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Jones, Helen M.F. and Notley, Martin

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Sticking together: teaching, learning and the art of research

Helen Jones and Martin Notley, University of Huddersfield, UK

Introduction

In this paper we emphasise the importance for community educators of building bridges between emerging needs, research, teaching and learning. A case study of recent work is used to illustrate the way in which research in vocational education and training offers the potential for practical outcomes which are not necessarily defined by the Research Assessment Exercise (RAE). We believe that fragmentation must be resisted: the glue securing teaching, learning and research must be preserved.

The project which functions as our case study concerned the education and training needs of youth and community arts practitioners. Situated in the north of England, the research was directed by a partnership comprising Yorkshire and Humberside Arts, West Yorkshire Youth Association, the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation, youth and community arts practitioners and the University of Huddersfield. This innovative collaboration led to pragmatic outcomes in course development, teaching and learning: a new postgraduate course is planned in direct response to the research, a conference was held to share the findings with practitioners whose input, using a focus group approach, was vital in the writing of the final report. We also envisage the work having a practical impact on future approaches to teaching and learning.

We analyse the glue which holds together the collaborative partnership and answer the question: what is the nature of cross-sectoral partnership and how do all the partners get what they want? We believe this brings us back to the good old fashioned idea that the purpose of educational research is to inspire change, and is not only to add to the sum of human knowledge. Sadly, all too often nowadays there is a tendency for research to serve the demands of the RAE.

The art of research

The central position of Youth and Community Work (YCW) as an aspect of Community Education has been addressed in previous SCUTREA papers (Jarvis and Notley 1996; Jones 1996). Professional accreditation in YCW is one aspect of a degree programme. This means that such courses unite developmental approaches to education with vocational training in single programmes. However, unlike certain other aspects of Adult and Continuing Education, YCW is under-developed in terms of academic research activity. The teaching and learning which is delivered through YCW professional qualification courses within HE institutions tends to be disconnected with the practice in which voluntary and statutory agencies and organisations engage. Indeed, there may be a chasm between the two: HE staff and institutions are portrayed as focussing on theories which have no relevance to day-to-day situations whilst agencies are caricatured as operating at an entirely pragmatic level. To some extent the chasm is bridged by the requirement for students' work placements which ensure structured contact frequently occurs between HE staff and agencies. This fosters understanding and keeps all participants aware of developments taking place. However, there are ways of making links stronger. From the inception of the YCW course at the University of Huddersfield, we have consciously sought to ensure strong connections between what we do and the development of YCW practice on a regional basis through active personal involvement in the management of organisations and creation of policy, the delivery of training and, as we will show in this paper, research.

Our emphasis on ensuring that we are not only in contact with YCW practice but also that we are actively involved in the regional scene at both practical and policy levels is rooted in our shared philosophy and praxis. The importance of linking theory and practice is a key tenet of YCW and is intrinsically linked to the profession's ethos. The National Youth Agency, which endorses the qualification in YCW, identifies the profession's 'underlying principles and values' as including the

recognition and promotion of:
- the principle of equality and a commitment to anti-discriminatory practice
- a commitment to empowerment and participatory democracy
- collaborative working relationships and collective action (Agency 1997: 7)

These points correspond with postmodern models of empirical research posited by writers such as Lather (Lather P. 1991) and indicate the way in which the clearly articulated value base of our profession presents an exciting context for research. Our ontological starting-point is largely analogous to that identified by Usher et al and assumes:

> the existence of a world characterised by socio-economic and cultural inequalities, where researchers have a part to play, indeed they have an obligation to endeavour to emancipate oppressed groups, those who suffer from the greatest inequality and a lack of social justice (Usher, Bryant et al. 1997:191).

This, Usher et al add, requires an epistemological commitment to 'the generation of knowledge in the service of emancipation'. Knowledge is measured in terms of its 'usefulness or efficacy in enabling the empowerment of oppressed groups' (Usher, Bryant et al. 1997: 191). Our teaching includes introducing students to approaches to analysing oppressions in addition to theories and practical methods of empowerment: really practical knowledge. It also emphasises the role of groups; of sticking together.

With its close links to practical knowledge, research not only presents us, as HE staff, with the opportunity to be partners in, and agents of, change but also informs our approach to teaching and learning. Sharing a political commitment and vision, we make use of our skills, knowledge and resources not only to make a 'practical' contribution but also to influence developments in our professional field. Voluntary and statutory organisations value an academic approach to research but also require findings to have a practical application. This results in the relevance of identifying, defining, analysing and emphasising 'transferable lessons': problem solving not problem posing. Working together with the key stakeholders (the organisations, their staff and members/users), the research process can be refocused and developed. All involved in the research have ownership of the process.

The importance of ensuring that new barriers are not created by the way in which research data are written up should not be taken to mean that there is no place for theoretical structures and approaches. Indeed, it is the possibility of bringing such a theoretical grounding to the research process which has led organisations to seek the involvement of HE. The potential of moving beyond the purely evaluative format, where outcomes are measured against stated aims and objectives, is seen as a positive addition. The research undertaken by HE partners is not to be confused with commissioned evaluative reports undertaken and delivered by externally commissioned bodies which may / may not have lasting results on the agency's approach and which may be described as 'reviews'. The skills and knowledge brought by HE staff include theoretical approaches and frameworks together with the scope to foster the evolution of innovative methodologies. Frameworks with academic credibility remain significant because of the opportunity they present for making sense of data through indicating connections, implications, patterns; for identifying what *is* transferable. However, resultant material can be written up accessibly, ensuring that all involved feel a sense of ownership.

The RAE has served to emphasise one particular approach to the writing up of research and has thereby institutionalised a hierarchy in research itself. Although researchers find ways to operate in directions they consider appropriate, the widespread perception that playing obscure academic games through refereed papers appears to be of greater value than the generation of more widely read writings in practitioners' journals and magazines or of recording research in accessible terms. Where researchers are committed to emancipatory techniques, there is a contradiction when data are recorded in language which creates or sustains barriers. Additionally, there is a danger of encouraging the

achievement of RAE scores whilst undermining research with an emancipatory goal. Although Martin and Shaw showed how HE institutions' desire to 'climb the rungs of the RAE ladder' can generate internally funded opportunities to engage in 'subversive' projects (Martin and Shaw 1997). The pressure to 'translate' accessibly written research into wilfully obscure articles, designed for publication in refereed journals, remains.

Addressing the question of how research can have a practical impact, Hart identifies the 'pressure on researchers, through the RAE, to generate research funds and publications' and warns that there is a danger that 'unscrupulous (or simply naive) academics' may give disproportionate weight to their findings. In addition, where external funding bodies are involved in funding research, to what extent are they involved in determining the nature and direction of the research undertaken? The research on which Hart focuses was commissioned by District and Regional Health Authorities 'who ... have either not undertaken this kind of work themselves and are unaware of what is possible, or accept the advice of those intimately involved with research, which in itself may be flawed or, at the very least, limited in the range of research expertise' (Hart 1997:121). The implications of such research may be a misplaced reliance on published findings which over-emphasise certain aspects, introducing bias or unreliability. More encouragingly, however, McIntyre observes,

> Commissioned research is often seen as dirty work subordinated to policy imperatives, and restricted in scope by project timelines and policy agendas. Sometimes it is, but also it is true that policy objectives may often require both depth and complexity and invite and tolerate the contradiction of current policy positions. (McIntyre 1997)

We are interested in particular in the role of research in creating or influencing policy. The identification of 'transferable' aspects, for example, may herald the birth of work intended to put the 'transfer' into practice. The models of partnership and the approaches to research which we have adopted are designed to avoid the range of pitfalls outlined above by establishing clear boundaries before the beginning of the work and by constantly revisiting and, where necessary, redefining and refining ground rules. The research findings have included findings which have challenged the commissioning agency.

Teaching and learning ourselves
Engaging in practical research ensures that we continue to develop our own reflective practice, moving through the processes of concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualisation and active experimentation (see Kolb D.A. 1984) which we are aiming to nurture in the students. Thus practical research provides the opportunity for us to present models of good, and developing / evolving practice for our students. Indeed, the reflection engendered by the writing of this paper has resulted in a decision to develop the process of sharing our research with the students.

YCW students may be full-time undergraduates or part-time, in-service students. In order to deliver courses which stimulate, challenge and have clearly identifiable relevance for the latter group, who may be very experienced and somewhat cynical about the fact that, after spending many years engaged in practical work they need to gain professional accreditation in order to 'move on', it is vital for staff to keep abreast of current practice and developments. Participation in research is one of the ways in which this can be assured.

The research into art
Several examples of this approach to research have taken place during the last eighteen months. One example involved both the authors of this paper in researching 'unintended outcomes' at Manchester's Trinity House family centre together with the staff, users and representatives of local authority departments. The research was commissioned by Save the Children, who funded much of the centre and its work. The report was written as accessibly as possible. However, we are intending to undermine one of the values underpinning the work by subjecting our methodology to academic

analysis and writing it up with refereed publications in mind. This would result in writing which would be impenetrable to the people with whom we conducted the research. Although it could be argued that different voices and languages are appropriate for different audiences, we would regret creating work around which we have erected barriers through which only those with privileged educational experience may pass, when the original research was understood by all who took part.

The example on which we focus in this paper, concerns the recently completed research into youth and community arts work in the Yorkshire / Humberside region. The research brought together Yorkshire and vHumberside Arts, West Yorkshire Youth Association, the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation, youth and community arts practitioners and the University of Huddersfield. Youth arts work, which may be defined as the use of a range of practical arts techniques in youth and community environments, is a natural vehicle for informal education. The emphasis is on the use of arts as the medium for developmental work rather than on 'art for art's sake'. An enormous diversity of opportunities can be opened up to young people. At its best, youth and community arts work is a very practical way forward to achieving the goals of youth empowerment; as a vehicle it enables young people to articulate their view of their own lives and the world around them in ways which communicate directly with the adult world. As well as inspiring young people's group and personal development, the use of arts has an impact and influence on the wider adult world, achieving progress through the process, the medium and the message. In addition, youth arts work has the potential to reflect the diverse cultures which are vital to young people from a wide variety of backgrounds. However, there is no clear route into such potentially challenging and rewarding work. YCW training includes a generic range of YCW skills but without emphasising specialised arts skills. HE courses in arts skills tend to concentrate on personal achievement in the chosen skill area: the outcome or product is emphasised.

Given this context, the original focus of the research was the existing training backgrounds of youth and community arts practitioners and their future training needs. The partnership's members were aware that many practitioners appeared to be frustrated that they were not able to access posts requiring YCW professional qualifications. However, whilst such a need could have been met at face value, we were interested in defining precise training needs, in gaining a vision of the current opportunities and in working with current practitioners to create and design educational programmes which met their needs, whether to be delivered by the University of Huddersfield or by other organisations.

Sticking together the partnership

The partnership brought together individuals and organisations whose interest in the field pre-existed the research. As with many such collaborative pieces, previously existing networks were not insignificant in creating the 'glue'. But what elements ensured that the 'glue' was truly 'super'? Stokely Carmichael, analysing alliances between poor white Americans and African American people, asserted that all alliances are based on the principle of mutual exploitation(Carmichael and Hamilton 1969): a strong way of saying that partnerships are a two-way process where each party needs to be clear and explicit about what they want and expect to get out of the arrangement. The dynamic interface between agencies impels thinking and action towards new horizons; the desire is to bring about change and achieve objectives through collaboration which cannot be achieved by a single agency. The participants in the Youth and Community Arts research all brought a commitment to bringing about change. This was one aspect of the vision and values which were articulated and shared in order to ensure a further ingredient in the glue: trust in other partners founded on belief in the integrity of all involved. For example, other partners trusted the integrity of our approach to using the work as the case study in this paper, or as a source of material for future articles. They trusted us not to use the chance of accessing their networks as an opportunity to market our courses.

The University of Huddersfield brought to the partnership the credibility of its name and reputation on a stage beyond the regional; the resources available to staff, the academic and research skills and knowledge which would ensure that the research was undertaken with an appropriate approach. The regional voluntary organisation brought credibility with local and regional organisations, contacts

with grassroots agencies and vital specific, contextualised knowledge. The funding bodies brought regional and national perspectives, credibility on a regional and national basis with practitioners and agencies and knowledge of a range of initiatives. An understanding, appreciation and valuing of difference formed a vital foundation of respect which contributed to the adhesive qualities of the glue.

It is significant that the partnership's group dynamics had the features which binary gender analysis would define as 'female'. Although all participants possessed power, whether through knowledge or through being in control of the funding, these aspects were not used as a source of privilege but rather of celebration.

Sticking together the future

The project has led to important tangible outcomes and directions for the future. The dialogue which has taken place across professional and institutional boundaries has created a springboard for creative thinking and working together in future. The significance of securing the interest and commitment of the regional arts organisation, local authority youth and community services, practitioners and HE to this often marginalised area of work should not be underestimated. The outcomes included a number of specific proposals, underpinned by systems of rigorous evaluation. First, the University plans to design and launch a new postgraduate route to professional YCW qualification in February 1999. The course and its curriculum are being designed to meet the express needs of youth and community arts practitioners which were drawn out through consultation processes. This involves developing our existing methods for linking theory and practice to ensure their relevance for practitioners working in and through arts. Advisory and management systems will ensure the continued relevance of the course. Secondly, the soon-to-be established regional Youth Work Unit will work alongside the regional arts organisation to develop a regional strategy to disseminate information about short term courses and models of good practice. Thirdly, the regional arts organisation has been asked to consider ways of providing financial support for arts practitioners who wish to embark upon training. Finally, local authorities within the region have been asked to consider including arts methods in their own, local, initial part-time YCW training programmes. These outcomes demonstrate the way in which research conducted in partnership with other organisations can have outcomes which influence future practice and policy developments.

Sticking together: teaching, learning and the art of research

Either of us could have written this paper on our own. It would have been different but nonetheless it would have given the individual the 'full points' for the RAE. However, working together provides, in microcosm, similar advantages to working in partnership with other organisations. The opportunity to engage in dialogue around professional dilemmas and tensions has outcomes which extend beyond the single piece of work. In this case, we have formulated ideas for approaches to working with students during the process of writing the paper. The Arts research led to the creation of new, stimulating networks of practitioners, from drama and dance workers to practitioners from a range of visual arts backgrounds including mask making and video.

The Arts research project presents a case study of how, in the field of teaching and learning in a professional context, it is possible for HE institutions to bridge the chasm which lies between the realities of everyday practice in the field and the popular perception of the approaches and interests characterising HE. For individuals working in 'new' universities, the 'teaching' often seems quite separate from the 'research': the latter takes place when the students are on vacation and opportunities to develop a professional praxis which brings the two together in a holistic approach are rare. However, just as young people learn and develop through arts based processes, media and messages, so HE staff can develop their practice through sticking together their teaching, learning and research.

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