

Editorial: From Pedagogic Research to Embedded E-Learning

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INTRODUCTION

This Special Issue of *Reflecting Education* arises from the work of the PREEL project (*From Pedagogic Research to Embedded e-Learning*) at the Institute of Education from 2006-2008. This project was one of nine HEA/JISC (Higher Education Academy and Joint Information Systems Committee) Pilot Pathfinder Projects¹ and followed on from our involvement in the Pilot Benchmarking of e-Learning Programme. In the benchmarking exercise we identified a lack of coordination between research and practice in e-learning at the IoE as one of our crucial weaknesses, and so our Pilot Pathfinder project concentrated on this theme of building links between e-learning research and practice.

RESEARCH AND PRACTICE

For research-led universities the idea that there is a link between research and practice is either taken as axiomatic or as a goal to be achieved. There are, however, those who have problematised this link, suggesting that there may actually be no connection between research and teaching, or that the relationship may actually be antagonistic, or that in the changing university we have different kinds of research and hence different forms of relationships, or even that different teaching paradigms imply different relationship between research and teaching (see for example the range of contributions in Barnett 2003).

The literature discusses a variety of different meanings that the relationship between research and practice in higher education might convey (Barnett, 2003; Barnett, 2005; Dempster, 2003; Jenkins and Healey, 2005; Jenkins, Healey and Zetter, 2007; Kezar and Eckel, 2000; Roach, Blackmore and Dempster, 2001). These include: using the results of research to inform teaching (either in terms of content or pedagogy), teaching as research, teachers as researchers, students as researchers and learning as research.

Perhaps the conventional way of conceptualising the issue is as one of the dissemination of research findings, and Kezar and Exkel (2000) outline some of the standard problems encountered in this approach

- researchers and practitioners have very different expectations from research reports;
- research dissemination is often by presentation –lectures and research reports;
- practitioners are expected to do the hard work, they have to interpret the research in their own terms, as researchers are not funded to do this;

¹ <http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/ourwork/learning/elearning/pathfinder>

- some researchers begin as practitioners and as they become researchers in the area they have to develop specialised vocabularies and ways of writing precisely to differentiate themselves from practitioners.

They identify some possible techniques to start to address these issues, and specifically focus on the development of communities of researchers and practitioners through reading groups and reflective action research. These possibilities were all concerns when the PREEL project was formulated.

The PREEL project selected a dozen masters degree courses at the IoE for redesign, and applied a variety of methods of addressing the issue of linking research to practice. We started with a review of the e-learning research being carried out at the IoE, by our partners within the Bloomsbury Learning Environment and at the University of London Centre for Distance Education. We identified 39 projects which we saw as directly relating to e-learning in higher education. We interviewed many of the research teams involved in these projects, trying to identify the lessons for PREEL, and also to introduce the project to them, as a way of creating connections with practitioner groups. We distilled the project descriptions and lessons into a report which was made available to the course teams. We concentrated on local projects, because we wanted to open up the opportunities for close contact between researchers and practitioners thus helping to develop communities that included both researchers and practitioners. With the same aim in mind we linked e-learning researchers into a staff development programme made available to the course teams. The course teams were encouraged to see their own work as reflective action research, and to publish this – as a consequence this Special Issue contains seven papers arising from this reflective action research of the course teams.

THIS ISSUE

In their paper which constitutes the first section of this Special Issue Terry Mayes and Derek Morrison set the national and international context for the HEA Pathfinder and Benchmarking exercises. Derek Morrison has been the programme leader of this initiative for the HEA/JISC and Terry Mayes has been the evaluator and critical friend. The central question addressed by their paper is the effect of national initiatives in e-learning within the Higher Education sector. They compare the English Benchmarking and Pathfinder programme, the Scottish e-learning transformation programme, and the Pew Grant programme in course redesign in higher education in the USA. They conclude that both the UK programmes have succeeded in building a cross-institutional level of capacity development that does offer a policy direction for the future.

There were nine Pilot Pathfinder projects (of which PREEL was one) and 28 projects in the Phase 1 Pathfinder that followed on from this. The second section of this Special Issue provides accounts of three of the Pilot Pathfinder Project, this providing descriptions of the Programme at an institutional level.

- The Carpe Diem workshops developed by the ADELIE (Advanced Design for e-Learning Institutional Embedding) project at University of Leicester is described by Alejandro Armellini and Sylvia Jones. The Carpe Diem is a discipline-specific two-

day workshop for departmental course teams intended to generate, facilitate and disseminate incremental change in technology-enhanced course design. The approach builds on earlier work by Gilly Salmon on e-tivities (Salmon 2002). This article presents the results of research into pedagogical change in approaches to e-learning through analysing the impact of Carpe Diem on participants' e-learning designs.

- The CABLE project at the University of Hertfordshire which developed a local process to embed blended learning in the curricula and across the institution based on the Change Academy model² is described by Irene Anderson, Peter Bullen, Jon Alltree and Heather Thornton. The paper summarises the CABLE process and its outcomes, and evaluates its effectiveness. It was found that participants including students have formed a thriving community in which good practice and transformative change is shared, supported and embedded. The authors discuss the project in the context of the cultural change required to fully embed changing practice across the institution.
- The PREEL project at the Institute of Education forms the central focus of this Special Issue and has already been described to some degree. Caroline Pelletier and Magdalena Jara (who were respectively the Evaluator and Research Officer on the project) reflect upon the lessons learned from the project. Based on interviews with participants, this article pays specific regard to the link between research and practice and the ways that practitioners accounted for this relationship, and discusses the implications of the project for research-based practice. The results indicate that the research-practice link was not always established in the ways planned, and that where links were established, these were sometimes in ways that were unforeseen by the project team.

The third section of this Special Issue then considers in more detail the actual application at course team level of the PREEL approach through seven reflective accounts of course redesigns of masters degree modules.

Research methods is a central topic in much of our teaching at the Institute of Education, so it is not surprising that two of the accounts relate to research methods courses:

- Karen Bird describes the process of integrating e-learning into the module *Research Synthesis for Policy and Practice*, and she reflects on the use of an 'objective-centred' approach to course redesign, using learning objectives to integrate e-learning looks.
- Martin Oliver and Natasha Whiteman were involved in the process of redesign of an online research methods course that would run across three different MAs. This process of redesign led them to begin to question the nature of the research methods curriculum, and in their paper they develop a critique of approaches to teaching research methods through an exploration of three different approaches to the teaching and assessment of this online research methods module.

For four other courses, e-learning offered the possibility of delivering aspects of the curriculum that had been problematic in the past.

² <http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/ourwork/institutions/change>

- Colin Durrant and Maria Varvarigou describe their work on teaching choral conducting within the course *Choral Conducting, Leadership and Communication*. They had already begun to experiment with the use of video and they reflect on the opportunity to incorporate other aspects of e-learning allowing the continued tracking of the professional development of choral conductors in their skills, knowledge and perceptions of their own progress.
- John Potter reflects on the process of taking a module from the MA in *Media, Culture and Communication* that was largely concerned with offline production of teaching resources and redesigning it to foster agency, engagement and production in online social software. He describes how the early stages of the re-design process were recorded in a course tutor blog and how his reflections on the process were supported by evaluations of a pilot and final versions of the course.
- Ralph Levinson and Tim Neumann reflect upon the re-design of a mixed mode module *Foundations of Science Education*, using e-learning to design a module to support the construction of knowledge and critical review of that knowledge through the dimensions of shared practice.
- Karl Wall, Olga Miller, Julie Jennings and Eric Hadley reflect on their development of a blended *Early Years and Disabilities* module. One of their central concerns was increased flexibility and accessibility for learners, and their paper highlights how the underlying conceptualisation of the course changed as the team developing it embraced the flexibility and challenges offered by online technologies, supported by the comments of a critical friend skilled in online course development.

The last paper in this section takes a critical perspective on the implementation e-learning in initial teacher education:

- Adrian Mee describes the development of e-learning as an integral element of a course of initial teacher training. This process uncovered a number of tensions which he argues must be addressed if the use of such tools is to meet the needs of a range of stakeholders. The article suggests that the uncritical deployment of e-learning has the potential to diminish quality, efficiency and effectiveness unless planning is informed by clear guidelines focussing on and balancing the needs of course stakeholders. Adrian goes on to argue that the range of e-learning tools made available to those designing and delivering courses is too often provider rather than client led.

The fourth and final section of this Special Issue consists of a paper by Caroline Daly, who organised the staff development activities of the PREEL project. We present this paper as an argument for a specific way forward in the embedding of e-learning within higher education. Caroline argues that understanding learner experiences is a core consideration for course design. The PREEL project recognized that staff development for future course design needs to include a focus on understanding e-learner experiences. Practitioners need to consider the diversity of these experiences, and how they will be able to find out what it will be like for learners to participate in their courses. This paper argues for the potentials of narrative evaluation methods to enhance the learner experience. The focus is on the benefits of narrative methods within e-learning contexts, by which learners participate in dialogic evaluation practices as part of their course. It is argued that such approaches are

relevant to the needs of practitioners and learners in contemporary contexts, and should feature within course design.

This Special Issue presents a unique insight into a major initiative to embed e-learning within Higher Education institutions, providing reflections on the initiative at the level of national strategy, organisational strategies and individual course designs, providing a contemporary picture of the employment of e-learning within Higher Education.

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