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Symposium: Critical Perspectives on Practitioner Research

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Abstract: This symposium explores the ambiguities and tensions involved in carrying out practitioner research within specific funding and institutional contexts. It argues that more explicit recognition of these challenges is needed to realize the potential of PR.

Introduction and Overview of Issues
Mary Hamilton

PR is a well-developed strategy within adult education and is promoted, if unevenly, by a range of government agencies and NGOs The idea of reflective professional practice and its relationship to research has a longstanding history in educational research and presents considerable intellectual challenges. It is frequently linked to action and participatory research methodologies and to research traditions concerned with voicing the experience of marginalized groups. It aims to re-dress the balance between practical, professional knowledge and academic research which has traditionally been more highly valued. Debates about who are the legitimate creators of knowledge, what is the relationship between theory and action are at the heart of these activities. Questions about how professionals use evidence in making practical decisions are actively explored.

Various models exist of practitioner involvement in research. These include supporting practitioners to carry out research themselves; having experienced researchers mentor practitioners new to research; involving university researchers with practitioners in a common network; consulting practitioners about topics for the research agenda; creating opportunities for researchers and practitioners to talk and work together through organizing conferences, study circles and professional development programmes. Many lessons can be learned from these experiences but to date these have not been drawn together. There are just a handful of evaluation reports that have begun to document the effects of practitioner involvements in research. While it seems clear that engagement in this process leads to teacher learning and changes in practice (Berger, Boles, & Troen, 2005), the broader potential of teacher research is less well understood.

The potential benefits identified for PR include improving practice through encouraging critical reflection; improving learner outcomes, informing and challenging policy; enabling dialogue between practice and research; and the creation of new knowledge through expression of practitioner voices (Quigley and Norton, 2002). In our experience, however, the actual outcomes and benefits are more ambivalent. Mainstream social policy research in the UK, North America and Australia. increasingly aims to incorporate practitioner research into its own vision of research impact. PR is seen as a way of encouraging "evidence-based" practice (Bingham and Smith, 2003). The meanings and possibilities of PR are dependent on the policy context within which it is funded and initiated and circumstances within which PR has been carried out. The achievements and value of PR are contested by different stakeholders and especially the relative

importance placed on process and product in the knowledge-making activities of practitioner research and the ways in which practitioners position themselves in relation to existing academic traditions. Tensions and dilemmas frequently arise as projects develop, manifesting themselves at all stages of the research process: problem definition, methods of data collection and communicating findings. It is these ambiguities and tensions that we hope to explore in this symposium.

All the contributors to the symposium have been actively involved in carrying out or supporting PR. Each paper will take one critical issue to explore in relation to these experiences. Yvon Appleby poses the question of what happens when PR is taken up by mainstream agencies and the prospects for sustainability. Alisa Belzer explores the effects of different, often conflicting, stakeholder perceptions of the purposes of PR and the need for explicit guidelines for evaluating quality and relevance in PR. Sondra Cuban discusses the challenges and outcomes of addressing gender issues in PR. Maria Kambouri reflects on practitioners' decision-making and the role of research diaries in PR.

Exploring Contexts and Purposes of Practitioner Research:
Is More Necessarily Better?
Yvon Appleby

The last five years have seen development in ABE practitioner research in the UK with the creation of a national adult literacy and numeracy strategy called *Skills for Life*. As part of research carried out with the National Research and Development Centre (NRDC), we were delighted to have the resources to integrate practitioner research within our work at Lancaster University. This seemed like a dream come true: a national research organisation, researching a national strategy that not just acknowledged practitioner research but actively promoted and funded it. However, as the dream became a reality several issues emerged questioning how successful or desirable this incorporation is. Issues emerged such as the meaning and purpose of practitioner evidence and how autonomous or challenging it is possible to be when 'badged' by a funding organisation. There are also wider issues around sustainability once the current policy moment has disappeared.

In the UK the *Skills for Life* strategy is supporting the professionalisation of the adult literacy, numeracy and ESOL workforce through initial teacher training, qualifications and continuing professional development. The strategy is therefore developing what professional practice means - how practitioners view their job and what they do in the classroom. In a system that operates through national targets, individual assessments and national tests our research suggested that there were two different types of professionalism. The first, 'responsive professionalism', was based upon democratic principles and a commitment to social justice. The second, 'new professionalism', was based upon the ability to adhere to procedures and paperwork ensuring systematic record keeping and efficient delivery of the national curriculum.

This distinction is significant as it impacts upon the type of practitioner research carried out and the type of evidence about practice that it generates. Within a 'responsive professionalism' approach practitioner research will focus on generating 'critical findings' looking at things from different perspectives, including that of learners. A 'new professionalism' approach will focus on generating 'evidence' of 'what works best'. The different approaches to practice will focus on different research questions and will therefore produce different research findings. How the findings are viewed as 'evidence' by peers, colleagues and policy makers as robust, rigorous or relevant depends on the valued placed on the type of professional practice being investigated, how practitioners are supported and what is being researched. The eight

practitioners we worked with carried out their own research connected to our overall focus on adult learners' lives. Each practitioner's study contributed to and extended the overall research project and each practitioner reflected that this had impacted positively upon his or her practice. Within the overall research context we were able to make sure that we recognised and supported a 'responsive' view of practice that generated 'critical findings' about adult literacy and adult learners' lives. We were able to integrate these finding into our own, generating a larger body of critical evidence.

This approach was not necessarily followed by other research projects, particularly those who were researching within a 'what works' model. In these, a less critical questioning appeared to occur. Whilst in some cases practitioner researchers were integrated within these research projects, and felt their contribution was valued, the type of evidence produced would not challenge some of the orthodox views of teaching and learning being supported within the *Skills for Life* strategy. This is in contrast to the more marginal but radical and critical spaces that practitioner research occupied in the previous thirty years of adult literacy education in the UK, for example in the Research and practice in Adult Literacy network (RaPAL). It could be argued that ABE practitioner research has moved, or been moved, from the margins to the centre. The benefits of this repositioning are increased resources and recognition. The downsides are the loss of autonomy, silencing of critical voices and the break up of communities who have supported critical teacher inquiry through practitioner research. It is important to look critically at what is happening and also to suggest some alternatives. One alternative model that has been developed in the NW of England is a research forum that links practitioners, managers, co-ordinators and academic researchers, provides a critical space for reflection and discussion where research evidence is used to stimulate debate rather than to be trained in 'what works'

This paper thus questions what a movement towards the centre means in terms of possibilities and tensions for practitioner research. Will it provide increased access and resources for more practitioners, or will it act to constrain critical dialogue? If, as Susan Lytle argues PR is both "useful and enlightening" and well as "messy and sometimes contentious" (Lytle 1997), it is essential to question whether it is possible to retain the critical and potentially radical elements which characterise its previous marginal situation as well as providing 'evidence' from 'responsive' practice within the current context.

Between a Rock and Hard Place: Mediating Competing Expectations for Practitioner Inquiry
Alisa Belzer

As a long time facilitator of teacher research among adult literacy and basic education practitioners, I firmly believe that teacher research processes have the potential to address successfully many areas of need in the field. This paper discusses, in particular, the challenge of using teacher research to generate new knowledge. Teacher research is most successful when it attains a level of intensity in terms of duration, creation of a community of teacher researchers, facilitator support, and frequency of meetings. However, it is rarely adequately resourced and teachers are pushed to achieve maximum results with minimal time. Such cost cutting often leaves room for meaningful individual growth, but rarely provides the support needed to produce a high quality product (i.e. a final report, conference presentations and journal articles) that adequately reflects the new knowledge that participants have attained and can be shared with others to serve the broader goals of teacher research.

The lack of resources which often limit the time facilitators and teacher research group participants spend on the "back end" completing high quality final projects, has enabled me, and

I suspect many others, to skirt the question of knowledge generation. In other words, if practitioners do not really have the time or help to develop high quality renditions of their inquiries, it is not possible to judge fairly the potential of teacher research to generate traditional knowledge. More complexly, however, Cochran-Smith and Lytle (1992) argue that teacher research is a distinctive genre of knowledge generation, therefore the same standards that are typically applied to traditional university should not be used. Yet, what this has meant in practice, when judging the value of teacher research from the perspectives of multiple stakeholders (e.g., the facilitator, participants, funders, outside audiences), has never been established. In reality, evaluations of teacher research projects that go beyond judging individual impact on participants tend to use traditional research criteria of quality (Foster, 1999; Furlong & Salisbury, 2005), or designate it non-research and judge its value in other ways. When judged by traditional research standards, teacher research not surprisingly often falls short given the fact that participants' training in traditional research methods is generally very limited.

I was recently asked to facilitate a teacher research group whose primary focus was to generate knowledge rather than promote individual professional development. I felt confident that the goal could be met. Funding and support seemed adequate to give this group a fighting chance despite its short time frame. However, disagreements arose with the funder about whether the participants had properly identified a research question and came to a head over the quality of the papers produced at the end with a refusal to publish or disseminate them at a national conference. What went wrong? Clearly the funder felt that she had not gotten what she had paid for. I believe that at least two issues may explain her rejection of the projects and my surprise at her response. Firstly, what knowledge generation is (i.e. what counts as knowledge, for whom) in the context of teacher research has not yet been clearly articulated. Secondly, standards of quality for teacher research have not yet been established. Both these absences create significant challenges to the ideal of teacher research being viewed as a unique and valuable source of knowledge that can serve efforts to improve practice and increase learner outcomes across contexts and audiences.

I believe that the funder, like many academics and those with advanced training working in the field as she is, applied traditional criteria of research quality to her judgements of the projects and found them wanting. I realize now that she was predisposed to this evaluation, in spite of my repeatedsuggestions to her that teacher research yields something different, though no less valuable, than traditional university research. I, on the other hand, evaluated the projects from the perspective of a practitioner, asking myself do these projects have value in practice, ie. do they have immediate and concrete application to challenges in teaching, learning, and program administration? The answer, from my perspective, was yes. Shkedi's (1998) case studies of teachers' encounters with research suggest that they actually read research differently than researchers do because they seek concrete connections to their experiences, challenges and questions which are very different from those of researchers. Without articulating criteria for quality, disagreements over the merit and benefits of teacher research are probably inevitable. These judgments will be shaped by individual beliefs and assumptions about how new knowledge gets generated and what makes it valuable. As long as this is the prevailing condition within which teacher research is produced and judged, when it is conducted for purposes beyond individual professional development, participants, facilitators, and funders may often, and frustratingly, find themselves between a rock and a hard place.

Are We Only Studying Women? Doing PAR on Gender in Adult Basic Education
Sondra Cuban

This paper reports on a case study of feminist practitioner-research in a service-learning project at a university in Washington and its implications for the adult basic education field. Feminist practitioner-research is pervasive in gender/women's studies (Gatenby & Humphries, 2000) and professional studies (Katila & Merilainen, 2002) and less so in fields like adult basic education, where women predominate as learners and educators, but, where their labour and contributions are historically marginalised. This issue surfaced on the first day, when a student asked, "are we only studying women?" As a faculty fellow in a year-long service-learning programme at my former university, I wanted to boost a flagging course in my department (Adult Education & Training), called, "Issues in Adult Basic Skills" to focus on women learners' literacy and language issues, specifically migrants, who were Seattle's growing population, but with little existing information on their needs and interests. In addition, Seattle's programmes had a majority of women learners as well as women practitioners. It seemed like the perfect opportunity for the mostly female graduate students in my course (a number of whom were also practitioners) to conduct action research with programmes that were filled with women. The aim of the course was to satisfy my objectives of learning more about these issues, give opportunities to twelve graduate students to learn about feminist issues; and position my university as an advocate for these programmes and this population.

The action research process that I used in the faculty fellow programme was used by the students in my course. I conducted my research with them while they conducted their research with practitioners in community-based programmes (who helped them design their research projects). These steps followed a cycle of becoming sensitized to the literature, generating research question collecting data and analysing it, and then, coming up with themes and implications. At the same time that I presented my research to the provost and colleagues, the students presented their research to the programme, to politicians, to their own programmes, to the public, and to our class. I operated the course according to feminist pedagogical principles yet with some aspects of the course, however, I exercised more control. For example, the programmes that were chosen by the students had been pre-selected by myself, as I wanted to help under-resourced organisations who couldn't afford to do research, and were receptive to collaborating. Additionally, I wanted to give students the opportunity to freely experiment in other organisations than their own. I stipulated that the students put in at least 30 hours of research and advocacy work into the organisations so that they grasped the complex issues and really helped them. Students also read a "women and literacy" literature and they reflected and dialogued about theories and their own experiences in small groups, presented readings in a seminar format, engaged in anti-oppression exercises, heard guest speakers, kept journals, and in the end, had the community-based supervisors evaluate their work. For my action research, I wanted to know, the degree to which the students became knowledgeable about women, literacy, and language issues over a 10 week period, and if they could advocate for the programmes and the population, effectively, and from a feminist perspective. I collected all of their journals, assessed the students at three intervals, collated their emails to me, wrote up notes after each session, and then analyzed these sources for themes. Self-reflexive strategies are important for feminist research and they were critical to this project, as everyone, including myself, had to come to terms with their own gendered positions in their organisations. I was one of two women out of six faculty fellow members, and I was the only one focusing on gender issues; most of the graduate students were initially uncomfortable with women as the subject of their studies, despite the fact that most worked in jobs predominated by women; and the women practitioners with

whom they collaborated were often more pragmatic in their decision-making than ideological, and hence, did not model many theories students read about.

The first main theme that emerged about feminist practitioner-action research projects was that the graduate students became acutely sensitised to the poor working conditions of the women practitioners they worked with, as well as their own organisations. The students often complained that the organisations were "disorganised" and the staff were spread too thin and burdened with paperwork, disallowing them from fully engaging with their projects, and leaving them without support. These experiences were ones that they also faced in their own work as practitioners but it became doubly obvious in another environment. This issue was revealed mid-way through the course, and became a topic of dialogue rather than a "barrier" to their project successes.

Could this kind of research continue outside of a university-community collaboration? Questions remain about the efficacy of feminist practitioner-research for continuing education when the risks are higher, than in a master's programme. Could women practitioners confront and change gender inequities through this type of research? If so, how would it look? There were lessons for me about my own continuing education. As I challenged my students and women practitioners in community-based programmes to reflect on the "Cinderella service" of adult basic education, I reflected on my own situation at a teaching university where other women academics, like myself were expected to teach seven courses per year, be on call to students in a consumeristic, "learner-centered" environment and never have resources or time to conduct my own research. Upon completion of the course, I realised that I was "an outsider in the sacred grove" of academe (Aisenberg & Harrington, 1988) reproducing many of the same norms in my environment, by pushing students to make changes that I also needed to make. Yet I also saw the danger of positioning myself as a 'feminist practitioner-researcher" in a privileged university.

The Role and Use of Reflective Diaries in Practitioner-Led Action Research
Maria Kambouri

The focus here is on the reflective diary as a method for collecting insider- expert information about practice as well as an instrument for the professional development of participating practitioners. The discussion is based on work carried out in the context of five 'effective practice' studies which were commissioned by the UK government following recent changes in raising the professional status of ABE. The studies looked at reading, writing, ESOL and numeracy practices through both quantitative and qualitative prisms. The fifth study which is the background chosen for this paper, looked at how Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) were introduced in some adult education practices, both as new literacies and as pedagogic tools. This research and development process entailed looking into the creation of new pedagogies and so the use of a practitioner-led action research paradigm seemed to be the appropriate tool to record change both in their practice and in practitioners' own developing skills. It is in this sense that the reflective diary can be considered both a research tool and a continuous professional development tool. Nine tutors, 2 development officers (experienced tutors and ICT experts) and 4 researchers (including the author) comprised the research team. Eight of the tutors were qualified ABE practitioners, experienced in mapping competencies to the National Standards; the ninth tutor was an ICT expert. The project span over two phases, a development period of a year and an evaluation period of about 6 months (Mellar et al.2007). During the development phase, tutors, who were paid a day a week to be part of this study, kept weekly diaries describing their teaching, the learners, the challenges they faced and reflecting on the processes involved. The team met to discuss pedagogic issues, theoretical perspectives

behind the use of ICT and research paradigms (in particular action research). Tutors felt they needed to spend more time 'standing back' and observing students at the same time as taking more of a researcher stance. The two development officers and two researchers visited classes and observed and discussed progress of work with the tutors. In the second phase tutors invited a 'buddy', a colleague who was willing to repeat the teaching approaches they had designed, and the diaries were now focused around 'critical incidents' or significant events in that process. Each week the tutors completed an on-line reflective diary describing their progress with their classes and their understanding of the role of ICT in their learners' learning. These short journals were often made available electronically to the rest of the tutors, though some tutors preferred to share them only with research and development officers. Through these reflective diaries, tutors were invited to reflect upon their teaching, especially in relation to the innovative programmes they were implementing. For example, changes in their approach to pedagogy. The diaries indicated the processes of thought that informed the decisions made by tutors. Questions were raised by tutors both within these diaries and within the support sessions and these led to changes in their pedagogy. The diaries also demonstrated that tutors were making decisions about their teaching in response to their learners and the available technologies (thus successfully recording 'change'). At the end of the year, the diaries were distilled into a report written by each tutor summarising the research and development outcomes. The diaries were also analysed by the researchers who looked across all tutors diaries. Conclusions and evaluative comments were drawn and discussed within the team.

Although the diaries demonstrated that important changes in pedagogy were taking place, partly fulfilling their role as research instruments, they posed certain challenges both to their creators and to the rest of researchers, which are worth investigating further.Not all tutors found the reflective diary a natural method to report on their thoughts about their practice even in an accepted 'experimental' setting. Some felt threatened by the open discussion on their teaching skills (even though they were observed by peers and researchers in several occasions) and were not prepared to share on line. Over the diary- keeping period, most diarists seemed to grow more confident and less self-conscious about sharing their diaries, as they found and developed their own voices and became more accustomed to others visiting their teaching environments. Some became more interested in how their accounts were analysed and began to actively engage with this information themselves and write about it in their reports. Others shied away but still acknowledged that the project had been a significant learning experience for them and the reflective diary useful in forcing them to evaluate and build on their experiences.

Going back to origins of personal documents such as diaries reminds us of how potent they can be in exposing the sensitive side of their creators, something we may not concentrate on enough when we think of them as reflective tools today. Allport, (1943) identifies three distinct models of diary familiar in everyday life: the intimate journal, in which private thoughts and opinions are recorded, uncensored; the memoir - an 'impersonal' diary, often written with an eye to publication; and the log, which is a kind of listing of events, with relatively little commentary. While the memoir may assume an audience, the log and the intimate journal are essentially private documents, written primarily for the diarists themselves. They are therefore constructed within the diarist's own frame of reference and assume an understanding reader for whom there is no need to present a best face.

At the same time, the potential to use diaries as a vehicle for research informants to observe situations which researchers cannot access has been explicitly drawn out within ethnographic research (Zimmerman and Wieder, 1977). Asking informants to keep diaries on the

subject to be studied and elaborating the written accounts based on the diaries is a common process. Thus diaries form part of a research process, in which informants actively participate in both recording and reflecting upon their own behaviour. We are left with questions about how professionals use evidence in making practical decisions about what to reveal for the 'research' table and how researchers can facilitate this process. Finally how can reflective diaries, or other methods of practitioner-led enquiry lead to revisiting existing research paradigms?

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A fuller version of this paper and further references can be found at http://www.lancs.ac.uk/staff/eramh/