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## Transforming Research-Learning Performance With Professional Lifelong Learners

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### Abstract

In Europe, universities promote accredited professional development opportunities as a key strand of their lifelong learning commitment. Within this context, learning about research methods can be problematic to busy professionals, as it can appear dis-located from practice and unworthy of the energy and effort it takes to understand what might be perceived as a purely academic pursuit. The purpose of the study was to tackle this situation: to enhance the professional's experience and learning performance in research methods, in the context of work based learning Bachelor's and Master's degrees. Action research was used to develop a pedagogic approach to facilitate learning with busy professionals. The results suggest a significantly more positive experience for the learners, and a verified increase in performance (% grades) in assessed work. This paper gives an overview of the pedagogic approach and tools developed.

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### 1. Introduction

In Europe, universities have delivered accredited professional development opportunities for some time now, and often promote it as a key strand of their lifelong learning commitment. These opportunities may be referred to as work integrated programmes, workplace learning programmes, service learning, or work based learning degree programmes (Wall, 2010). Within the UK, the latter of these terms is used, and attract busy professionals in full time jobs, and this paper is written from one of the largest centers of negotiated work based learning programmes in Europe (Wall, 2012).

The center has found that the attraction of these programmes is that the busy professional learner can integrate accredited study alongside their work and family commitments, in areas that have direct relevance to their programme of study (Nixon, 2008). Yet the center has also found that within this context, learning about research methods can be problematic to the busy professional learner across industrial sectors; to them, from their perspective, it can feel dis-located from practice, and in some cases, unworthy of the energy and effort it takes to understand the area – it can be seen as a purely academic pursuit.

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Though the tensions of the ‘relevance gap’ of universities and the ‘real world’ have been known for some time, and continue to be reported (Starkey and Madan, 2001; Mintzerg, 2004; Wedgewood, 2008) – but the pedagogic responses to deal with this continue to be stark in the literature. The purpose of the study was therefore to practically tackle this situation at the pedagogic level: to enhance the professional's experience and learning performance in research methods, in the context of work based learning Bachelor's and Master's degrees.

## **2. Method: Action Research**

A team of academics within a medium sized UK university adopted a cyclical action research methodology to research their pedagogic practices (including the author as the principal investigator). The particular focus was within the delivery of a research training and preparation course (named ‘Designing Practitioner Research’), which features as one of the final courses in work-based learning undergraduate and Master’s degrees within the academic department. This action oriented research approach aligned with the pragmatic orientation of the work-based learning department (learning through action rather than the classroom), and focused on authentic changes in the reality of the context.

Together, the academic team took cycles of planning-action-reflection-re-planning, acting as critical-peers to challenge observations during each cycle (Brannick and Coghlan, 2009). This included reflecting-in-action (Schön, 1992) during interactions; direct instruction to groups during a ‘Designing Practitioner Research’ workshop, and interactions after the workshop. The particular interactions after the workshop specifically included paying attention to the questions raised by the professional learners and the coaching that was required to facilitate learning. And finally, it included reflecting-on-action, which involved: reviewing each learner’s draft proposals for practitioner research, formal assessment of the final versions of these proposals by academics, and critical-peer debriefings amongst the academics.

To analyze the experiences and reflections of the team, a grounded, emergent strategy was used, enabling common themes to be identified from practice, which then formed the basis for re-planning and development of pedagogical practices (Brannick and Coghlan, 2009; Creswell, 2009). For each cycle, academic performance was externally scrutinized and ratified within standard quality assurance procedures by external examiners. These are highly specified assessment criteria used by all academics within the team and the external examiners, and have been in operation for over 5 years.

This provided a procedure for independent validation (or otherwise) of the outcomes being created through the pedagogic practices being implemented (James, Slater and Bucknam, 2011). The initial cycle started in 2010, and the team has undertaken four full action research cycles since then. The most important themes and practices are reported below.

## **3. Findings and Outcomes: An Accelerated Practitioner Research Approach (APRA)**

A key outcome for APRA has been a significant change in the level and consistency of the learning achievement in the Designing Practitioner Research course, as measured by academic grades and feedback on the learner’s final proposals, by the academic team. Most professional learners now achieve what is recognized as a ‘Merit’ in the grading system, which is one classification below the highest grade boundary (the ‘Distinction’).

In comparison to other courses, this is a higher level of achievement, but has been consistently validated by the external examiners. Less measurable, but noticeable for the team, was a shift in focus from a ‘nice to know’ type of academic research to strategic pragmatic research which is focused on addressing important organisational challenges or opportunities.

For example, rather than the learners attempting to generalize about the use of human resource planning in small businesses (perhaps more of an academic interest), all of the professional learners are now focused on their own strategic issues, such as trying to understand and improve the sales performance of particular products. In turn,

though not discussed here, this has led to more strategic changes and impacts within organisations, when the learners actually implement their practitioner research design.

The pedagogic practices that have influenced these outcomes include: a new course design (for Designing Practitioner Research) which embeds a new practitioner research process; coaching questions which directly link to this process; heuristics to help communicate options and possibilities through the process; and new assessment criteria for the course, to emphasize the nature of practitioner research for learners and markers. The process, along with key pedagogic practices, is outlined below.

### *3.1. Stage 1: Specifying Focus*

This stage facilitates the professional learner to focus on an issue of importance. Typically, learners tended to start the course with a method without a clear issue or development to focus on – they wanted to do a questionnaire or focus group, for example. The questions and concepts in this stage resist thinking about method, and instead, focus on change or development. The questions are:

0. What alternative perspectives or positions are available here?
1. What needs to change or develop in my setting?
2. ‘Who’ has said ‘what’ about addressing my focus?
3. What do I want to achieve in my situation?
4. How can I approach this?
5. What specifically do I need to find out?

A detailed discussion of each question is beyond the scope of this paper, but there are some important points to note. Question 0 is about the professional learner developing a critical awareness of their assumptions and choices throughout; it encourages critical thinking and acts as an ethicality check at each decision point, along the points of beneficence, autonomy and justice.

For question 2, learners focus on reviewing professional and academic literature to inform and illuminate a solution to the change/development specified in question 1, rather than academic theory determining their focus. Typically within academic research, the task would be to find a gap in the literature, but within this form of practitioner research, an academic gap is not a concern. The focus is more on a change or development in practice.

Within question 3, we use the heuristic to hone in on, and be precise about, the professional learner’s purpose for the research: we ask them to finish off various sentences such as “To identify recommendations...”, “To enhance...”, “To recommend a course of action...”. This is not to constrain; it is a pedagogic scaffold from which to start or shape thinking. This then represents the Research Purpose to which all methodological decisions relate to; the terms ‘research aims’, ‘objectives’ or ‘outcomes’ have been removed to aid clarity and focus.

In question 4, we use the heuristic of seeing approaches as researching something ‘before’ action is taken, ‘during’ action, or ‘after’ action has been taken. These imply particular methodological choices, but their intention is to enable learners to think quickly about broad alternatives such as decision analysis, action research, or evaluation research. And finally, the answers to all of these determine question 5; the Research Questions.

### *3.2. Stage 2: Specifying Methodology*

A great emphasis is placed on getting clarity in Stage 1 before progressing into Stage 2. We still find much time and effort is spent in this stage, and is likened to internal consulting processes. Stage 2 is about considering alternative methodological options, and then clearly specifying methodological choices. The questions here are:

6. What data do I need?
7. How will I collect the data?
8. How will I interpret or analyze the data to create action?
9. How will I ensure ethicality?
10. 'Who', will do 'what', 'when'?

Question 6 encourages the professional learner to consider the actual data that are needed which will then be collected and analyzed in questions 7 and 8. This continues to be challenging, but enables the learner to be clearer about the specific methods of data collection and analysis (questions 7 and 8).

Within APRA, we found that many professional learners started their journey conceiving 'research' simply as question 7, but through the above process, emphasized a much wider process of strategic thinking. Similarly, we found many professional learners would not think in depth about question 8, but rather focus on methods for data collection.

In question 8, the academic team continue to encourage the professional learner to think of analysis in terms of 'what else needs to happen' to the data to meet the actionable outcomes of the Research Purpose above. The final two questions are final checks for ethicality and a specific action plan to implement the practitioner research. The professional learner, usually as an insider researcher, must be aware of the ethical implications of every methodological choice they make.

#### **4. Implications**

APRA has proven outcomes for professional learners in an attempt to improve their learning experience (from their perspective) and enhance the learning performance according to the achievement of learning outcomes. In this way, professional learners are also learning how to make a difference to business practices through research, and also benefit from doing so, through academic reward – a key characteristic of work based learning programmes.

It is especially relevant for those educational establishments working with professional learners in real world contexts, such as professional development and work based learning. Educational center in the Netherlands and Austria have been adopting the processes and tools identified in this paper, and have translated into their own contexts. Yet others may want to explore how they can integrate the pedagogic practices into their own facilitation practices.

Though not designed for other learning contexts, other communities have expressed an interest in APRA, including traditional teaching contexts, and more radically, organisational consultancy and organisational development. APRA embeds the capability for professionals to investigate strategic issues, using both practitioner and academic theories and research, to make a difference. This is an emergent practice which will be important to consider over the next decade.

Yet it is important to continue the action research cycles to further refine and develop pedagogic practices. A particularly interesting theme that seems to be emerging in current practice is how to facilitate reflective methodologies within the context of busy professional learners whose first language is not English. Reflecting critically in a second language is a challenging task in itself, but when this is being facilitated and formally assessed through English language, additional challenges arise. This is a new line of enquiry which the team hopes to enhance the experience and learning performance of professionals.

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