

Mobilising a Socio-rhetorical Network for Research

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The *Literacies for Learning in Further Education* research project has been funded as part of Phase III of the TLRP. It is running from January 2004 until December 2006 and aims to investigate literacy as a resource for learning across the curriculum, drawing on previous work in New Literacies Studies. The project is a partnership between two universities and four further education colleges spread across the border between England and Scotland. For more details, visit the website at www.lflfe.stir.ac.uk.

The project is in its early stage but we want to use this opportunity to reflect upon our own approach to what is commonly referred to as ‘user engagement’ in the evolution of this project and some of our plans for the future. Our approach is informed by both previous experience and our own academic understandings of engaging with others in research practices (see, for example, Hamilton, Ivanič and Barton 1992, Ivanič and Weldon 1999). For us, this requires not merely understanding partnership, collaboration and user engagement as sets of institutional and/or personal relationships. It involves thinking about our research practices as crucially communicative, in the sense of building up shared understandings, not merely of things held in common but also of differences.

Networks in the development of the proposal

Thus, the evolution of the successful proposal for this project involved discussions with those working in further education and in organisations that support FE such as LSDA and the SFEU in attempting to develop a shared view of the purpose and focus of the project. For us, as academic researchers, this required an engagement with the policy and practice priorities within FE as well as with existing theory and research. For our FE colleagues it meant engaging with our view of literacy practices alongside the discourses of basic skills, key skills, core skills and the like. In this way, we were able to begin to fashion a network of communication around the proposal.

The mobilising work in and around the project does not cease once it is funded but is integral to the continuing development and ultimate success of the project. The proposal becomes a basis for further communication, as we move into the detailed phases of the project and start to draw others into it as part of a multi-directional understanding of the evolution of a large project such as this. These include, among others, staff within the four colleges with which we work, colleagues working elsewhere in the sector, an Advisory Group of stakeholders and interested researchers. A network, unlike a community, is open and fluid and can be pushed and pulled in different directions depending upon the nodes that are connected. Obviously, some actors within the network are more powerful than others, but in taking this approach, we are attempting to position all participants in the project as actors, even if in different ways, but letting the relationships be developed through the practices in which we engage, rather than positioning certain groups or individuals as for instance ‘partners’ or ‘users’.

In entering into the project, we are already networked in a range of ways to others who have an interest in our aims. At Lancaster, recent consultations conducted for the National Centre for Research and Development in Adult Literacy, Numeracy and ESOL have established a network of practitioners in a variety of post-compulsory settings in the North West of England allowing for fruitful cross-sector communication, including but not limited to Further Education. The Workplace Basic Skills Network is based at Lancaster, providing a ready-made network of client groups within which to embed the research. In addition, Roz is a founder member of the Research and Practice in

Adult Literacy Group which has since 1985 maintained communications between learners, tutors and researchers in Adult Literacy, and encouraged and supported practitioner-research in the field. At Stirling, Richard is part of a well-developed network through the work of the Centre for Research in Lifelong Learning. Thus in seeking to mobilise a network in and around the project, we are also able to build on existing relationships with organisations and individuals to help fashion it.

Communication and Impact Strategy

Our approach to the evolution and development of the project will also inform how we communicate with others about the project. Essentially, we adopt the view that communicating research involves a recontextualisation to make sense of the outcomes in differing situations. This is a dialogical process rather than one-way dissemination. Our overall communication purposes are:

(a) To contribute to the wider pedagogic engagement of those literacy practices that benefit learning outcomes in further education and the life course.

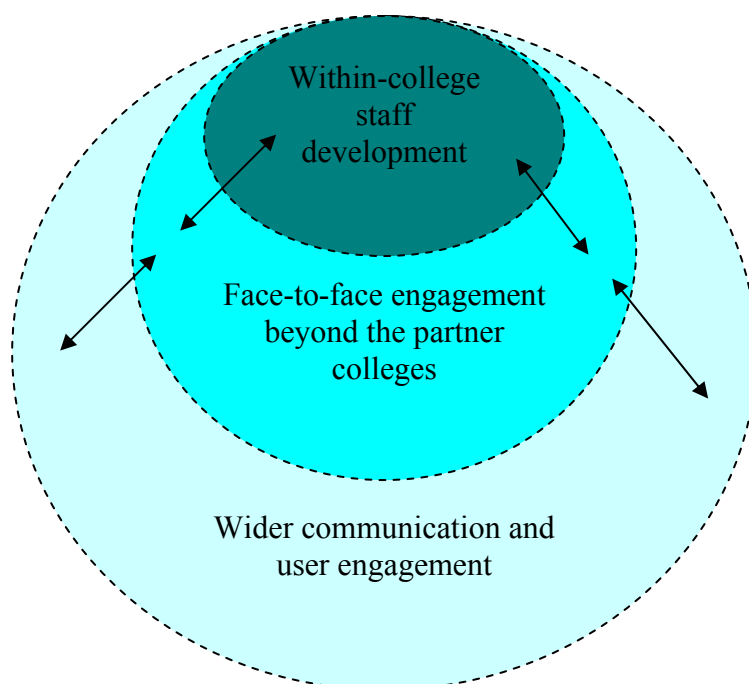
and

(b) To inform and establish cross-sector research partnerships, with a view to enabling further education practitioners to undertake research beyond the project itself.

At the end of the three main Phases of the research, the process and its outcomes will be communicated within the research sites, across the sector in both countries, and within the TLRP Programme. Staff research partners across all four colleges, collaborating students and the project Advisory Group will be participants in the communication strategy. They will contribute to identifying ways of transforming the understandings reached in the project into outcomes which will be relevant to staff and students in their own and other similar contexts. This process will inform research and curriculum innovation capacity across the sector.

Our communication and impact strategy can be expressed diagrammatically in terms of ever-increasing circles, as in Figure 1, across which there are flows of communication that connect different actors in different ways.

Figure 1. Communication and Impact Strategy



The figure indicates how within-college staff development activities provide the starting-point for achieving increasingly wider impact of the research.

As part of the process of developing the proposal, partner colleges have already committed themselves to building this research into their on-going quality enhancement and professional development activities. Senior staff will ensure that there are opportunities for the researchers to contribute to staff development programmes within colleges, to communicate their experiences to colleagues, and to implement new developments that may result. Within-college communication and impact activities will accompany each phase of the research, with different findings, processes and issues being the focus of attention for each phase. The approach to achieving impact within partner colleges involves the interaction with colleagues set out in Figure 2.

Figure 2: A recontextualisation model for achieving impact ¹

1. Research partners share their situated processes and findings with immediate colleagues.
2. They invite them to identify similarities and differences between the research sites and their own teaching situations.
3. They invite them to recontextualise the processes and findings of the research by planning and undertaking similar investigations and interventions in their own subject areas, with the assurance of support from college systems.
4. Colleagues enter into a dialogue over what works and what doesn't work, and the effects of different contexts on this.

To achieve impact beyond the partner colleges is more demanding, since there is no institutional commitment in other institutions to the process. The within-college staff development activities and approaches will provide the basis, and the work will be greatly facilitated by the mediation and support of local and national networks for the FE sector, for example LLRC and LSDA in England, and CRLI and SFEU in Scotland. In addition we will make use of our existing avenues for communication such as the Scottish Forum for Lifelong Learning and the LLRC discussion group, which bring together policy-makers, practitioners and researchers on a regular basis. It is an essential part of our communication strategy to meet with as many potential actors as possible in the translation and recontextualisation of the research into different situations.

REFERENCES

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¹ We are grateful to Andrew Morris, who was at that time Research Manager at LSDA, for advice which has informed the development of this model.