Shared Ambitions Support Educators in Practitioner Action Research

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Abstract:

When teachers share ambitions for their practice, they are raising both their own awareness of their personal theory and articulating a shared conception of educational values. In contrast to traditional research methods modules which encompass a variety of methodologies, a new module has been collaboratively developed between two higher education institutions in Ireland to focus on action research, specifically requiring participants to engage in and document a research project linked to practice. Research methods as a subject can prove challenging for teacher-researchers especially in applying the concepts to their own practice-based projects. This module, aimed at practitioners in further and higher education in Ireland, forms part of a flexible pathway to a postgraduate diploma which is underpinned by core professional values. Until now, there has not been such a blended action research module offered within Ireland, and we are keen to explore the potential of shared ambitions in this context.

Key Words: Academic practice; Blended Learning; Collaboration; Inquiry;

Outline:

The purpose of the Irish Learning Innovation Network (LIN, 2012) is to enhance learning and teaching practices through collaborative work and shared practice in the Institutes of Technology in Ireland. This is achieved through shared development and delivery of teaching and learning modules by the cooperating institutes of higher education to encourage and promote professional development amongst their staff. The modules form part of a flexible pathway to a postgraduate diploma in learning, teaching and assessment. This diploma is underpinned by core professional values including being committed to 'evidenced research based teaching informed by scholarship' and having 'courage' and 'openness to new approaches, innovations and a commitment to continuing reflection on professional practice' (Fitzpatrick and Harvey, 2011, p.85).

The network identified the need for an introductory Educational Research module that provided lecturers with the opportunity to engage in research into their learning and teaching practices. In particular two institutes from the network, Athlone Institute of Technology (AIT, 2012) and Dublin Institute of Technology (DIT, 2012), undertook the development of the module. Initial thoughts focused on creating a syllabus that concentrated on identifying typical generic steps in the research process (Crotty, 1998; Cohen et. al, 2011), relationships between these steps and providing an "À la carte" menu from which a theoretical perspective, methodology, and methods are chosen. However, this traditional approach was rejected in favour of engaging the module participants (lecturers within the Institute of Technology sector) in undertaking a relevant research project investigating their own practice while learning about the research process itself. Our approach promotes student centred learning with active engagement and reflection on practice. It also supports the theme of enhancement of quality in teaching and learning identified in the Irish National Strategy for Higher Education (2011) which states that 'a culture of enquiry and engaged scholarship should permeate the work of all higher education institutions, and all students in Irish higher education—both undergraduate and postgraduate—should learn in an environment where research and teaching are closely linked'. In this approach, we along with Healey and Jenkins (2011, p.5) view the lecturers taking this module as 'participants' in rather than as an 'audience' of the module. In particular, Healey and Jenkins (2011, p.5) classify this approach as 'Research-Based' where students undertake research and inquiry. This form of teaching according to Griffiths (cited in Healey and Jenkins, 2011, p.4) is where 'students learn as researchers, the curriculum is largely designed around inquiry-based activities, and the division of roles between teacher and student is minimised'. Leading from this Gibbs and Coffey (2004) suggest that effective professional development on any instructional topics requires a level of depth and engagement that does not just happen in a single session but instead through quality engagement over a period of time. The learning that lecturers will partake in to develop and improve their own research practice comes from discussion, sharing and collaboration with other teachers facing similar challenges (Sachs, 2003).

To achieve our principal design goals of getting lecturers doing research into their practice and being 'participants' (Healey and Jenkins, 2011, p.5) in the module, we decided to employ a single methodology – Action Research.

Action Research was chosen for a number of reasons. It can be employed on small-scale research projects. It is practitioner-based allowing individuals to investigate their own

practice. Action researchers intervene in their own practice to determine if they can improve 'practice so that it is more effective?' (Lomax, cited in Bell, 2010, p.7). Kemmis (2007, p.172) identifies 'educational practices' as the focus of action research and notes that action research relies on 'practical theory'. This allows action researchers to investigate their own personal theories (Bassey, 2007). The methodology is best undertaken through collaboration with other participants (Kemmis, 2007). The benefit here is that lecturers investigating their own practice through action research expose their own students to research process activities. Action research is strongly advocated where lecturers engage in deep reflective practice. According to Greenbank (2007) action research is a step further than reflective practice and provides a rigorous and systematic research approach for educational enquiry working towards improvement of practice while facilitating reflection. This methodology provides a framework to allow a variety of data collection methods to be explored, examined and deployed as required. Potential data collection methods include diaries, interviews, observation, and questionnaires (Bell, 2010). These methods provide data that must be analysed in order to identify 'recommendations for good practice' (Bell, 2010, p.6) to be made. As collaboration with other participants is an integral part of action research, this methodology requires ethical considerations to be addressed and provides an environment to explore ethical issues such as 'informed consent' (Bryman, 2008, p.124), 'privacy' (Cohen et. al., 2011, p.90), or seeking permission to undertake your research (Bell, 2010).

This module is delivered through a blended approach employing face-to-face classes, webinars, on-line tutorials, on-line discussion forums and group-work with teachers of the module facilitating the learning process (Carlile and Jordan, 2005) by encouraging group work, promoting discussion, and engaging the lecturers in their action research project. The module design, delivery, and facilitation processes support the module participants in identifying and developing a relevant research concern related to their individual practice; engaging in critical reading related to their concern; selecting, justifying, and implementing an action research process to investigate their practice while they continuously critically reflect on the process being undertaken. The module design deliberately includes 'authentic assessment' (Bloxham and Boyd, 2007, p.27) where the module participants must provide a written rationale for their research concern selected, an annotated bibliography, an action research report, and present their critical reflection on their action research process and project to their peers.

Developing professionalism within learning and teaching in education involves an understanding of practice in the context of a changing society. By providing such opportunities for research, professional dialogue, promoting collaboration and sharing of practice and creating a culture of inquiry and reflection it is intended that professional development opportunities for lecturers in further and higher education will be sustained and enhanced.

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