

The Teaching and Learning Research Programme: Progress Report

The ESRC Teaching and Learning Research Programme has now been under way for over two years. In view of the announcement of the changes in the Programme Office (see page 2), it seems an appropriate time to take stock of what we have achieved so far.

First of all, I would like to express my personal appreciation for the work of Professor Desforges and Dr Kanefsky in leading the Programme in this vital period of establishing and then breathing life into the Programme. As they complete their contracts early in the New Year, they will be able to look back on a major contribution to national and international understanding of how we can raise the attainment of learners through imaginative and responsible research. All of us engaged with the Programme - the Steering Committee, its officers, the researchers and their partners - have benefited from Charles' wisdom, vision and energy. He has been supported with great professionalism and drive by John, especially in terms of winning support for and wider interest in the programme. They will be a tough act to follow, and I am pleased that they have been able to help us lay plans for the maximum degree of continuity as the Programme moves into its next phase.

As you will be able to see by surfing the Programme website, we have already made much progress towards our objectives of raising attainment, advancing research excellence and supporting best practice.

In particular we have:

- commissioned £10 m. worth of outstanding research projects and networks, following a large scale, high quality competition. These significant investigations will report between 2003 and 2005;
- attracted comprehensive practitioner and policy community engagement with individual projects (in some cases on an unprecedented scale). These groups are contributing to all stages of the research from planning to the conduct and transformation of the research into settings and forms where it can help to raise achievement;

By Sir David Watson, Director
of the University of Brighton
and Chair of the Programme
Steering Committee

- set up a landmark, innovative research capacity building network. The Network's website is at <http://www.cf.ac.uk/socsi/capacity/>
- contributed to developments in theory and methods in the field through publications on research methods, research strategy, impact, knowledge transformation, brain research, as well as a review of reviews on teaching and learning. All these are available on our website at <http://www.ex.ac.uk/ESRC-TLRP/>
- built up an extensive infrastructure of partnerships in support of impact, with policy organisations, research institutions, campaigning bodies and other key centres of opinion;
- developed effective international partnerships for mutual consultancy, benchmarking, advancing research methods and capacity building. This exchange of ideas and strategic thinking has been valuable to both to the Programme and the broader UK policy context; and, last but not least,
- attracted £10.5 m. of new funding for a third phase of research in post-compulsory education.

Much remains to be done. Detailed research under Phase III will not start until 2003, when the projects already in progress will begin to produce their major reports. There is also a huge amount of work for us to do to keeping in touch with all of you who share our interest in doing the best we can for all our learners. We trust that this third newsletter will help us to meet that important obligation.

New Director to be appointed

The ESRC has begun the search for a new Director and support team for the Programme, in succession to Professor Charles Desforges and Dr John Kanefsky who have announced their intention not to seek further contracts. The new Director will take over in March 2002 and will recruit a new support team. The current Programme Office will work with the appointee to ensure a smooth transition to the new directing team.

The new Director is being recruited by open advertisement (the text in on our website at <http://www.ex.ac.uk/ESRC-TLRP/jobadv.htm>). It is hoped that an appointment will be made in November, which will allow the new appointee to work closely with the existing team and contribute to the finalisation of the Specification for Phase III of the Programme. They will also be able to play an early role in advising potential bidders in the formulation of their outline proposals.

Professor Desforges said: "It has been an immensely fulfilling task to see the first two Phases of the Programme successfully commissioned, to lead consultation on the agenda for Phase III and to contribute to the Programme's work in developing best practice in teaching and learning throughout the UK. However, the substantial extension in its life involved in Phase III, making the Programme a 10 year undertaking, means that the commitment of the Director will be more prolonged than originally envisaged."

"As I do not wish to see the Programme through to 2008, now seems the most sensible time to hand over to a new Director. I wish the new appointee every success, and both Dr. Kanefsky and I will work closely with the person appointed, to ensure the smoothest possible transition to the new Programme Office."

News in Brief

Research Training Fellowships

The Programme has recently started a pilot scheme for research training fellowships in collaboration with the British Educational Research Association (BERA) and with support from DfES. They are open to practitioners in any area of teaching and learning who want to study for a research Doctorate while continuing in their current post / profession, and provide buy-out for part of their time.

Each fellowship is attached to, and has a mentor from, one of the Programme's project teams. Two fellowships have recently been awarded (see the programme website for details):

- Steve Hodgkinson of Lewes Tertiary College will be working with the project on "Improving Effectiveness of Pupil Groups in Classrooms"
- Mark Goodrham of Leeds College of Technology will be associated with the project on "Transforming Learning Cultures in Further Education"

The ESRC will be inviting applications for a second round of fellowships this autumn. Further details and how to apply should be posted on the ESRC website at <http://www.esrc.ac.uk/prog/tlguide.htm> by the time this newsletter reaches you.

International Collaboration

International collaboration is a strong feature of the Programme's approach to developing best practice. There are a number of strands to this:

- We are participating in the EU funded Learningspace initiative, which involves collaboration with researchers in Finland, Norway, Iceland and Spain. It will address strategic issues in research on learning and co-ordination of national research programmes, through workshops and a virtual environment. Programme Director Charles Desforges will be taking part in the first workshop in Brussels in October.

- The Programme is contributing to a joint international seminar sponsored by OECD, DfES and the QCA on "Knowledge Management in Education and Learning in the UK", to be held in February 2002. This is part of a series of strategic investigations of knowledge management.
- We are also working with PROO, a Netherlands programme of research in vocational education, on future collaboration especially in relation to Phase III.
- Our already well-established collaboration with the National Science Foundation in the USA is developing well, and they will be leading a workshop at our researchers' conference in November. We are also involved with Prof. Eamon Kelly in a series of seminars on the development of research methods, particularly design experiments.

Second Programme Conference

The second Programme Conference in November is an invitation event for our projects to share methodological and management perspectives.

There will be a major public conference in November 2002, when Phase I networks will present emerging findings and other projects will report on work in progress. More details will be available early in 2002.

Teaching
and
Learning

Teaching and Learning

Knowledge base for teaching and learning

By Charles Desforges, Programme Director

All readers of this newsletter are committed to enhancing learners' achievements broadly conceived. We already have an extensive knowledge base on teaching and learning from which we can work. A lot of this knowledge is tacit. It is manifest in the arts and practices of effective teachers. Some of the knowledge base is explicit. It can be stated as propositions, tried and tested by scientific research. In this article I summarise the main principles of this scientific knowledge base relevant to enhancing attainment.

In a major review of learning processes, John Bransford¹ has identified the key features of successful learning environments. Such environments are **learner centred, assessment driven, knowledge rich** and **community connected**.

'Learner centred' does not refer to the rhetoric of the Plowden era. It refers to the fact that every learner enters any learning setting with a pre-formed and pre-forming corpus of knowledge, skills and attitudes. Their experience will be successful in terms of learning to the degree that it starts where the learner is and moves on from there.

All educational systems are driven by assessment and accountability systems. Quality learning environments are designed in recognition of this. The assessment system is valid in learning terms only to the degree that it promotes achievement.

'Knowledge rich' environments require learners to achieve understanding rather than mere recall. Such environments are designed in recognition of the human brain's capacity to thrive on information complexity and redundancy. A key characteristic of these environments is that knowledge transfer is promoted.

'Community connection' works in recognition of the fact that learners spend four times as many hours in the community as they do in classrooms. The community is, therefore, a vital resource and context in which understandings can be developed and validated. A learning environment is successful to the degree that it capitalises on opportunities afforded elsewhere. For learners in the post-compulsory sector, 'elsewhere' refers to the work place, placements, attachments as well as the home and community generally.

These propositions constitute the educational equivalent of Newton's laws of motion in physics. They provide a solid foundation on which to ask questions of any learning environment and on how to understand why some environments are more successful in promoting learning than others. They also provide a design specification for improving any learning environment.

Converting scientific knowledge into practical action requires the development of the equivalent of engineering knowledge. Sir Isaac Newton understood the forces necessary to send a projectile to the moon but he could not do it. That took more than 300 years of developments in engineering, amongst other things.

The basic design features of successful learning environments - learner centred, assessment driven, knowledge rich, community connected - require extensive working to develop the intellectual and practical tools necessary to maximise the practicality of delivery. The TLRP is already

working on aspects of this. Noel Entwistle and his colleagues are developing diagnostic, assessment and teaching technologies related to what we know about learners' understandings in a range of HE departments. Martin Bloomer and his team are exploring the implications and skills necessary to making the best response to students' and their tutors' perspectives on learning cultures in FE. Other research communities are advancing our knowledge and skills in formative assessment and in linking educational establishments with their communities, specifically with learning in mind. There is yet a long way to go but the journey will be quicker if teachers and researchers everywhere ask these questions of current provision: 'to what degree is it learner centred; is the assessment system here driving our desired learning outcomes; is this environment promoting understanding and transfer; are we capitalising on learning opportunities in the community and what do we have to learn to improve on all these counts?'

The current discourse of teaching is dominated by so-called issues; the accountability issue, the gender issue, ICT, teaching thinking and so on. These issues may be a dangerous distraction. They are certainly not at the core of teaching and learning. Learning is the core. This in turn puts learners centre stage.

In that light it will come as no surprise to find that studies which ask the question 'where do we get our best return on effort in enhancing attainment?' show that the closer the attention paid to increasing learners' intellectual activity, the bigger the impact on attainment. Wang² and colleagues reviewed the impact on pupil attainment of a wide range of policies and practices in the US schooling system. Variables and initiatives considered included national and state educational policies, curriculum legislation and innovation, reform of qualification and assessment systems, reform of teacher certification practices, reforms in classroom practices and interventions in learning skills development.

Wang and her team were able to show that most of these initiatives had negligible effects on student attainment. The researchers identified the top three factors in promoting achievement to be:

- 1 pupils' cognitive and metacognitive activity
- 2 the orderly flow of appropriate classroom work
- 3 time on task

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Knowledge base for teaching and learning - cont'd

There are few surprises here. Learners learn more to the degree that their minds are engaged in thinking and learning (cognition) and reflecting on thinking and learning (metacognition). The more they do that the more they learn. There is no reason to limit these conclusions to the years of schooling. Perhaps the surprise is that so many educational policies and practices are not consistent with these widely established and intuitively reasonable prescriptions.

The research challenge is to learn how to maximise learners' intellectual engagement with the curriculum. This is the common core of the projects in the Programme.

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Post-Compulsory Education and Lifelong Learning: Review of Pedagogic Research

By Elliot Stern and Joe Cullen, Tavistock Institute

Preparing for TLRP III

The focus of Phase III of the Teaching and Learning Research Programme will be on post-compulsory education and lifelong learning. In preparation for Phase III a team from the Tavistock Institute has been commissioned to undertake a brief 'state of the art' review of current pedagogic research and practice. This is intended to cover a number of sectors or domains, including Higher Education, Further Education, Work-Based Learning and Continuing Professional Development and Informal and Community-Based Learning.

Aims and Expected Outputs

The aims of the review are to better understand current conceptualisations of pedagogy and review current evidence and understanding that could improve teaching and learning practice and lead to improved learning outcomes. It is hoped that the review will have outputs at a number of levels. These include:

- A synthesis of current understandings regarding pedagogics, learning and teaching.
- A description of the main ways in which learning is conceptualised and the kinds of frameworks that are being used.
- Relating some of the main understandings and frameworks developed through research to current debates among policy makers and practitioners.
- The identification of some of the gaps and priorities that could be addressed in the next round of TLRP research funding.

The team undertaking this work at the Tavistock Institute are able to draw on work previously undertaken for the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development on work-based learning, for the Department of Education on informal and community-based learning and for the European Union and HEFCE in aspects of learning and teaching in higher education - especially technology-enhanced teaching and learning.

The Importance of Practitioners' Perspectives

The work now underway includes reviewing and mapping source material across post-compulsory sectors and domains and consulting experts and practitioners especially about 'grey' material. This is particularly important given the concern to understand pedagogic assumptions and frameworks that derive not only from research, but also from the world of practice.

Much knowledge and understanding in this field is embedded within what Lave and Wenger have called 'communities of practice'. For example, personnel and training professionals and community development workers may rely on tacit knowledge and rules of thumb about what constitutes 'good pedagogic practice'. Such tacit knowledge at the very least will help identify hypotheses and questions that may justify further research. Consulting practitioners and researchers such as personnel managers, research personnel based in policy bodies and those within learned societies and professional groups is therefore seen as an important part of this review.

Pedagogics and Policy Debates

Locating this review within contemporary debates and policy initiatives is already proving to be a useful frame of reference. For example, the image of the learner and the teacher is quite different within a lifelong learning framework than within earlier policy frames of reference. The review team hopes to take account of the ways policies and debates are framed, whilst at the same time recognising that these may push researchers in particular directions. Sometimes researchers have to stand back from the most recent policy imperatives and take their own critical and independent view.

Teaching and Learning

Cross-Cutting Themes

This review is trying to combine two perspectives. It is starting from the concerns of each sector or domain (Higher Education, Work-Based Learning, Informal Learning etc.). At the same time there are cross-cutting themes that need to be considered across all domains. For example, it is already clear from work underway that themes such as motivation and empowerment of learners; learning resources including IT; the social context for learning; new roles for teachers and trainers; and learning outcomes are shared concerns, whether in a community or a further education setting.

This is an ambitious review being conducted under tight time pressures. The final report has to be ready by the end of the year. If any readers of this newsletter would like to make an input, contact the review team or make suggestions of sources that ought to be considered, do get in touch - soon!

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Research evidence on the effectiveness of Problem Based Learning

By Mark Newman,
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The Project on the Effectiveness of Problem Based Learning is examining the proposition that problem-based learning (PBL) will assist students to achieve specific competencies and should be the method of choice for professional education.

Problem-based learning became a feature of medical educational programmes during the late 1960s. The growth of PBL programmes was given added impetus during the 1970s and 1980s by recognition of the need for educational reforms in many professional fields including medicine, nursing, dentistry, social work, management, engineering and architecture (Boud & Feletti 1997). In recent years, the advantages that are claimed for PBL have become part of the generally articulated outcomes for education at all levels (Evenson & Hmelo 2000).

The wide dissemination of PBL has spawned so many mutations that the genus "problem based learning" now has an almost unclassifiable array of species (Barrows 2000a). Bereiter and Scardamalia (2000) distinguish between PBL (uppercase) and pbl (lowercase). Practitioners of PBL tend to adhere to

the structures and procedures systematized by Howard Barrows (Barrows 1986). Lowercase pbl refers to an indefinite range of educational approaches that give problems a central place in the learning activity, drawing on the pioneering work of Dewey.

The PEPBL project includes the conduct of a systematic review of the existing research literature on PBL. Such reviews are necessary to identify existing evidence of a quality sufficient to provide robust answers to questions of effectiveness. It is therefore premature to make any robust claims to evidence based knowledge in this area. We can, however, look at the findings of previous reviews that have been called systematic by their authors. There have been at least four reviews of PBL (Vernon & Blake 1993, Albanese & Mitchell 1993, Berkson 1993, Van den Bossche et al 2000).

However, all four of these reviews are difficult to interpret due to their varying methodological limitations including: the use of a non-systematic approach to identifying studies for inclusion, different and highly flexible interpretations of PBL within and between the reviews, and the absence of any specified methodological inclusion criteria. This combination of factors meant that the reviews included studies that had a number of common methodological weaknesses. These include the use of single group post-test designs, the use of non-comparable sample groups, poorly specified and/or non-comparable interventions, the use of non-objective outcome measures/assessment tools that had no established validity and/or reliability.

The reviews included a very similar range of literature but came to different conclusions. Vernon and Blake (1993) concluded that "results generally support the superiority of the PBL approach over more traditional academic methods". Albanese and Mitchell (1993) whilst acknowledging the weaknesses of the research literature concluded that PBL was more nurturing and enjoyable and that PBL graduates performed as well and sometimes better on clinical examinations and faculty evaluations. However, they also concluded that PBL graduates showed potentially important gaps in their knowledge base, did not demonstrate expert reasoning patterns, and that PBL was very costly. Van den Bossche and colleagues (2000) concluded that there was a robust positive effect from PBL on the skills of students but a negative (non-robust) effect on knowledge. Berkson (1993) was unequivocal in her conclusion that "the graduate of PBL is not distinguishable from his or her traditional counterpart". She further argued that the experience of PBL can be stressful for the student and faculty and implementation may be unrealistically costly. Berkson (1993) and subsequently Woodward (1997) and Colliver (2000) have argued that many studies have erroneously claimed effects for PBL when it was more likely that the effects were due to selection and philosophy of care differences.

Conclusion

The case for evidence based approaches to education has been convincingly argued (Taylor Fitzgibbon 1999, Van der Vleuten et al 2000). Researchers on PBL who include the reviews cited above in their considerations, conclude that there is a paucity of good-quality studies and evidence available regarding the hypothesis that PBL produces learning and/or learners different from or superior to those derived from traditional approaches (Wolf 1993, Evenson and Hmelo 2000, Davies 2000). Davies goes further in arguing that that it seems safe to conclude that problem based learning may not be invariably better than other methods, or superior for all types of learning or learners. More work in this field is clearly needed.

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Research evidence on the effectiveness of Problem Based Learning Cont'd

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Workshop on Improving Attainment in Learning at Work

This invitation International Workshop, organised by our Phase I Network on Improving Incentives to Learning in the Workplace and co-sponsored by the ESRC SKOPE centre, is being held at in Northampton on 8-11 November. A report will be published on the Network website at <http://www.northampton.ac.uk/ncr/esrc-resnet>.

ESRC Annual Conference: Mind the Gap

The fifth annual ESRC conference is being held on 15 November at the QEII Conference Centre in London on the theme of the role of social science research in policymaking. It includes sessions on the research evidence base for policy and on the blurring of private and public sector roles.

**More details from External Relations at
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Teaching and Learning

Phase three

research agenda

priority issues raised in the consultation

By Charles Desforges and John Kanefsky,
TLRP Programme Office

Early in 2001 the announcement was made of new funding of £10.5m for a Phase III of the Programme to focus on post-compulsory education and learning, broadly conceived. The Programme Office mounted an extensive consultation process seeking advice on the research agenda for Phase III. The consultation included a number of regional seminars, a web and paper questionnaire, and a series of focus groups aimed at gaining the views of learners from a range of backgrounds. Over 500 individuals contributed; the participants in the consultation seminars and the respondents to the questionnaire were mostly from the supply side of education and training, although many of these stressed the need for greater 'customer orientation'. We would like to thank all those who took part and gave us so generously of their time.

The summary analysis which follows is that of the Programme Office. Together with all the other views and advice given this will be reported in detail to our Steering Committee later this year, and will contribute alongside other reports, our literature review and the views of our Post Compulsory Working Group to designing the research specification for Phase III.

There was a good deal of congruence between the questionnaire responses and the issues which emerged from the seminars (one each in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland and three in England).

In the **questionnaire**, we asked respondents to name up to 3 priority research issues relevant to Phase III. As might be expected in such a diverse sector, a wide range of topics were nominated. In terms of number of citations, the top 8 issues were:

- improving capacity to teach basic, key and transferable skills (with 72 mentions);
- enhancing the use of ICT and multimedia approaches to teaching (56);
- what works regarding teaching methods (34);
- training, including work-based learning and training cultures (33);
- transitions between types and phases of learning (29);
- learning processes, including learner autonomy and learning styles (28);
- relationships between formal and informal learning (28);
- assessment and learning (26).

Participants in the six **consultation seminars** argued that we needed to develop the research base in many of the same areas. The topics most strongly featured in these seminars were (not in any order of priority):

- learning processes (including learner identity, learner autonomy, learning style);
- ICT, multimedia methods and e-learning;
- motivation, especially for disadvantaged and disengaged learners;
- the relationship between formal and informal learning at all ages, particularly the integration, validation and recognition of informal learning;
- the effects of accountability systems (especially assessment);
- training and trainers, including teaching cultures and the skills base of trainers;
- transitions including those from school to FE/HE and to work, and in adult learning;
- what is expert performance, and how can it be achieved.

Users and beneficiaries, learners and potential learners found their voice in the **focus groups**. Their research agenda covered the following issues (no priority to be inferred within the list):

- identifying the characteristics of good teaching
- how to spread best practice
- the design of multi method/multimedia learning environments
- identifying cutting edge teaching developments
- promoting learners' self image/confidence
- assessment for learning.

Themes

Across the priority themes expressed in the seminars and questionnaires there was a clear set of priority values. It was persistently suggested that **research to promote inclusion** was the key issue. Excellence was mentioned only once. Inclusion involved focussing on learners 'at risk' or 'the casualties of schooling' or learners not well served (e.g. the great majority of workers in SMEs). If a choice were to be made between constituencies of learners then the clear advice was to focus on 'non-participant' or 'inactive' learners, those least well served by current provision and those most limited in achievements relevant to the learning society.

Phase III three update

As reported on the inside pages, since our last Newsletter the Programme has been engaged in a wide range of consultation activities on the research priorities for our new Phase III, which will focus on post-compulsory education, work based learning including continuing professional development, community education and other aspects of lifelong learning including transitions between sectors of learning.

The task is now to incorporate all the advice we have received from the practice and policy communities, learners, researchers and expert advisers into a Research Specification. We will then take this forward into commissioning specific projects to deliver on the research agenda. We are not yet in a position to be definitive about the timetable for this activity over the next year, but we expect it will be broadly as follows:

Between now and December 2001 the Programme Office and Steering Committee will be working to finalise the Phase III Specification. This will include an analysis of the advice received from the consultation process, the outcomes of our literature reviews and other relevant material. The Specification will identify the core priorities the Steering Committee have agreed and set out what will be needed and when from applicants. It will give as much guidance as possible on the type, size and structure of bids thought most likely to be successful and describe how applications will be reviewed and evaluated. A Call for Proposals will then be issued in December / January.

As with Phase II, it is certain that stress will be placed on conducting research as a partnership between policy makers, practitioners and researchers. Transforming research evidence collaboratively to maximise its contribution to improving policy and practice will also be central to the objectives for Phase III.

The Programme and others recognise the need to build research capacity in those areas, particularly given the very broad scope of Phase III. There is a relatively limited research tradition in many of the component sectors of post-compulsory learning, especially work-based and community learning. At all stages we want to allow as much time as possible for research partnerships to put together their teams and bids, and to support research capacity building for those partnerships. It is therefore anticipated that, as a further aid to capacity building, a summary of the expected key features / themes of Phase III will be published on the Website in November without prejudice to the Steering Committee's final decision.

No final decisions have been made on types and stages of the commissioning process or the deadlines for each stage, but it is expected that outline applications will be sought by March / April 2002 and shortlisting decisions will be made in the summer. Full applications would be required in the autumn and final funding decisions announced in early 2003. Individual projects would start as soon as possible thereafter and last up to five years, so the Programme will now run to 2008.

As soon as the Specification is published, we will begin a round of seminars and other meetings in January and February 2002 to discuss the Specification with potential bidders. These will be led by the current Programme Team, wherever possible with inputs from the Steering Committee and the new Director. However, we will announce the dates and locations on our website (<http://www.ex.ac.uk/ESRC-TLRP/>) well in advance. We will also e-mail them to HE and FE institutions, relevant organisations and individuals we know to be interested. Additional advice will be available by telephone, e-mail and individual discussion.

Further copies of this Newsletter are available from the addresses below or can be printed from the Programme website, as can the Schools version.

The ESRC Teaching and Learning Research Programme's prime objective is to support research which will lead to improvements in the achievement of learners of all ages, in all sectors and contexts of education, training and lifelong learning throughout the UK. It has total funding of £23 million from the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE), the Scottish Executive, the Welsh Assembly and the Department for Education and Skills (DfES), and is managed by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC).

Strategic management of the Programme rests with a Steering Committee of practitioners, academics and other users chaired by Professor Sir David Watson, Director of the University of Brighton. See the Programme Website for a full list of members.

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