Building research capacity in a practitioner network: the National Action Research Network on researching and evaluating Personal Development Planning and e-portfolio

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Introduction

The national action research network on researching and evaluating Personal Development Planning and e-portfolio (NARN-PDP) is a National Teaching Fellowship Scheme project with some significant defining characteristics:

- It is a large network project involving 16 higher education institutions (HEIs) *
- It is a practitioner-led network focused on researching aspects of Personal Development Planning (PDP) and e-portfolio
- It aims to produce both a community of practitioner-researchers and publishable research outputs
- Impacts on student learning are through the improved capacity of the whole practitioner community to understand and develop practice in supporting student PDP and e-portfolio use.

The NARN-PDP project is at its mid-point, running from autumn 2007 to July 2010. This paper provides an outline of the context and challenges that have faced the project to date, and a brief overview of what has been learnt through progress so far. We believe that the model used by this project is a powerful one which could be adopted by other groups to build research capacity, achieve greater understanding of practice and enhance the student learning experience. As such this project has great potential for broad impact on the sector.

The context: a practitioner network supporting the implementation of PDP and e-portfolio

The practitioner network at the heart of this project is made up of members from a diverse set of backgrounds, with differing levels of experience, expertise and interests. The one area that all the practitioners have in common is some responsibility for supporting the implementation of student PDP within their own institutions. They also share a willingness to discuss their practice openly with colleagues from other HEIs and an enthusiasm to improve that practice in an evidence-informed way. The network has been drawn from the existing national network, the Centre for Recording

Achievement (CRA). This pre-existing network has proved to be key to this project in providing the basis for the project network and in facilitating our collaborative activity and dissemination.

The introduction of student PDP in UK HE is a unique attempt to enhance and capture student learning by sector-wide agreement (Jackson & Ward, 2004). The agreement defined PDP as "a structured and supported process undertaken by an individual to reflect upon their own learning, performance and/or achievement and to plan for their personal, educational and career development" (QAA et al, 2001). Many institutions chose to use e-portfolio systems as one means of supporting student PDP (Strivens, 2007).

The challenge: practitioners and the need for an evidence base

Consultation work by the CRA for the Higher Education Academy found that a key concern amongst practitioners was the paucity of the evidence base for their work (Ward et al, 2005). There have been repeated calls for more robust evaluation of PDP in the UK (QAA et al, 2001; Burgess, 2004; Clegg, 2004; Gough, 2003). The project seeks to address this through capacity building of practitioners as researchers, developing their confidence and capability to produce their own research base in relation to PDP and e-portfolio for students. The challenge for the project is that NARN-PDP project members have differing levels of experience, only some members having experience of undertaking formal research; in many of these cases, the research was not educational in focus.

The project: capacity building through participant action research on research

Capacity building for research engagement among this PDP practitioner network particularly lends itself to a participant action research model because there was already a strong, national practitioner network in the CRA. This network has developed over time many characteristics of a "community of practice" (Wenger, 1998) with shared values including an emphasis on the positive agency of the committed practitioner. This chimes

well with Reason and Bradbury's suggestion that "action research is an inherently value laden activity, usually practised by scholar-practitioners who care deeply about making a positive change in the world" (Reason & Bradbury, 2006). The value-laden nature of this definition is echoed by Senge and Scharmer's definition of capacity building as "enhancing people's awareness and capabilities, individually and collectively, to produce the results they truly care about" (Senge & Scharmer, 2001).

The adopted project methodology is a form of participant/community action research at the overarching, meta-level of sharing and developing research plans and outcomes among colleagues. In practice each individual NARN-PDP participant is developing and implementing a research project on a key aspect of PDP implementation at his or her own institution. The plans are being shared, analysed, evaluated and sharpened at regular regional network meetings. The action research interventions (Argyris & Schön, 1991) are taking the form of considered improvements in the plans developed through this iterative process and more formal inputs to annual national network meetings at the stages of research design, data gathering, data analysis and reporting. The emphasis throughout is upon sharing good practice and working collaboratively at all stages of the research process.

The overall project is seeking to establish whether this form of participant action research on research planning is an effective means of research capacity building. The key criteria here will be whether all participants are confident and able to produce publishable outputs. The individual institutional representatives are sharpening their research plans and aiming to produce at least one piece of publishable research on their PDP practice. The collation of these research outputs will make a significant contribution to our understanding of effective PDP implementation across UK HEIs.

Progress: lessons so far

The first period of the project was spent establishing the membership, forming the leadership team and three regional groups and developing a shared and consistent view as to the nature and purpose of the overall project. This could not be rushed.

There have been some issues of changing membership, which is to be expected with such a large project membership and over time. This created a challenge, in the first instance, in maintaining a sense of community and purpose as institutional teams formed and developed and new members were brought into the project. The project has now reached a period of consolidated and more stable membership.

The leadership team is now well established and appears to be effective in providing a central, guiding and overarching role for the project and its members. The project has important synergy with the lead National Teaching Fellow's role as Associate Director for Research with the CRA (Peters, 2006; 2007). The three regional groups have developed into highly effective support networks within which research progress and personal development journeys of members are being shared, with the guidance of all three regional leaders.

Levels of trust and support across the regional teams have developed and are exemplified by the way in which teams are able to act as critical friends to each other, asking probing questions and offering support. The success of the regional groups has been fundamental to the whole project's success. After one year, there is evidence that members have 'moved on a step' and developed in confidence and the capability to undertake and further their research.

An unintended consequence of the original project proposal is that the institutional members (through their participation in the NARN-PDP project) are developing research capacity within their own HEIs as research teams/groups have formed internally around the national project. In one HEI the national action research network model has been adopted internally to develop an action research approach, inviting academic staff to evaluate (e)-PDP implementation across different subject disciplines.

Early on in the project a NING social network site (http://about.ning.com/) was set up. This has had a mixed response and 'patchy' engagement. To encourage broader engagement with the NING site 'diarised' meetings have been organised on NING, with a specific discussion topic relating to the project. This has proved more successful and the

leadership team will be developing this. We anticipated that communication processes and systems would be a challenge with a network project of this size and we will seek to evaluate the success or otherwise of the NING communications site throughout the project lifecycle.

There has also been a challenge in keeping a balance between implementing the project timetable as planned and responding sensitively to the natural flow of participant action research. It is in the nature of participant action research that it should be driven by the community and not by a pre-set project plan (Argyris & Schön, 1991), and this can cause tensions. However, so far it has proved possible to respond to participant requests and ideas and still work within the overall project structure.

The NARN-PDP project centres on developing the capability and capacity of researchers. There is growing evidence that the intended capacity building is working. Network members are challenging themselves to move into new aspects of research and are using the supportive atmosphere of the network to guide them through this. Members are also demonstrating a willingness to 'push at the boundaries' and taking themselves out of comfort zones in their research.

The overall project offers a blueprint for capacity building through participant action research which could be utilised effectively by any HE community. The commitments it requires are the willingness to find time to meet, to be open about plans and to learn from peer feedback. The project has already done much to move a successful practitioner community towards engagement in practitioner-led research. Participants have developed research questions and plans that are robust enough to generate publishable outputs. The result will be a greatly enhanced evidence base for PDP implementation across UK higher education.

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Northern – Bradford, Bolton, Liverpool, Salford, UCLAN and Newcastle

Midlands – Bedfordshire, Birmingham City, Coventry, Wolverhampton, Worcester and Gloucestershire

Southern – Bournemouth, Exeter, Portsmouth, Canterbury Christ Church [and Kent]

Project website: **recordingachievement.org/narn/default.asp**