



National Research and Development Centre
for adult literacy and numeracy

Maximising the impact of practitioner research

A handbook of practical advice

Paul Davies, Mary Hamilton and Kathryn James



Published by the National Research and Development Centre for Adult Literacy and Numeracy

This document is also available in pdf format from www.nrdc.org.uk

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ISBN: 978-1-905188-58-1

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NRDC is a consortium of partners led by the Institute of Education, University of London (see back cover for a list of members) and is part of the Faculty of Policy and Society at the IoE.

www.ioe.ac.uk

Design: www.chapmandesign.net

Print: dsi colourworks

Photos: Phil Meech

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Foreword

Engaging practitioners in research and encouraging reflective practice are central to NRDC's remit. The Practitioner-Led Research Initiative (PLRI), which ran from 2004 to 2006, supported 17 groups of literacy, language and numeracy (LLN) practitioners in designing, developing and completing hands-on research and development projects. These projects addressed policy priorities in Skills for Life and important messages have emerged which will help in the future development of the strategy. The projects were carried out in three rounds, with each round having a clear theme:

- **Round one:** New ways of engaging new learners;
- **Round two:** Understanding purpose and perseverance – learners' aspirations and commitment to learning;
- **Round three:** Creativity in teaching and learning.

The NRDC has drawn on its experiences of co-ordinating and supporting the work of these projects to produce this handbook. It is for everyone who would like to conduct small-scale action research projects within their own organisation: from senior managers to individual teachers or teams planning to work collaboratively. It is a practical guide on how to initiate and manage practitioner-research programmes. Making research work in practice is not simple: ideas do not always flow smoothly or automatically between the worlds of research and practice. To optimise the transfer process, practitioners need active engagement with research processes together with collaboration and dialogue with full-time researchers. Well-supported and resourced practitioner research is best placed to develop practice because it encourages critical and reflective inquiry. It throws light on, explores and challenges accepted practices and received

wisdom from the inside as well as the outside. It provides the opportunity to recognise and use practitioners' knowledge, and to identify and promote innovative practices, which mushroom constantly in so many places. This guide offers guidance on the process and is realistic about problems which might occur.

Those interested in finding out more about NRDCs Practitioner-Led Research Initiative, should refer to the following publications, all available via the NRDC website: <http://www.nrdc.org.uk>

- *New Ways of Engaging New Learners: Lessons from round one of the practitioner-led research initiative*, edited by Mary Hamilton and Anita Wilson, published 2006. This publication brings together the final reports of the first round of the PLRI.
- *Practitioners Leading Research*, compiled and edited by Mary Hamilton, Paul Davies and Kathryn James, published 2007. This publication brings together the final reports from rounds two and three of the PLRI.
- *Practitioner-Led Research Initiative Impact Report*, Mary Hamilton and Kathryn James, published 2007. This web-only publication looks at the findings that came out of the PLRI.

I commend this handbook to you. I hope you will find it both useful and enjoyable as a guide to your own practitioner-research initiatives.

Ursula Howard, Director, NRDC

Introduction

The main purpose of this handbook is to offer a practical guide to those who plan to initiate and manage practitioner-research programmes. It is based on our experiences of co-ordinating and supporting the work of practitioner-researchers in a wide range of fields which have included adult, school and community learning. It also draws on ongoing work with postgraduate students, especially those who have to undertake a significant work-based study as part of a masters degree or diploma course.

Our interest in developing a practitioner-research culture arises from our view that ideas do not always flow smoothly or automatically between the worlds of research and practice. This is, of course, an opinion shared by many and partly accounts for the increase in the number of practitioner-research programmes that exist not just in the UK but in Australia, Canada, the USA and elsewhere. The wider literature reporting on experiences of practitioner research suggests that it can be an effective way of engaging full-time researchers with practitioners and vice versa.

In the UK many high profile education and social policy initiatives now feature a practitioner-research element amongst their key requirements. The thinking behind this is to encourage practitioners and their organisations to look towards research as a means of providing the information they need to both develop their services and tackle the challenges they might face as they do so.

We believe that in order for practitioners to be involved with research requires more than just being exposed to research findings. Rather, they need active engagement with research processes together with collaboration and dialogue with full-

time researchers. In other words, evidence in and of itself does not necessarily result in change. It is crucial who disseminates this evidence, who feels it to be important and how it is understood to be relevant to practice. Engaging practitioners in research will ensure that the work done is relevant and geared to their needs. It will increase the sense of ownership of, and commitment to, the research itself, and to any development and other policy and practice proposals which are based on the research. It also enables full-time researchers to become more familiar with the type of information practitioners require and the range of ways in which research findings might be packaged and communicated.

In addition to focusing on individual practitioners, an important aspect of many practitioner-research programmes is to also engage the senior management of organisations in the programme, thereby increasing their involvement in and awareness of research activities, agendas and outcomes. The purpose of this is to encourage them to provide the essential infrastructures for practitioner research including, for example, release from teaching to allow them to carry out their studies. Moreover it is equally important that senior managers become more active in disseminating such research and act on its outcomes.

With an appropriate amount of support from full-time researchers, practitioners can normally undertake very successful research. Many regard their newly acquired research skills as a useful addition to their overall professional competence, particularly important in the light of the new qualifications standards for teachers introduced in September 2007¹. Others become more interested in research and there are a growing number who

¹ See www.lifelonglearninguk.org for details.

are recruited onto full-time research projects and either permanently work for research organisations or develop careers whereby they move between research and practice as various contracts start and finish.

Doing practitioner research

Although there are numerous advantages associated with practitioner research there are a number of difficulties which need to be acknowledged. Perhaps decisions have to be made whether to alert practitioners at the outset about these or whether it is better to offer support to them as they emerge.

Practitioner research naturally appeals most to those practitioners who have an existing propensity to do, or interest in, research. They are often the enthusiasts in their field who are interested in exploring complexities and dilemmas. However, just because there are individuals in an organisation who are keen to do research does not necessarily mean that they work in organisations which have a research culture. (There may be more of a target setting and achieving culture, for example.) Although there have been many attempts to narrow the divide, many practitioner-researchers will eventually discover that although their research findings might be received enthusiastically by their immediate colleagues, others in their organisation and a wider interested community, they may not necessarily lead to changes in practice.

Research can seem like a very complex and sophisticated activity whose very appeal is that it is perceived as more academically demanding than routine day-to-day activities. It is this difference or 'breath of fresh air' that we are told is one of the most appealing aspects to practitioners. Unfortunately, for some practitioners the

experience of actually doing research is somewhat less exciting. Work-based projects can be exciting and innovative, but a lot of the demands of the project are better described as management, scheduling, co-ordinating, easing person-to-person difficulties, and so on. Practitioners are sometimes disappointed to find that the description most commonly applied to practitioner research is 'worthwhile but time consuming'. Because many studies can only be completed by abandoning some of the more innovative approaches, settling on sample sizes which are less than originally desired, and collecting data which does not lead to particularly 'groundbreaking' conclusions, some practitioners wonder whether what they have done deserves the title 'research'.

Finally, when the practitioner-research project has been completed, and even if the practitioner is told that it is a very thorough and worthwhile piece of work, there are many in the research 'community' who may not attach that much significance to it. The status of practitioner research is variable, and this has major implications for how the research is published and disseminated.

This handbook attempts to provide useful, practical and realistic advice for those who manage practitioner-research programmes whilst also acknowledging that this is a contested area with competing views about what practitioner research is, how it should be done, who should do it and what the point of it all is. For example, is it the quality of the end product, the findings in the research report or the quality of the learning experience that is the most important thing, irrespective of the actual findings?

One approach is to regard full-time, academic research as the 'gold standard' against which practitioner research should be always judged.

Another is to regard practitioner research as a similar but different activity which has its own set of success criteria. From time to time, each of these perspectives is applied to different practitioner-research situations in this handbook.

When supporting practitioner researchers we have often found the metaphor of the 'research journey' a useful way of describing the experience of planning a study, finding a direction, negotiating delays and detours before eventually arriving at the destination. Consequently, this handbook is divided into the following sections which reflect the different phases of such a journey.

1. Getting started
2. Maintaining momentum
3. Writing up, publishing and disseminating
4. Conclusions

There are many resources available for those interested in practitioner research. A comprehensive list of these resources is available in the NRDC publication *Practitioners leading research* (2007) edited by Mary Hamilton, Paul Davies and Kathryn James. Available at www.nrdc.org.uk

1 Getting Started

This section examines three main issues:

1. Making and taking opportunities to do practitioner research
2. Establishing a working definition of research
3. Deciding what is achievable

Making and taking opportunities

Attracting a field of good quality practitioners and potential researchers is an obvious factor in a successful practitioner-research programme. There is a definite need to offer some attractive 'carrots' which make the prospect of doing research appealing, rewarding and achievable. Some practitioner-research programmes with which we have been involved have been relatively unsuccessful, mainly because they had limited appeal and were considered to be just an additional burden.

Hamilton has identified five models of practitioner research (see page 11) and these vary according to:

- The amount of professional development they explicitly provide;
- The nature and amount of external support;
- The extent to which the research projects are embedded in the practitioners' organisations.

Furthermore and very importantly, they have different funding implications for stakeholders.

Practitioner-research programmes can provide several things. They can:

- Help develop a research or evaluation culture

within organisations or a professional field of practice;

- Assist organisational development;
- Encourage professional development;
- Develop collaborative patterns of working;
- Lead to the production of useful research 'products' such as networks, websites and, of course research reports.

It would be a very successful programme indeed which achieved all of these in equal measure, and perhaps it would be useful to prioritise these both within the programme as a whole and for the individual practitioner researchers.

Part of the process of attracting a good field of applicants for a practitioner-research programme is to make this range of benefits visible to potential applicants, for some have narrow and indeed stereotypical images of what research is and what it does. Consequently, practitioners tend to respond to a practitioner-research invitation when they can see the opportunity to obtain at least some of these benefits. The 'ideal case' scenario for an attractive practitioner-research programme might include the following.

An 'ideal' practitioner-research programme

1. An experienced and high profile organising team based on, for example, a university well known for its work in this field.
2. Internal organisational support from senior managers who are keen for their staff to undertake practitioner research and then use the findings.
3. A work-based problem or issue which practitioners think can be better managed or provided for as a direct result of research. ►

4. An adequate level of research support and funding which gives the impression that practitioner research is valuable and worth investing time and effort in. Described by one of our practitioner researchers as the 'wow factor'.

Establishing a working definition of research

It is hard to pin down an exact definition of what practitioner research actually is. Furthermore, practitioner researchers (even within a single field) can come from a variety of both academic and occupational backgrounds and have very different views about the nature of research and what it tries to do. Some hold strong views about the appropriateness of particular research traditions such as the 'scientific' method or the qualitative approach. Others do not necessarily favour any particular methodology and favour basing their studies on a mixed package of:

- Questionnaire surveys;
- Semi-structured interviews;
- Case studies.

Action research is sometimes popular with those who are teaching and have the opportunity to use their classrooms as places where the effect of small changes can be recorded and analysed.

Practitioner researchers can also have a range of views about what they think research can actually achieve. This can vary in terms of ambition from:

High Ambition →→→ Low Ambition
Provide the solution to the problem. Contribute to our understanding of the problem.

Practitioners are attracted to both ends of this spectrum. Some regard the 'low ambition' focus as not worthy of the term research, whilst others are relieved they are not under the pressure of having to find the answer to a tricky problem. Indeed it would appear that most new comers to practitioner research have no clear idea about what their work might offer the knowledge-base in general. However, they tend to be far clearer about what their study might contribute to their workplace. This ranges from:

High Impact →→→ Low Impact
Intend the research to convince others about a solution they already know. No particular expectation about impact. More interest in general learning from the research experience.

Most of the practitioner researchers with whom we have worked have been comfortable with the fact that no particular definition of, or approach to, research was promoted. Instead they were encouraged to:

- Start from their comfort zone of previous perceptions and experiences of research;
- Appreciate that there are a variety of definitions and approaches;
- Appreciate that the greater the variety of methods they considered using, the greater was the range of research topics that were open to them.

An important part of this early phase is to help the practitioners adopt a research perspective in a very general sense. This is best illustrated by the work we did in supporting them to consider critically, and sometimes re-define, some of the notions they had about research. For example:

Five models of practitioner research

Model 1:

Practitioners are employed as members of the research team in externally funded research projects, working in their own or others' organisations.

Follows rhythms and aims, and ethos of funded research rather than professional development needs or organisational priorities. Depending on the balance of expertise in the project, practitioners may take on an 'apprenticeship' role or a 'consultancy' role. Can be good for 'first step' research experience. Highly structured, offering a sense of contributing to a bigger research effort, opportunities for dialogue with researchers, good for disseminating existing research. Can be exploitative (researchers on the cheap) or lead to practitioners mainly being used to facilitate access to research sites and to collect data.

Model 2:

Practitioners carry out small-scale projects as part of professional development in the context of initial teacher education or masters-level programmes.

High on professional development links and formal training, low on organisational links, relevance and embedding; often fragmented, necessarily small-scale, no development of a professional community unless a critical mass of students working alongside each other or networked together.

Model 3:

Practitioner-led group research projects or 'research circles', often supported by external research consultants.

Promoted in Scandinavia and Canada. Groups work with expert research consultant (as in Ward and Edwards, 2002).² As developed to date, low on formal professional development, can be low on embeddedness and research culture links unless institutional support is

given. A number of examples of this approach in Australia and Canada, both successful and unsuccessful. Groups are highly dependent on research consultant for quality of experience.

Model 4:

Research and practice networks, organising conferences and other events for debate and sharing of good practice; publishing practitioner-oriented journals.

These exist in the UK, Canada and Australia. Good on dissemination and encouraging sense of professional culture that includes research. Unless supplemented by other forms of support, can only share existing research experience (e.g. practitioners already enrolled on postgraduate courses and research degrees), doesn't expand or embed the research culture beyond active minority. Such networks already exist in the UK.³

Model 5:

Whole institutional approach. Research expert attached to a providing organisation, works in situ with selected members of staff on a project chosen by the organisation and participating staff members as being relevant to their goals and interests.

Common model at school-level and some examples from Australia and the US. Given that the size of provider staff group is crucial, would it work in a college or community-based provider? Could include studying existing research to explore how might be relevant to own organisational setting as well as generating new research funding.

2 Ward, J. and Edwards, J. (2002) *Learning Journeys: Learners Voices*. London: Learning and Skills Development Agency.

3 RaPAL: Research and Practice in Adult Literacy, see www.literacy.lancaster.ac.uk/rapal; ALM: Adults Learning Mathematics, see www.alm-online.org; NATECLA: National Association of Teaching English and other Community Languages to Adults, see www.natecla.org.uk

<p>Notion 1</p> <p>Notion – Research is usually difficult and best done by full-time researchers.</p> <p>Support message – An achievable project (from the point of view of a practitioner with limited research experience and resources) is not necessarily intellectually less demanding.</p> <p>Implication for practitioner research – The practitioners liked stretching themselves but towards a goal that was attainable.</p>	<p>Notion 3</p> <p>Notion – Research and organisational management (such as monitoring and information processing) are more or less the same, it is mainly the language that is different.</p> <p>Support Message – Information is viewed more critically in research. The nature of the information, its source and how it is gathered are all potentially problematic. Researchers are happy to convey complexity and do not necessarily strive after a single judgement or solution.</p> <p>Implication for practitioner research – The quality of research methods are vital. Data gathering is different from routine information processing although there may be some similarities.</p>
<p>Notion 2</p> <p>Notion – Research findings have to be significant and wide ranging.</p> <p>Support message – Change can also come about through a process of small steps.</p> <p>Implication for practitioner research – Most practitioners work in situations where there is only limited scope for change. Small steps rather than wide ranging reforms might be better suited to organisational practices and culture.</p>	<p>Deciding what is achievable</p> <p>A very important question at the core of managing and supporting practitioner-research programmes is how much guidance should be given to the practitioners. This is particularly difficult where the very things about which the practitioners are most enthusiastic and which provide the main motivation for them to do research, are also the very things that to an experienced researcher are most likely to cause them problems.</p>

On the other hand, there is also the risk that the distinctions between research and practice might not be separated sufficiently and the characteristics of the research perspective might be lost.

A number of responses are possible if this situation arises at the start of a practitioner-research project.

Response	Positive Effect	Negative Effect
'Nip the problem in the bud'	Problem solved and avoid knock-on difficulties	Damages enthusiasm and motivation
'Don't rock the boat'	Maintain enthusiasm and motivation	Simply postpone dealing with the difficulties
'Let events take their course'	Enable them to experience the research 'journey'	Wasted time, damaged confidence

In practice a mixture of all three responses were used during the early phase of setting the research projects up and much depended on:

- the relationship we had with the practitioners;
- how closely they wished to work with us and;
- the other research support they were likely to receive.

However, we usually provide our practitioner-researchers with:

- Fairly clear frameworks;
- Deadlines whose significance is stressed;
- The promise of early support visits to review the start they have made.

In most cases, events do take their course and most of the projects did appear to experience a phase where ideas (sometimes unrealistic) are tossed about followed by a phase where the emphasis is placed on what is feasible and achievable.

So practitioner research is in some respects not so different from full-time research in that the form the project eventually takes is somewhat more modest in ambition than was the original idea. During this process of abandoning some of the initial ideas and settling on a version that is reduced in size, two main issues tend to arise.

1. Sample size – in particular, if original sample targets are missed, is the sample that is actually achieved good enough?
2. Reassurance that the more manageable and less complex amended version is still sophisticated enough to deserve the title of a research project.

Discussion points

Some experienced researchers plan their study in only a general sense anticipating that many of the more detailed decisions are best left until the study has started and they are more aware of the opportunities and obstacles they might face. To what extent should practitioner researchers be encouraged to plan in detail before they begin their study? Can they also delay some specific decisions until later?

One of the devices used to help practitioner-researchers achieve a manageable research focus is to encourage them to produce a short list of quite specific key research questions. This usually enables them to complete their study but it can also mean that their findings are of limited value to the wider audience. Just how specific should key research questions be?

MAXIMISING THE IMPACT OF PRACTITIONER RESEARCH
HANDBOOK



2 Maintaining momentum

This section looks at four main issues which are to some extent interrelated:

1. Keeping ownership
2. Keeping to the 'rules'
3. Skills training
4. Three levels of support

Keeping ownership

One of the main reasons for encouraging practitioners to do their own research is to enable those working in the field to view research as an aid to professional and organisational development and not something that is detached from day-to-day work issues and which is chiefly the concern of those who work in academic communities. Consequently, whilst it is important to provide practitioners with guidance and general support, it is vital not to become the key decision maker in the project and so demote the practitioners to a position of research assistant or apprentice.

Being able to offer the practitioner advice, whilst also feeling comfortable in standing back so that they retain ownership of the research, can be difficult. Much depends on how those who support practitioner research actually view it. Four possible examples of support viewpoints are:

1. It is much like post-graduate supervision where the practitioner or 'student' is helped to meet the criteria of a post-graduate research degree.
2. It is a semi-academic exercise where meeting the research criteria as mentioned in the point above is of lesser importance than the production of a thorough, clear report whose

findings are related to the evidence collected and have some value for practice.

3. It is a process of acquiring research skills and experience by undertaking a project in a supportive environment. The key element here is not the status of the findings but helping the practitioner to learn from the process.
4. It is a distinct form of research which although drawing on traditional research approaches and techniques needs to be viewed as having characteristics and uses of its own. It may well not meet all the criteria of post-graduate research but its worth cannot be judged only by full time academics. Its value to other practitioners is of immense importance too.

Keeping to the 'rules'

Many practitioner researchers come to their projects with a clear preference about how they wish to do it. Others, of course, have more of an open mind and seek some fundamental advice from the very start.

Practitioner researchers with a preference can normally be placed anywhere on a spectrum ranging from those who like traditional survey-type quantitative approaches to those who favour more qualitative, ethnographic styles. Occasionally, there are those who are keen to try out more creative techniques which are sometimes more literary in style, such as presenting data in the form of imaginary letters, or which take advantage of new technology such as collecting data through the ongoing use of 'blogs'. Sometimes, these new techniques carry a degree of risk because their appeal is mainly due to their innovative nature rather than their effectiveness in actually doing the job.

To a large extent the preferences about how to do the research are a product of the type of work the practitioners do. For example, many of those involved in a programme of practitioner research offered to teachers of adult literacy, numeracy and ESOL wished to use qualitative techniques to investigate complex issues such as learner confidence, motivation and so on.

Whatever approach is being taken by the practitioner researchers, we have found it useful to continually remind them that each decision they make as their study unfolds needs to be cross-referenced to some form of general checklist which hopefully will help ensure quality and enable them to keep to whatever set of 'rules' are guiding them. Such a decision checklist might look something like the following:

'Rule'	'Decision-check'
What is your original purpose?	Will this help or hinder your ability to fulfil this purpose?
Who is the audience?	Will this help or hinder your ability to influence this audience?
What is your schedule?	What impact will this have on your schedule?
What are the key principles underpinning your data collection methods e.g. validity, reliability, triangulation, etc?	How will this effect the rigour of your study?

Whilst some practitioners feel 'safe' working within such a checklist, others view it as rather mechanical and are keen to explore routes where there is a greater degree of risk.

Skills training

Practitioners who opt to do research usually bring many actual, or at least potential, research skills with them. However, almost all appear to benefit from having some skills training, ideally through some formally arranged programme, but at the very least by some ad hoc 'just-in-time' short sessions, just before they are about to embark on a particularly technical phase of their study. The main topics about which practitioner researchers appear to have appreciated skills training in are:

- Sample sizes, particularly how these are related to quantitative and qualitative methods;
- Questionnaire design – there is a tendency for their first attempts to be either too simplistic or too lengthy and complex;
- How to categorise qualitative data;
- Notions such as validity and reliability – distinguishing sound evidence from other material they may have collected;
- Research ethics – obtaining permission, explaining purpose, anonymity, confidentiality and so on.

Three types of support

One of the most fascinating aspects of practitioner research is the range of people who take part. They come from a variety of walks of life and have different experiences, academic backgrounds and are usually at different stages of their careers. Unlike mature people who undertake work-based studies as part of a masters degree and who to some extent or other have opted to put themselves under the direction of their tutors, it might be inappropriate to view practitioner researchers as students. Perhaps the best description is colleagues who are contributing a particular type of experience and expertise to a joint project. Consequently, establishing the working relationship is vital.

Speaking of his experience of working with us, one practitioner explained that he was not sure at the outset what type of support he needed, but in retrospect he felt he and his team of practitioners had benefited from:

- Inspiration
- Confidence
- Practical support.

Inspiration – the sense they were taking part in an imaginative and significant programme that valued the contribution practitioners could make by doing their own research.

Confidence – feeling that their ability to do the research (or to develop the skills during the course of it) was recognised and formed the foundation upon which their relationship with, in this case, the university was based.

Practical support – the continual input of practical advice, reminders, check-ups that came from the programme which enabled the practitioners to keep on course and, as important, keep in touch with the university.

The most important point, therefore, is to ensure that those staff who support practitioner research value it as a legitimate research strand. This is not always easy because as has been mentioned on several previous occasions, there are contested views held by full-time researchers about the role and status of practitioner research. However, most of the practitioners do want to develop their research skills and are very keen to learn from the experiences of full-time researchers. Consequently, guidance and constructive criticism is far better than an ‘anything goes’ approach. It is probably the atmosphere that is created before the constructive criticism is given which is the vital thing.

Discussion points

A major challenge faced by practitioner researchers (almost by definition) is finding enough time to do their study when the demands of their job are normally their top priority. Some have said that deadlines, follow-up emails and so on, have provided the necessary prompts to make sure they keep to their schedule. Just how much monitoring of the progress being made by practitioner researchers is appropriate?

One way in which practitioner researchers can make their job easier is to use some of the data collecting and processing they do as part of their job as material for their research study. Is this a good idea and what are the implications for objectivity? Also is there an ethical issue here too?

3 Writing up, publishing and dissemination

Writing up

This tends to be the part of the process which produces the most difficulties for practitioner-researchers and where they do need a substantial amount of guidance. Most practitioner-researchers do seem to benefit from some direct advice about the various 'dos and don'ts' of data analysis and report writing. This is possibly the phase of practitioner research where the relationship drifts more towards the tutor: postgraduate student style.

Some of the key issues which have tended to come up time after time are:

- Analyse, don't just describe;
- Make links explicit – use an 'audit trail';
- Avoid too many major messages – find a central thread or argument;
- Practice using categories;
- 'A shame to waste it'.

Publishing and dissemination

Publishing and dissemination are very important to practitioners, as the reports and feedback events they attend represent not just the end of the research process, but tangible evidence that their research has to some extent or other been successful. The key point is since many of the practitioners are not very familiar with the practices of academic publishing and dissemination, they can find this final part of the process rather drawn out and frustrating.

Support, or at least communication and explanations, is crucial at this time because this is the stage where the work of the practitioners leaves the relatively comfortable and supportive world of the host institution and is exposed to the critical eye of the outside world. This is especially the case where the intention is to publish their research findings in widely circulated reports, on well-known websites and through high-profile

Issue	Guidance given
Analyse, don't just describe	Analysis is not just a list of what you have collected, it's the reasons that explain the patterns.
Make links explicit	Because you have 'lived' with the data you know how it is all related. The new reader doesn't. Create a trail between questions – data – interpretations – findings.
Too many messages	Most readers will pay far less attention to what you write than you did in writing it. You need to 'hook' them. A single central message makes your work more accessible and provides you with a framework to which you can attach more minor points.
Using categories	These are the building blocks of much qualitative research. Quantitative research is relatively easy in the sense that there are usually agreed mathematical procedures. Developing categories is more open to criticism – practice your skills.
'Shame to waste it'	You may have collected data that does not make a major contribution to your study. Don't force it into the report just because you have it. In this case more may be less.

conferences. The prestige of having your findings published and disseminated in this way does come at a price and practitioner researchers need to be prepared for this.

Prestige	Scrutiny
High	High
↓	↓
↓	↓
Low	Low

The impact made by publishing and disseminating the research findings varies depending whether the audience is:

1. The immediate team and other close colleagues;
2. The organisation as a whole;
3. The wider community.

	Impact of findings	Value attached
Immediate team	High	Very important
Whole organisation	Some	Important
Wider community	Modest	Limited

The rippling process

The impact made by practitioner research can be described as having a 'ripple effect' where the greatest interest is shown by immediate colleagues with a diminishing amount of impact made as the research messages move outwards.

The extent to which practitioner-research messages actually move outwards partly depends on the perceived importance of the topic and partly on the steps taken by the practitioners to publicise their work. This usually depends on:

- Their sense of the worth of their findings;
- A confidence which they either brought to the research or which has developed during the course of the research;
- Their interest in developing a profile within their fields of practice and research;
- Whether they wished to use their research as a means of career advancement.

Discussion points

During the writing up phase practitioner-researchers often send in drafts for comments. Are there any differences in the type and style of the comments you would make on such a draft compared to the comments you would make to an assignment handed in by a post-graduate student?

Practitioner-research reports could potentially be read by a wide range of audiences. To what extent should practitioners be encouraged to write for the needs of any particular audience?

4 Conclusions

Although we have been co-ordinating and supporting the work of practitioner researchers for a number of years and in a wide range of settings, it is difficult to be exact about the role and value of practitioner research. The level of interest shown in practitioner research, which is often referred to by policy-makers as developing a research or evaluation culture, is often at its highest when a new initiative is launched and practitioners are encouraged to participate in its development. In some cases practitioners welcome this opportunity and enthusiastically embrace the chance to contribute to the aims and objectives of the initiative by developing their own research skills and feeding back their findings into the policy and decision-making systems. On other occasions, however, there is more scepticism amongst practitioners who interpret the call to develop practitioner research or evaluation skills as an attempt to encourage them to become part of a monitoring or target setting culture.

At the start of this handbook it was explained how practitioner research is an activity about which there is a range of views and whose status in the wider research community is variable but probably modest. At the moment it appears that the process value of doing practitioner research, that is the learning or developmental impact on the individual researchers, is probably greater than the product value, that is the findings contained in the final report and the other dissemination channels.

Enhancing the product value is clearly important if practitioner research is to break away from its 'interesting to do but not that significant' status. This, of course is easier said than done but a number of small steps may make an important contribution. Two amongst these are:

- **Research** – Practitioner networks such as RaPAL (see: www.literacy.lancs.ac.uk/rapal/)

whose publications, meetings and conferences can be used to spread the word about practitioner research.

- **Academic practices** – including published practitioner-research reports on course reading lists, in the bibliography of papers, etc. Inviting practitioner researchers to contribute to undergraduate and postgraduate courses. Including practitioner research as a research 'type' in research methods courses.

A different approach might be to shift the attention away from what full-time researchers think of practitioner research to what full-time senior managers in organisations think of practitioner research: why they allow, enable and/or encourage their staff to do it and what they hope the organisation will gain in return.

We have carried out some limited research in this area and it seems that although managers speak of the value of the research findings, they are also interested in practitioner research as:

- A means of obtaining additional funding;
- A form of staff development;
- A 'perk' given to a valued member of staff;
- PR – i.e. the prestige of having links to a university.

Thus there is a tendency amongst some managers to be more enthusiastic about participating in a programme of practitioner research than actually using the findings it produces.

Consequently, practitioner research can be portrayed as an exciting and rewarding partnership between individuals, their employing organisations and the external research consultants. On the other hand, if the commitment is not there, and if

from the outset people view practitioner research as inherently 'second rate', its reputation is unlikely to be enhanced by the experience. The following table describes potential best and worst case scenarios.

	Best-case scenario	Worst-case scenario
Practitioner researcher	Positive in terms of both research process and value of the research findings. Strengthen links between research and practice.	Negative – feel alienated from research process and attach little value to findings. Research seen as having limited value for practice.
Employing organisation	Value practitioner research as an effective means of organisational and professional development. Staff involved in decision making through research.	Practitioner research tolerated but attach little value to it. Mainly seen as a condition for obtaining funds. Research viewed as a means of monitoring staff performance.
External research consultant	Develop a network of practitioner researchers whose work is promoted by consultant.	Practitioner research used as a way of developing the career aspirations of consultant.

Notes

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- The University of Nottingham
- The University of Sheffield
- East London Pathfinder
- Liverpool Lifelong Learning Partnership

- Basic Skills Agency at NIACE
- Learning and Skills Network
- LLU+, London South Bank University
- National Institute of Adult Continuing Education
- King's College London
- University of Leeds

Funded by the Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills as part of Skills for Life: the national strategy for improving adult literacy and numeracy skills.

