Breaking down barriers in building teacher competence

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Abstract

Teachers may well be made, not born, and appointments to academic positions are often made without regard to the appointee's prior experience or competence in teaching. In most New Zealand universities, compulsory teaching development is not required. Furthermore, enrolment in opportunities to help teachers to develop further, frequently do not attract high numbers. How can those of us who work in staff development work effectively with resistant staff? How can we ensure that what we offer has optimal value in diverse areas? This paper reflects on an action research process currently under way in a New Zealand university, which seeks to investigate the usefulness of current and new staff development initiatives and to maximise benefits to staff. The work was presented at the recent ALARA conference and reflections from this presentation are interspersed with accounts of the work. I have used italics to highlight the 'process' parts of the work as it was presented at ALARA.

Keywords: action research, resistance, teacher research, advocates/advocacy

Introduction

Action research practitioners who usually work as 'insiders' in their own organisations can often encounter resistance as they work with others to change and improve established practice. *When this work was presented at ALARA in Brisbane (September 2011) I started by asking people in pairs to discuss examples of resistance they had experienced in their own work, and how they had addressed this resistance. Most had*

few problems in recalling these, and solutions ranged from including the resistors in the design group, engaging in mediation to help resolve the problems, by-passing the resistors in the work, and accepting that resistance is a regular response to change. I then provided some brief scenarios that volunteers read out, providing a context for the kinds of resistance that our team have encountered in our own practice. As these were read, there were frequent exclamations of agreement or nods from others working in academic contexts who identified with the scenarios presented. I then used the diagram below, blown up to poster size, to discuss the work that my colleagues and I are undertaking as we seek to improve our practice.

Action research is an appropriate way forward when one is seeking to improve practice (McNiff 2010; Stringer 2007;) and there is a plethora of models, case studies and related writing when one wishes to engage in action research. While there are those who would argue that action research must always be collaborative and aim to bring about broader social change (e.g. Carr & Kemmis 1986, 2005; Kemmis 2006; Tripp 1990; Zeichner 1993) others state that it can also be used to promote the improvement of individual practice without necessarily involving change in a wider context (e.g. Punia, 2004). Because I was familiar with the action research process as a way of improving practice, I recognised that it would be a good way for us, in a turbulent environment in which our unit was likely to be moved from its 'independent' positioning, to gather data on our effectiveness and to look critically at our practice. It could also help us to address needed social change in our University, which has a tendency to value research more highly than it does teaching, when we work with staff here. Together, we can help to redress the balance.

Action Research Cycle One: How well do we do what we do?

 Accordingly, I introduced my colleagues – two teaching developers, an appraisals administrator and our unit's

administrator - all important members of our team – to an action research model designed by Cardno and Piggot-Irvine (1994) and Piggot-Irvine (2000). This model proposes a three-phase process in which the first plan, act, observe and reflect cycle gathers baseline data. It is called *reconnaissance*, or as Piggot-Irvine titled it in her 2000 adaptation, 'examination of the existing situation' (see model below).
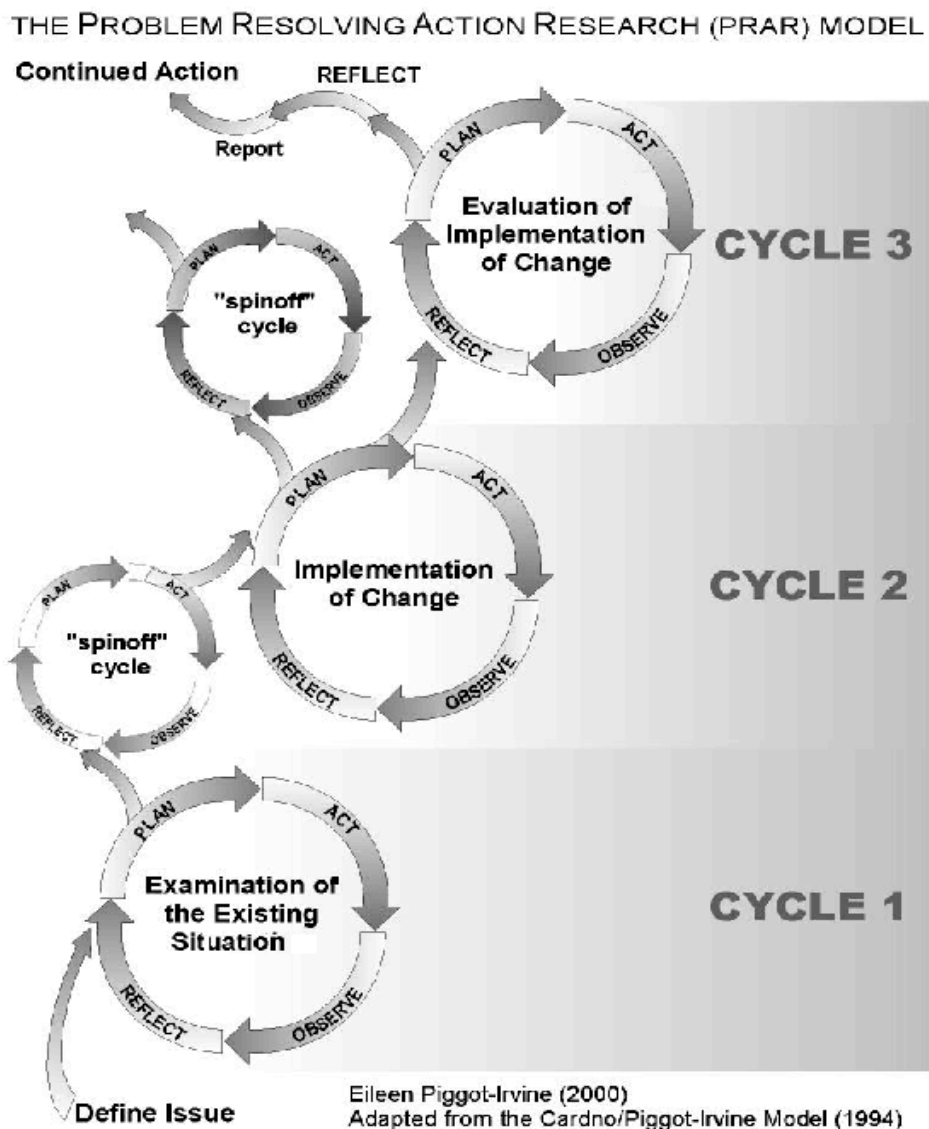

THE PROBLEM RESOLVING ACTION RESEARCH (PRAR) MODEL

Eileen Piggot-Irvine (2000)
Adapted from the Cardno/Piggot-Irvine Model (1994)

Diagram 1: a problem-resolving model of action research

Personally, I dislike the model's use of 'problem-resolving' in its descriptor, as in my experience action researchers are often seeking to understand their practice better or to be innovative in it, rather than being fixated on problems. This was the case in our action research; we wanted to see how effective we were being across a range of activities rather than being specifically aware of problems with any of these activities.

Although we are only a small unit, we strive to cover a range of activities, from a certificated programme, through one-to-one consultations and tailored workshops for specific areas, to the ongoing publication of our in-house magazine, TDU Talk, and mentoring for staff on developmental issues. Two recent initiatives, introduced only in 2010, included "Teaching Network" conversations (an opportunity for staff from across the university to come together and 'talk teaching' over a provided lunch; held approximately six weekly) and the Teaching Advocacy scheme, in which designated Advocates in each area, with support from their Dean and the Teaching Development Unit, facilitated teaching-related activities within the Faculty that would best meet the needs of discipline-based staff. There had been no evaluation of either of those initiatives, so it was important that they were included in our reconnaissance cycle. These initiatives too, were an attempt by us to strengthen the voices of those committed to valuing teaching within and across Faculties.

The poster below, which I used to help convey the range of our work to participants at ALARA in Brisbane in 2011, shows the various initiatives. I will refer to these by their numbers used on the poster, forthwith. Use of the poster freed me from a slavish dependence on power point, and modelled presentation processes that might be more appropriate for people working in environments where there isn't easy access to computers and

data show equipment. Feedback from participants at ALARA indicated that the poster had been a helpful way for them to grasp the complexity of our work, and to see how we eventually decided to narrow down to two initiatives in Cycle Two – but that is racing ahead at this point. (Thanks to our administrator, Preetha, for design work on the poster).
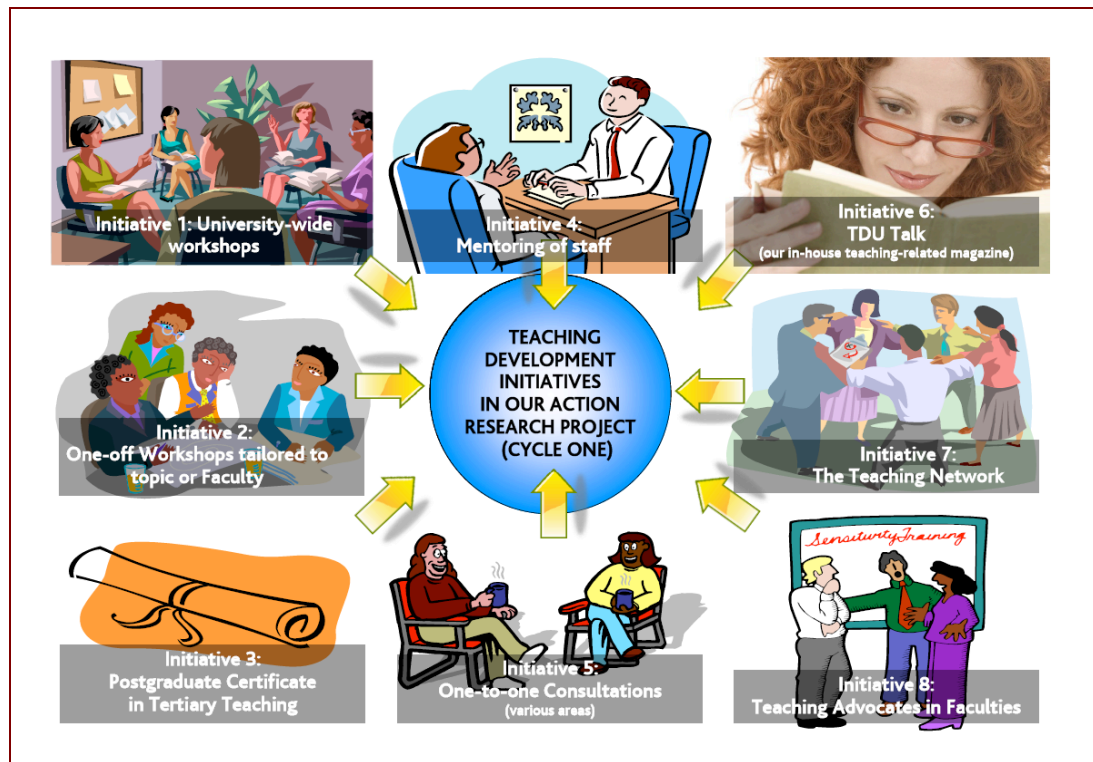

Diagram 2: ALARA conference display poster

We had to seek ethical clearance from the Faculty of Education, through which our PostGraduate Certificate in Tertiary Teaching (PGCert Tert Tchg) is accredited, for the research to proceed. This took some time; the complexity of the project required us to evaluate each initiative slightly differently, and complicated the process. There was a standard teaching appraisal process in place that gave us feedback on workshops for the PGCert Tert Tchg (Initiative 1), but after the workshops are held, much of the teaching happens through one-to-one supervision (Initiative 3). Accordingly, we organised and paid for a PhD student from outside our area to conduct interviews with all

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available graduates and current enrolees who agreed to participate (n=15). Feedback from this group was overwhelmingly positive[1] and informed our External Review of the Certificate that happened in 2011. General workshop appraisals were also very positive. For the purposes of the project and because we could not retrospectively include work, we appraised only the midyear workshops (n= 12 participants). As no specific one-off workshops (Initiative 2) were evaluated over the reconnaissance cycle period, we did not include those in the data examined.

Mentoring (Initiative 4) is evaluated by general feedback in a group process, and/or by emailed feedback at the end of each year. These data were not formally collated as the numbers were low (n=7, for people mentored by TDU staff) but the gist of feedback was that folk were satisfied with the mentoring they have been receiving and that nothing needed to change. All staff being mentored by TDU staff opted to continue with their current mentor if they wanted mentoring in the following year. Almost all of the one-to-one consultations held during this data collection period were related to PGCert Tert Tchg work so these (Initiative 5) were covered by the interviews conducted by our PhD student.

It proved quite difficult to evaluate Initiative 6, the effectiveness of TDU Talk, except by questionnaire, and we had already decided to use questionnaires or interviews to evaluate our work with the one-to-one consultations, the Teaching Network conversations, and PGCert Tert Tchg participants. So we included a couple of additional questions on the perceived effectiveness of TDU Talk in helping staff with their ongoing teaching development, in each questionnaire or interview. Again, feedback indicated

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[1] In-depth results are indicated in a joint paper – Spiller *et al*.2010 – that was presented at the Critical Ethnography Across the Disciplines conference in November of that year. Paper available from author.

that staff found it either "very helpful" or "helpful", with just a couple of suggestions for improvement. Sadly, budgetary restrictions in 2011 meant we had to cut down from monthly (8 editions per year) to six editions, with a further restriction to four editions planned for 2012.[2]

We promoted the action research project and invited input on Initiative 7, the Teaching Network conversations, both face-to-face with participants at the conversations, and by email to contact any who had not come to recent conversations. But we got so few respondents for this initiative that we chose not to include it in the next cycle of action research. Comments passed were that people enjoyed the conversations, but didn't want to give formal feedback on these.

Initiative 8, the newly-introduced "Teaching Advocates in Faculties", was evaluated via a focus group and follow-up emailed feedback. This revealed that in our attempt to be non-prescriptive around how Advocates ran their sessions, we had left some feeling under-supported. The Advocacy initiative was our attempt to combat the occasional criticism that university-wide workshops did not adequately meet the needs of some staff in discipline-related areas. So we sought to support them better by using a passionate teacher from each discipline area to better promote teaching-related work. Subversively, perhaps, we were also seeking to influence the cultures of some Faculties where teaching, and conducting research on teaching, was anything but the norm. Some excellent workshops and lunch-time conversations occurred that appeared to be filling this identified gap, but the Advocates themselves, being new in their roles, had wanted more direction from TDU than we had provided. They also sought more opportunities to meet together as a group. Being an identifiable 'change agent' in some more

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[2] E-copies of this publication can be accessed from http:www.waikato.ac.nz/tdu/resources/index.shtml

conservative Faculties could have been quite hard for them, and perhaps we should have better anticipated feelings of isolation.

At the end of 2010, having considered all the feedback on all initiatives, we decided in 2011 to focus just on improving the PGCert Tert Tchg and the Teaching Advocacy scheme. This provided the focus for Cycle Two. *When I explained each of these initiatives during the ALAR Conference, workshop participants made favourable comment about the conversational aspect of some of our initiatives, and certainly recognised the need for discipline-specific input. Staff developers in the group were well aware of criticisms of 'one size fits all' workshops in environments such as ours. The innovation of Advocacy was applauded, although the approach is not necessarily novel – staff at Lund University, Sweden, have followed a somewhat similar process in the development of their pedagogical competencies (see, for instance, Olssen, Martensson and Roxa, 2008, and reinforced via personal correspondence).*

Action Research Cycle Two: How can we improve PG Cert Tert Tchg and Teaching Advocacy initiatives?

Because our original ethics application had covered data gathering from each of these areas, we didn't need to go back to the Ethics Committee again. Part of the University's quality assurance processes requires that programmes be reviewed every three years, and it was time for the PGCert Tert Tchg to go through this process. As we already had the in-depth consumer feedback from these students in 2010, we didn't need to undertake that aspect of the review process. But we did need to review how the programme was working from the perspectives of the staff teaching on it. Our quality assurance processes meant that we also needed to seek an outside reviewer, and a colleague from the University of Otago agreed to undertake this task for us.

Staff feedback was sought via a focus group facilitated by someone in the unit who did not teach on the programme.

She recorded the conversation, provided a transcript and summarised the results. The feedback indicated that there was warm support for the individual meetings format, but that we needed to remember the reluctance of some to sharing some things. The programme was seen to: be good for people's development; prompt them to think in different ways; provide a safe place for them to explore teaching practice; help to 'turn around' people who were feeling disillusioned; positive in terms of its flexibility; contribute to a 'family' feeling among students; help to scaffold people into higher levels of learning; and contribute to cross-disciplinary communication. Aspects in need of change, from the staff's perspective, were: tightening up on assessment deadlines, given that our students (who are mainly also staff) can behave just like other students; ensuring that with our current staffing levels, we don't take on too many more students; the need to quieten down verbose contributors in PG Cert Tert Tchg meetings; and perhaps to investigate delivering part of the programme online. It was also recognised that some people, because of time and workload issues, did not engage with some aspects of learning in an in-depth way, but this is part of busy people's lives, and to be expected. It was also recommended that one of the tasks should be restricted just to an exploration of assessment, rather than being (as at present) either assessment or classroom-related. This is because the other task *did* require the design and evaluation of a teaching initiative, and otherwise assessment could be left out.

Staff mentioned their excitement about seeing people grow; that they never got bored with the programme or the teaching; that they learned to do new things themselves, and appreciated hearing about the different educational experiences of enrolees from other than university sectors, and those from different disciplines. This showed an increased awareness of contexts outside of the student's own, which is an important way of contributing to culture

change. Causes of least satisfaction included uncertainty about the programme's future, with our Unit's merger with the Faculty of Education; the fact that PGCert Tert Tchg is not necessarily counted towards promotion for staff who undertake the programme; and the length of time it takes to 'change hearts and attitudes'.

The external reviewer's very thorough report received in late September 2011, was mainly positive. She identified the programme's comprehensiveness; the adequacy of the graduate profile; the programme's suitability for preparing graduates for further tertiary study; the appropriateness of the teaching approach, papers and assessments for the clientele; and the 'practice-based' nature of the assessment tasks. She did, however, comment that the tasks seemed to be research-based, and as the qualification doesn't include research skills, were students adequately equipped to undertake these tasks? The team felt that because enrolees have to have completed a first degree (or equivalent) they're likely to have covered research in prior contexts, and in any case there is extensive supervision, with supporting articles and discussions, provided to help them with reflective-practice-based research. We also provide several case studies made available by previous students so that they can get a sense of how others have approached the tasks.

The external reviewer noted that student feedback, both through standard workshop evaluations and through the interviews conducted for this action research project, were 'extremely positive' overall. "The feedback affirms the approach taken in the Certificate, is highly complimentary of the teachers, and it is clear that the programme is changing the way people teach – for the better", she wrote (Spronken-Smith, 2011, p. 3). This was an important piece of feedback, given our desire to build into our institution better valuing of teaching.

As with the staff feedback, the issue of the group meetings being more focussed was raised, as was the need for our team and an e-learning group who contribute a couple of the workshops, to work together more closely. The reviewer noted as a concern, the fact that some staff still indicated a feeling of reluctance to talk about teaching with departmental colleagues, but related this to departmental or institutional cultures, not the programme. "This is indicative of a pervasive culture at our universities which values research more highly than teaching. Some participants called for a raising of the profile of this programme with clear support and promotion from senior management," she wrote (op. cit., pp 3- 4). This reviewer's comments support our perception that widespread culture change is needed in the University sector in New Zealand. We need to ensure that people who really value teaching, and who are committed to personal and institutional improvement teach our students. The only suggestions the reviewer gave for improvement were changing the title of the paper named "Tertiary Teaching Research and Development", and more regular evaluation of the Certificate as a whole. She concluded that the programme was "excellent, and indeed a model of good practice for such courses in the tertiary sector" (op. cit., p 4).

Our data collection for the PG Cert Tert Tchg programme had produced rich data that served two purposes: quality assurance for the University, and confirmation of approach plus some ideas for improvement, for the team. *When I shared this in-depth second cycle with the group in Brisbane, we did not yet have the external reviewer's comments to hand, but I was able to share the other sources of data with them. The general feedback was that the data gathering had been appropriate, with the possible exception of our not including 'external stakeholder' feedback. This could have come from Heads of Department/Faculty, or managers of staff from outside the University, to determine their perspectives on how well the programme was meeting the needs of teachers in their specific*

*contexts. This omission is acknowledged as valid in principle.
However, advice from our team manager was that some of our
students' managers would not even be aware that they were
undertaking the qualification, let alone what impact it might
have had on their practice. Few managers in university contexts
undertake classroom observations with their staff. While some
Chairs of Department do view the formal paper evaluations that
are conducted, these are somewhat of a blunt instrument in terms
of providing data that could give insight into how well or
otherwise our programme was impacting on daily teaching
practice. However, the point raised by Conference participants in
my workshop was appreciated.*

As far as the Teaching Advocacy initiative was concerned,
during 2011 we set out to provide more support for
Advocates. Individual meetings were scheduled with
Advocates towards the start of the year to
ascertain/suggest ideas for their Faculties during 2011, and
group meetings were held three times during the year
(March, July and November) at which events that had gone
well were shared. We also discussed a couple of events that
had not attracted much support, commiserated with the
Advocates and suggested ways of encouraging greater
participation in future. In these ways we sought to reduce
feelings of isolation that the previous year's Advocates had
indicated, and to strengthen them as they work to improve
the valuing of teaching at our University.

We had Advocates raise a couple of novel ideas besides the
more usual catered lunch-with-discussion that had been
the norm. The Waikato Management School, which is a
Faculty but retains its original name for branding
purposes, decided to have *two* Advocates in recognition of
the wide spread of discipline areas covered. They shared
the one budget, and supported each other in the work,
including the identification of a School tendency to have
late afternoon meetings. This identification led them to
offer Advocacy events over wine and cheese towards the
end of the day, an approach that worked surprisingly well,

attracting good numbers from across the disciplines, including some senior managers. The new Computing and Mathematics Advocate, from a small Faculty, sought permission to use some of their Advocacy budget to purchase a 'teaching tablet' that could be trialled by several staff in lecture theatres to work out recordable proofs, rather than using whiteboards whose results were erased at the end of the session. The success of this in disseminating conversations about teaching within the Faculty is yet to be reported on, but it was a novel idea.

It was interesting that some Advocates used their position and budget to explain and support institutional requirements such as the need for staff to write or update learning outcomes for papers (a new experience for some!); to compile marking rubrics; to come to grips with new technology such as WIMBA, Moodle or online, on-the-spot surveys (with the help of staff from the e-learning team). A couple of Advocates also invited University-recognised excellent teachers to come in and share ideas such as how to team teach effectively, and how to encourage student participation in lectures. A guest speaker from outside the University was the drawcard for one of the Advocacy sessions. These 'outside of Faculty' speakers were also an attempt to unseat any resistance to the valuing of teaching as an equal skill with research, by widening the ways in which staff think about teaching practice. As some of our Advocates are PGCert Tert Tchg graduates, they had often encountered relevant literature in the course of their study that they then used to stimulate teaching-related conversations in their Faculties. One example would be the Advocate for the Faculty of Science and Engineering, who used an article by Eric Mazur (1997) to provoke discussion on how better to formatively assess science-related subjects (see Wilson, 2010).

All Advocates agreed, at the 'evaluation' type end-of-year meeting, that Advocacy is a good idea and had provoked at least *some* conversations about teaching approaches in

their Faculties. This is 'new territory' in a couple of
Faculties however, where the pressure to produce high
quality research still appears to be the driving motivation,
as indicated earlier. Perhaps the fact that by mid 2012, all
academics employed here have to have submitted their
individual portfolios for our Performance-Based Research
Fund exercise may have exacerbated this motivation.
However it has always been a feature of University life,
with some (e.g. Zahra, 2011) commenting on the difficulties
of publishing teaching-related work in the face of pressure
to achieve high scores in discipline-related research.

*In the discussions at the ALARA conference, the idea of using
Teaching Advocates from within discipline areas was
commended. Those present at the workshop recognised the
tendency for some academics to devalue input on teaching
provided by people from outside discipline areas, whereas the
same information provided by colleagues might be accepted and
acted on.*

Conclusion (what did we learn?)

There were a number of benefits gained from our team's
action research. It enabled the younger, less experienced
team members to see how action research happens, and to
have their own part in our work recognised. We took a
joint paper to a local conference towards the end of 2010,
and this, too, was 'public exposure' of themselves as new
researchers that was new to them, and also gave us some
outside feedback on our work (Spiller, Bruce Ferguson,
Pratapsingh, Lochan & Harris 2010). The collaboration
needed to keep an extensive range of activities such as ours
going, depends on the initiative, skills and motivation of all
of us, and our team approach reinforced this valuing of our
joint work. The work also helped us to clarify how we
might intervene in less usual ways, to promote the values
that we all hold in this unit, values such as working hard to
ensure that teaching is valued; working to support staff
who are feeling isolated because their efforts to improve

their teaching are seen as so far outside the norm in some areas; and ensuring that student feedback on teaching is an important source of critical feedback that can improve teaching. Two of our number has undertaken a three-institution-wide investigation into just this last aspect, in 2010 and 2011.

It was good to get such strong support, in the main, for what we are doing. In our PG Cert Tert Tchg programme we encourage staff to engage in small, in-depth investigations of some aspects of their own practice, and it was good for us to role model doing this ourselves. It was also good to get feedback from staff within the university, and from participants at both of the conferences to which I/we have taken accounts of this work, that suggested ways of improving our practice. It was particularly encouraging that graduates and the external reviewer of our PG Cert Tert Tchg were so warm in their praise of this programme, in its review year.

Challenges experienced during the process included negotiating ethical approval through the Faculty of Education, a process that is likely to be repeated with other research as we are now formally located within that Faculty; and the ongoing drain of trying to promote teaching in such a research-based environment. However, alongside *that* particular challenge is the encouragement that we receive from those who do choose to support our work, and whose work we do our best to support in turn. Our collaborative pursuit of good teaching is supported by theorists such as Bell, Gaventa and Peters (1990). Their book, *We Make the Road by Walking: Conversations on Education and Social Change* with Myles Horton and Paulo Freire, was described by Henry Giroux as:

> ... a book of compelling passion, politics, and hope. The dialogue between Horton and Freire opens up new insights into the meaning of pedagogy, social criticism, and collective struggle. This book offers hope by demonstrating in the voices and practices of two of the great educator-activists of the twentieth century the reason for

making pedagogy practical and theoretical in the service of social
justice" (accessed from
http://www.temple.edu/tempress/titles/804_reg.html)

The road that we walk together sometimes feels difficult,
and the impact of our work hard to ascertain in our
research-based culture. Nevertheless, we hope that our
slight contribution to the literature will provide a local
example of collective struggle by people prepared to
challenge dominant hegemonies and to 'make our
pedagogy practical and theoretical' in the service of better
education for our students.

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Dr. Pip Bruce Ferguson has worked for many years as both a tertiary staff developer and as an independent educational consultant and researcher, practising mainly in New Zealand. Her PhD thesis (on http://fergs.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/01/PipPhD.pdf), used the action research approach advocated by Jack Whitehead and Jean

McNiff in the U.K., to help to develop a research culture in
the polytechnic where she then worked.

In recent years Pip has been active in online forums such as
BERA, in encouraging researchers to open up their
standards so that research presented in non-traditional (but
equally valid and relevant) ways can be 'counted'
internationally.