need for more research

generated within the sector by practitioners. We viewed practitioner research as more than a “stepping off point”, and more descriptive approaches to data collection and reporting as part of an interpretivist research tradition (Bartlett and Barton, 2006: 396). We strongly felt that teachers need to “reflect critically on the wider institutional, policy, social and cultural issues that enable or constrain their practice” (Morton et al., 2006: 5) which we felt keenly in the post-compulsory setting.

Our practitioner research network, the CETTnet research network, was launched in Nov 2008, with funding from a grant from ESCalate, and is gaining in strength and continuing to develop.

So how did it all happen? We had noted the negative impact of pressures within the sector on the development of research capacity. We were familiar with a discourse of deficit in reference to the LLS which permeated this period<sup>1</sup>. However, our experience of applying for a grant from ESCalate in 2008 was a rewarding professional experience, running counter to our expectations.

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We were not expecting the personal approach that the ESCalate team members adopted, nor the developmental approach to the funding process or the access to members of the ESCalate team. An outline proposal was invited and constructive and encouraging feedback was given, we had productive phone conversations with the ESCalate projects team which helped us to shape our approach to the CETTnet project but also made us consider how the potential contribution of CETTnet members to the research debate was valued, and importantly helped us to extend our research horizons.

ESCalate has gone on to contribute to our research network and the work of Success North CETT more widely, contributing to meetings of the CETTnet practitioner group, providing keynote speakers and workshop facilitators from the ESCalate team at five subsequent CETT conferences. Tony Brown and Julie Hughes are now working with the course leader for BA and MA in Lifelong Learning and Professional Development to support research and scholarly activity among students and members of the CETTnet group, who come from a range of education settings. Contact with both Julie and Tony has been described as “inspiring” by them, and the groups have been motivated to engage in their own collaborative research.

*“We are still concerned about pressures on the sector and the danger of resulting conformity which can run counter to genuine enquiry, and note that processes ostensibly put in place to support teacher learning may be subverted within a culture of control” (Avis, 2002; O’Leary, 2006).*

As our practitioner research network develops and our research activity grows, we are more aware of the need for confidence-building to support capacity in our sector, and view in the ESCalate approach key lessons for organisations aiming to provide this support.



Diane Thurston  
Newcastle College

Diane started teaching in Egypt in 1989 and has worked as an EFL, ESOL and literacy tutor and teacher educator in the UK, abroad and online. She started work at the Teaching Development Centre at Newcastle College in 2007 and manage Success North Centre of Excellence in Teacher Training.

She established the CETTnet practitioner network with her colleague, Christine Byrne, with the aim of supporting practitioner research and with a membership from all settings in the lifelong learning sector. As she embarks on her doctorate studies, she is more than ever aware of the need to support researchers in the sector!

## References

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<sup>1</sup> DfES, 2002; DfES, 2003; DfES, 2004; DfES, 2006