

Theme summary: Leading Adult Vocational Teaching and Learning



Introduction

This summary is one of a series of reports highlighting themes from practitioner research carried out using the Joint Practice Development model. The reports are based on the evidence from 118 LSIS practitioner research projects. This summary highlights the evidence they contained about leading adult vocational teaching and learning.

Leaders' activities and characteristics can have a direct impact on the quality of adult vocational teaching and learning and are one of the factors that account for the variation in student achievement¹. Many of such activities span the entire organisation or its several parts and include priorities such as setting directions, developing people, managing the teaching and learning programme, and securing effective relationships².

The majority of practitioner researchers focusing their enquiries on different aspects of leading adult vocational teaching and learning explored issues related to the curriculum, its relevance and making the most of extra- and cross-curricular learning. Problems of poor attendance and learner retention was a related line of enquiry, often leading to changes and refinements to teaching and learning programmes and introduction of new and additional mechanisms for supporting learners. The final group of practitioner studies exploring leadership was concerned with establishing and maintaining effective relationships, both within their organisation and beyond it.

Curriculum

Curriculum, its relevance and potential to engage and motivate learners became the foci of five practitioner reports. Most of the reports involved researchers working with learners, listening to them to understand whether the provision they offered met learner³ and, in some instances employer⁴, needs.

In one study⁵ for example, practitioners from the Media and Performing Arts Department in an FE college wanted to build on learners' interests to make the curriculum they set more contemporary and relevant to the learners' lives, at same time as keeping the curriculum to the same high standards. Feedback from learners and staff on how the curriculum could be improved was captured using interviews and focus groups. Based on this feedback and from further discussion with learners, new schemes of work were proposed which were developed by staff and learners together and incorporated into the curriculum. Examples of these included Gaming (which provided context for exploring *Representation and Ideology* and *Narrative and Ideology*), Hollyoaks (became the context for studying the *Audience Theory*) and MySpace and Facebook (used to explore *Ownership and Access*).

Elsewhere⁶, practitioners had the freedom to explore the curriculum, guided by the researcher's question 'How much of what we deliver prepares learners for this new world?'. Initially negative in their responses ('I just need to keep the learners – that's all that counts'), practitioners then decided to investigate how they could re-balance what they delivered to help learners prepare for the rest of their lives. They ran two groups of collaborative enquiry projects resulting in new approaches to more curriculum delivery, aiming to create balance between improving engagement, developing skills such as higher order thinking and collaboration, and supporting learner progression towards qualifications.

Another researcher's project⁷ was specific to a particular curriculum area and focused on understanding the reasons for girls opting out of studying physics post-16. The range of possible reasons was broad and included:

- the quality of teaching at the earlier stages ('non- specialist teachers may struggle with making the teaching of physics inspiring');
- poor career guidance; and
- learner identity challenges (physics is perceived by many as a masculine subject; as they try to define themselves in terms of gender, female learners are presented with identity conflict in an attempt to become feminine physicists).

Identity construction through adolescence occurs simultaneously with subject and career choices, and arguably the former is of higher priority for the youngster than the latter.

The researcher proposed a range of recommendations⁸ that could help overcome these and other challenges.

Extra-curricular teaching and learning: Supporting whole person development and wellbeing

Supporting whole person development and wellbeing became the focus of eight practitioner reports.

Amongst these, there were three distinct groups of studies which explored holistic support mechanisms for particular groups of learners: young offenders; children and young people with visual impairment in a specialist setting and elderly residents of care homes.

Approaches to supporting the development and wellbeing of young offenders were consistent across the reports^{9 10} and were based on personalisation. Individual Learning Plans, outlining the needs and targets of each learner, played the key role in shaping the learning of each individual.

One study¹¹ described strategies for supporting learners with special needs (visual impairments) in a residential setting. They suggested additional opportunities for reinforcing learners' functional skills, including homework, contact with parents, living together, negotiating personal care, personal finances, etc.

Two practitioner-researchers^{12 13} worked with elderly residents of care homes to improve their wellbeing and quality of life by providing opportunities for communication and reminiscence. One of the studies¹⁴ for example introduced the older people to social networks to support their ability to communicate with the outside world. Benefits associated with this approach included:

- increased self esteem and interest in what is going on and engaging with others more;
- ongoing contact with family and participation in family life through accessing photos, etc.; and
- improved reminiscence arising from the possibility of looking up old work places, social clubs and schools.

The remainder of the projects focused on developing FE learners' skills that can be 'left out' when teaching the core curriculum. These included:

- learners' organisational skills¹⁵;
- their collaborative working and perseverance when faced with difficult tasks¹⁶; and
- awareness of cultural diversity and associated skills, attitudes and behaviours¹⁷.

Improving attendance and outcomes

Five practitioner-researchers focused on improving learner attendance and punctuality to positively influence learning outcomes.

Researchers identified family or work-related issues¹⁸ as well as learner motivation for enrolment on particular courses and modules as reasons for poor learner attendance and punctuality, often leading to low retention. Learners who selected a course because they thought it would be 'easy' tended to develop attendance problems when they discovered how much work was involved¹⁹. Studies²⁰ also identified that attendance issues can intensify if practitioners' expectations and views about acceptable levels of absence and lateness differed significantly or were inconsistent across their institution.

A range of approaches, trialled by practitioner-researchers with the aim of improving learner attendance, performance and retention included:

- assertive mentoring²¹;
- rewards systems²²; and
- specific teaching and learning strategies (such as regular reinforcement of learning; development of a sense of group belonging, e.g. through joint projects and common learner themes, etc)²³.

One study²⁴ investigated poor performance in just one curriculum area – STEM subjects. The researcher found that in addition to poor organisational and study skills, lack of clarity about the role of independent learning (similar to generic problems described above and addressed through, for example, assertive mentoring), there were also subject specific difficulties that affected learner performance. These included for example lack of practical skills necessary for science (handling equipment, reading and following instructions, interpretation of results) or learners' poor algebra skills due to its reduced content at GCSE level.

Having identified common reasons for poor performance, the practitioner-researcher proposed a set of support interventions and recommendations to drive improvements in this area.

Partnership working

Partnership working to enrich or contextualise the curriculum was the focus of five practitioner reports. Two of the projects described partnership working between practitioners from different contexts (FE and HE²⁵; vocational training centre staff and work-based practitioners²⁶) and three of them focused on working more effectively with employers.

One²⁷ of these projects described an FE and HE college developing an employer portal in order to improve transparency and communications (including feedback) with employers.

Another practitioner-researcher²⁸ also looked at new ways of building and sustaining trusting relationships with employers. Listening, identifying problems and proposing solutions to customers (rather than basing suggestions on sales and funding) was identified as the key strategy which also intended to create stronger bonds between the college and employers.

Thus, a new approach to building relationships with the employer being central to the process was introduced. There were team training events to help illustrate the new model.

Elsewhere²⁹, in order to support knowledge transfer and continuous improvement of the training on offer at a further education college, a high quality short programme of seminars, delivered by industry professionals and facilitated by the college staff was developed. The course enabled the development of ongoing relationships with the employers, who were offered future support via social media. Careful attention was paid to the structure and timings of the seminars and the quality of the facilitation. In addition to the development of participants' skills and knowledge transfer between the stakeholders, the programme:

- helped create a community;
- offered enhancements for other contracts; and
- delivered rewards for employer endorsers.

The college also gained information and labour market intelligence to inform new training developments.

Collaboration

Four practitioner-researcher reports focused on different aspects of supporting collaboration between practitioners. One³⁰ of these studies explored issues of staff participation in practice sharing across an FE college and the other three investigated relationships and their features that either supported or inhibited effective collaborative working between staff.

Two of the studies^{31 32} explored collaborative working between practitioners and their line-managers or supervisors. The first study structured the enquiry based on collaborative critical reflection and discussion through three categories each which included points of tension. These were: isolation-community, simplicity-complexity, and oppression-freedom. The second study explored the relationships between practitioners acting as mentors in Initial Teacher education and their supervisors. The researchers recommended a democratic style of mentoring and supervision and the development of critical reflection in order to promote autonomy and confidence at all levels.

Another study³³ explored the relationship between tutors and support staff in an FE college. The researcher found that tutors' lack of understanding of the level of skills and expertise of support could act as a barrier for developing effective relationships and delivering sessions collaboratively.

Methods

118 project reports and related evidence (such as posters, questionnaires, learning resources and outcomes) were provided by LSIS as a basis for creating a number of summary reports speaking to the themes as outlined by the Commission on Adult Vocational Teaching and Learning. The project reports and related documents were coded by a team of CUREE researchers as likely to yield evidence for each of the themed summary reports. For each of the practitioner research projects, CUREE researchers also created a summary outlining its key processes and outcomes. The data was captured in the project database to enable cross-project, thematic analysis.

The current report is based on analysis and synthesis of the evidence from the projects which were identified as containing data relevant to *Theme 6 Leading adult vocational teaching and learning*. A total of 35 projects had evidence relating to the theme.

Types of evidence commonly collected and analysed by the practitioner-researchers, which formed the basis for drawing project level conclusions about outcomes and the impact of their interventions, included:

- staff and learner interviews, focus groups and surveys;
- practitioner observations, including those that were video recorded;
- assessment data and exam results;
- learner case study explorations; and
- documentary analysis.

¹ Muijs, D., Harris, A., Lumby, J., Morrison, M. & Sood, K. (2006) Leadership and leadership development in highly effective further education providers. In: *Journal of Further and Higher Education*. 30 (1), pp. 87:106.

² CUREE (2010) *What do institution leaders do that is effective in facilitating quality improvements in teaching and learning?* Coventry: LSIS.

³ [Cath Harcula and Lisa Vernon](#) *The Huskies are harnessed and ready to go, but who is shouting "Mush"? A consideration of the challenges and opportunities inherent in meeting the needs of learners in Adult Community Learning*

⁴ [Ashleigh Dalton](#) *Driving Commercial Training in the Schools Sector*

⁵ [Damien Homer](#) 'Why not our way, in our world?' *Developing the learners' voice through curriculum development.*

⁶ [Robin Webber-Jones](#) *Scaling New Mountains: How can Joint Practice Development support the design and delivery of curriculum?*

⁷ [James Knowles](#) *Why should women take a chance on physics? A case study of Access to Medicine students' views on the issue at a College of Further Education in England*

⁸ Ibid

⁹ [Angela Addison](#) *It's not personal*

¹⁰ [Barbara Hurley](#) *Unlocking Participation Problems Probationers Experience when Communicating in Skills for Life Sessions*

¹¹ [Sue Prescott and Charlotte Watmore](#) *How can functional skills reinforcement, practice and achievement be supported in Residential Care in WESC?*

¹² [Sian Nicoll](#) *You're never too old to socialize*

¹³ [Sarah Housden](#) "Improving Skills for Workplace Practice through Mentoring Student Reminiscence Workers in Care Homes"

¹⁴ [Sian Nicoll](#) *You're never too old to socialize*

¹⁵ [Kate Hopkins](#) *Promoting independent learning through modelling organisational skills*

¹⁶ [Tim Turner](#) *Enhancing student behaviour and achievement through promoting teamwork and outdoor learning*

¹⁷ [Simon Bennett](#) *Delivering Equality and Diversity in a White Working Class Further Education College*

¹⁸ [Greg Poole et al](#) *Pinning the Butterfly – Improving Retention and Achievement of Entry Level Students*

¹⁹ [Mahfia Choudhury](#) *It wasn't my fault, my alarm didn't go off! An understanding of the perception of strategies to improve attendance and punctuality within a Further Education setting*

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ [Ann Horsley](#) *Assertive mentoring: An effective method of supporting post-16 students?*

²² [Claire Jones](#) *Improving motivation and self-confidence in post-16 Foundation Learning students*

²³ [Greg Poole et al](#) *Pinning the Butterfly – Improving Retention and Achievement of Entry Level Students*

²⁴ [Vasu Krishnaswamy](#) "Yes we can!" *Exploring study strategies for effective learning and teaching at AS level in mathematics and science*

²⁵ [Sue Garland et al](#) *An evaluation of Joint Development Practice between FE and HE tutors within Art and Design*

²⁶ [Lynette Baldwin](#) *Training and Learning Together*

²⁷ [Lisa Edge](#) *Blackburn College Employer Portal*

²⁸ [Sue Garman](#) *Building and Sustaining trusting relationships with employers*

²⁹ [Alison Lewis and Teresa Gardner](#) *Knowledge Transfer with micro SME's*

³⁰ [Nadim Bakhshov](#) 'Why should I?' *Engaging, challenging and developing innovative teaching, learning and assessment practices in a further education college*

³¹ [Angela Rhead](#) *You will collaborate! Harnessing Practitioner-Directed Joint Practice Development (JPD) for Organisational Continuing Professional Development (CPD)*

³² [Pam Garside](#) *What role could there be for 'mentor supervisors' in initial teacher training in the Further Education and Skills Sector?*

³³ [June O'Brien](#) 'My whole group have failed their exams five times, I'm sending them to you for support'