

Article

In Practice: The Importance of Practitioner Research in Vocational Education

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Abstract: This article presents the background to and rationale for a practice-focused model of educational change and improvement. In contrast to autocratic top-down models, this democratic and pragmatic approach begins with the educational concerns of teachers. In this model, responsibility and accountability for educational improvement is shared between policy professionals, the university team and sector practitioners. Contributions from the literature explore the question of the nature and purpose of educational practice; how concepts of educational practice influence curriculum design and content in programmes for the initial and continuing professional development for teachers of vocational education; and how these can enhance or inhibit the improvement of educational practice. Drawing upon case study examples from a national programme of university-supported practitioner research in England, results illustrate how this model offers insights into ways of increasing research capacity and achieving sustainable improvements in educational practice. It concludes that programmes of university-supported practitioner research, which encourage and enable teachers to engage in the systematic investigation of educational practice, can realize educational improvements which other approaches to educational evaluation and improvement (including external inspection regimes) struggle to do. It invites politicians and policy professionals to consider potential applications of this approach in other national systems of vocational education.

Keywords: vocational education; practice; practitioner research; university-supported practitioner research; practice-focused research; educational research

1. Introduction

1.1. *The Notion of Practice*

We routinely speak of “practice” as if its meaning is self-evident and uncontested. For example, we refer to teaching practice, legal practice, clinical practice, dental practice, artistic practice, literary practice and so on. However, the value, meaning and significance of a “practice” is far from self-explanatory and is not well understood. Through the work of contemporary contributions from the philosophy of education and psychology, this article traces the notion of a practice back to the work of Aristotle and his discussion of forms of knowledge. It argues that a practice is socially, historically and culturally (and sometimes politically) constructed. It is made by people. People who work together in cooperation and collaboration not only to establish ways of doing something well in the world, but also to continually get better at what they do—their practice. This involves the development of a shared understanding of what we mean by “good work” in that field of practice or indeed in any form of life. It also includes nurturing the drive and commitment to enable a practice to evolve and move forward through the challenging of taken-for-granted assumptions in the light of experience and evidence. Each of the practices discussed above, among others, has its own history. Each has its own traditions and its own ways of doing things. What is important to note here is that practice seldom

(if ever) develops and improves solely from the top down or from the outside in. Instead it tends to develop from the ground up, incrementally through the work of its “insiders”. This is not to say that the improvement of practice does not require external support. It almost certainly does, as the histories of many practices testify, including those in the arts and crafts as well as in natural and social sciences. Nor is it to suggest that practice cannot or should not welcome contributions from other practices. It is to argue, however, that when an impetus for change and improvement comes entirely from the top down by those who are no longer “insiders” through the imposition ideas and theories developed by others, which are then expected to be applied in practice, a consequence of this is imposition is that it is achieved at some cost to the practice itself. For example, in the context of education, teachers regularly struggle to make ideas, research and theories often derived from remote others in higher education or those in political and policy circles “good” in practice. We do not have to look far to find cases where “theorists . . . change their theories . . . because they have grown tired of their old ideas [rather] than because of logic or experimental evidence” [1] (29). It is, however, teachers and other practitioners who test ideas and theories out daily in the arena of practice and it is in the context of practice where new theories can emerge in practical inquiry and through practical reasoning.

This research study is set against the backdrop of Post Compulsory Education in England in 2020. While many practitioners in the sector in England are all too aware of aspects of educational practice which need improvement, many find their attention, energies and resources being diverted away from important and enduring educational issues toward demonstrations of compliance with top-down policy imperatives and the demands of regular external inspection by the Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted).

In widely used more autocratic models of educational evaluation and improvement such as that employed by Ofsted, the impetus for change comes from the top down and educational evaluation is carried out by external inspectors from the outside in. Responsibility and accountability for educational improvement resides entirely with education leaders and practitioners who are expected to bear all of the risk in the inspection process and accept all of the blame if the outcomes of Ofsted inspections are not deemed to be at least “good”. In contrast, the approach to educational evaluation and improvement reported in this article is different. It takes a more pragmatic and democratic turn by beginning with the concerns of teachers (from the ground up). The momentum for change and improvement comes from the inside out. Responsibility and accountability in realizing change and improvement are shared between policy professionals, the university team and sector practitioners. A central purpose of the article is to bring this alternative model of educational change and improvement to the attention of policy professionals as well as those with accountability for educational change and improvement in practice and to invite them to consider how this model might be applied in other national systems of vocational education. As indicated above, the model of educational change and improvement underpinning the PRP is informed by a pragmatic philosophical world-view. This asserts the dynamic and interactive nature of theory, practice and research and includes an appreciation of the ways in which practice is developed incrementally and over time by its “insiders” from the ground up. This view of practice rejects technical-rational approaches to educational evaluation and improvement which assume that educational can be changed by policy and inspection regimes imposed from the top down simply by telling others what to do.

This article introduces and describes a practice-focused programme of evaluation and improvement in vocational education, based upon a model of university-supported, practitioner-research. This approach, takes practitioners, those most centrally engaged in education, the ones upon whom the achievement of good vocational education most heavily depends, as a starting point, an engine and a driver of improvement in educational practice.

It is argued that the development and improvement of educational practice is not well-served when teachers of vocational education are regarded as mere technicians, charged with responsibility for the mechanical insertion of facts and skills into the minds and hands of their students or when they are simply seen as the deliverers of a curriculum prescribed from the top down by those who

are (often far) removed from practices in which they claim to but no longer really have a foothold [1]. In sum, the model of educational evaluation and improvement introduced here describes a programme of university-supported practice focused research which aims to improve educational practice. The programme supports research conducted by practitioners in the contexts of their day-to-day work, in the spaces and places where educational theory and the findings of educational research can be tested out in practice, in a spirit of genuine inquiry and mutual engagement. This process of investigation and educational improvement is described as Joint Practice Development (JPD) [2].

1.2. The Nature and Purpose of Vocational Education

Questions regarding the nature and purpose of vocational education and its social and economic importance have occupied the minds of politicians and policy professionals for centuries. They still do today. For example, in the 2019 UK general election politicians of every persuasion proclaimed their commitment to increasing the funding and the status of vocational education recognizing it as an enabler of social mobility, a driver of economic prosperity (and no doubt, a winner of votes). The day after outgoing Conservative Prime Minister Theresa May used her last appearance at the dispatch box to plead with incoming Prime Minister Boris Johnson to invest more in Further Education, Johnson declared, “It is vital that we invest now in further education and skills”, promising that this would be a priority for his Government [3]. Later, in their 2019 election manifesto, Johnson’s Conservative Government announced a new £3 billion National Skills Fund and pledged to review further opportunities for apprentices by improving the Apprenticeship Levy. In addition, Johnson’s Government committed to investing almost £2 billion to upgrade the Further Education college estate. In the same election campaign, the Labour manifesto promised to introduce a universal lifelong learning entitlement of six years of training at Levels 4 (Certificate in Higher Education/Higher Apprenticeship) to 6 (Honours Degree/Degree Apprenticeship) including maintenance grants for disadvantaged learners. Labour also pledged to increase the percentage of Apprenticeship Levy funds that could be transferred to non-Levy payers to 50% in order to bring about what they described as a climate change in apprenticeship training. While the Liberal Democrats launched a “skills wallet” which would give adults a total of £10,000 at three specific points in their lives. They also committed to expand apprenticeships and reform the Apprenticeship Levy so that 25% of funds would flow into a Social Mobility Fund together with a £1 billion investment in Further Education funding.

It is clear from the above, that vocational education matters to politicians (at least on the campaign trail in the run up to a general election). However, political sound bites are relatively cheap and a long way from the realities of a successfully implemented vocational education policy. To know this is to begin to know the problem. While consecutive Labour, Coalition and Conservative Governments in the UK have committed considerable funding to the improvement of vocational education, the proportion of that funding that has found its way to frontline teachers is questionable. Capital funding announcements attract national headlines and the financing for such projects is always easier to find than for the more expensive recurring funding needed for teachers’ pay or the professional development and support needed in order to be able to make well-intended educational policy and ideas from rigorous peer-reviewed, published, educational research “good” in practice. While globally acclaimed research and published literature [4,5] underscore the importance of the quality of the teaching workforce in bringing about actual improvements in standards of achievement in vocational education, the terms and conditions of employment and opportunities for the professional development for teachers in the sector, appear to be deteriorating. For instance, an analysis of responses to a freedom of information (FOI) request submitted by the University College Union (UCU) in 2019, reported that the percentage of colleges in the UK employing over half of their teaching staff on casual contracts had tripled to 29% [6].

At the same time, vocational education in England and elsewhere has to face other serious challenges. For example, vocational education always has to compete for funding with schools and higher education. What is spent in one sector nationally cannot then be spent in another. Vocational

education also suffers from what is regarded by many as its second-class status in comparison to its academic counterparts in the schools and in higher education sectors. Those who regard vocational education as being beneath the gold standard of academic study often publicly applaud this sector of education, while at the same time directing their own children as far away as possible from any engagement in it. Once vocational education has been subordinated in this way then it is relatively easy in political and policy terms to see it as being reducible to sets of skills and techniques which, it is assumed can be passed on to “non-academic” (a term often used as a shorthand for “not so bright”) through simple instruction or “training”. This instruction or training is taken to involve little more than didactic teaching, mechanical observation and mindless repetition until the task or skill in question is “mastered” and added to the repertoire of tasks and skills necessary to carry out a particular job, often for a single employer.

To frame vocational education in this way is to significantly underestimate the knowledge, expertise, skills and educational values upheld and embodied by sector staff and to profoundly misunderstand the nature of vocational practice (or indeed practice of any kind) including the ways in which practice actually improves. Teachers of vocational education do much more than simply “instruct” or pass on skills and techniques. As prominent researchers from the field of philosophy of education [7–10], point out, teachers are the gatekeepers of the practices, traditions, forms of life and vocational communities into which they themselves were once inducted. The deeper point here is that the concepts we use to frame understandings of vocational practice, in turn influence the design, content and pedagogy of programmes of initial and continuing professional development for teachers of vocational education. If we limit our understanding of the nature of practice and how practice improves by framing the discourse in the language of the simplistic acquisition of second-class knowledge and the instrumental acquisition and development of mindless skills, then we diminish the concept of vocational practice at any level to mere technique, or to what Aristotle may have recognized as “*techne*”. In turn, this view of practice and its development influences how we go about the initial and continual professional development of teachers in ways which are more likely to inhibit the development of good practice than to keep it alive and moving forward in vocational education contexts, or indeed in any form of life.

The fabric of any human practice [11] is not and has never been limited to the mindless and mechanical acquisition of knowledge and skills [7] (p. 152–153), “practice is alive in the community who are its insiders (its genuine practitioners) and it stays alive” and is advanced by its insiders—those who care enough about the practice to challenge its traditions when necessary in order for it to evolve and move forward.

When practice is not open to challenge it can become dogma and cease to be useful to anyone interested in real change and improvement (even blueprints need to be interpreted and adapted as they are realized in context). Educational practices cannot therefore be established through the medium of a technician form of logic which seeks to specify and prescribe learning outcomes in advance and which regards the task of effective educational leadership and management as one of simply getting teachers to maximize these outcomes, by making them accountable for doing so and then setting up inspection regimes which “name and shame” them if they do not achieve set targets. The importance of entering the “core reality of a practice”, the context in which a practice is realized, in order to evaluate and improve it, is paramount in all of this. The foregrounding of the context [12] in which a practice is realized is therefore vital to those who would seek to improve it. To ignore the role of context in the development of practice, is to risk education policy becoming stuck or failing to “land”, in misguided and inevitably expensive attempts to change educational practice from the top down and from the outside in. Such top down and outside in policy initiatives lock relays of power and restrict relationships between the people involved in education reform to the extent that educational reforms become almost doomed, to predictable failure [12]. When change is imposed from the top down and from the outside in nothing changes because it cannot. If people cannot talk about what is really happening in practice then practice cannot change let alone improve. In these circumstances,

hyperactivity begins to masquerade as change. Teachers and education leaders have to spend their time providing (in extreme cases, fabricating) evidence to prove that preset and prescribed targets and outcomes have been met.

As explained above, the model of educational change and improvement, discussed in this article offers an alternative to “top down” and “outside in” models of educational reform. The approach to educational evaluation and improvement outlined here provides insights into how politicians, policy professionals and others interested in educational improvement might go about education reform differently, from the ground up and from the inside out. It provides practical examples of how policy professionals, education researchers and teachers can “enter into the core reality” of educational practice by working alongside each other in order to decide how best to realize sustainable improvements in practice in vocational education and in other educational contexts.

This HE-supported approach to educational evaluation and improvement is embedded in a continuing professional development programme (CPD) and is open to practitioner-researchers from across the vocational education sector in England. It consists of three intensive residential research development workshops, each lasting between 3 and 4 days. These are provided over a ten-month period in each year of the respective pathway and include monthly supervision tutorials at and in between residential events. Workshops involve engagement with educational research and literature surrounding a range of issues including, paradigms in educational research, research methodology and research methods in education. For example, key methodological issues are addressed through the sharing of stories of experiences of engaging in educational research; discussion of enduring issues in educational practice and debates surrounding the nature of knowledge and the processes of knowledge and practice development. All of these are made accessible to practitioner-researchers through the direct sharing of research and experiences of practice. These workshops are supported by a wide range of creative media and methods in order to bring these complex issues and ideas “to life”. For example, considerations of the relative merits of different research methodologies and methods are supported with reference to, narrative enquiry; multimedia; ICT-based games; conventional board games; music; film and art. The use of multimedia enables practitioner-researchers to engage critically and deeply with key educational ideas and concepts including methodological, epistemological, theoretical and educational issues in more engaging and less intimidating ways.

Research outputs from the PRP include, scholarly research posters, MPhil theses, case studies, accounts of critical incidents and impact grids which identify and provide indicators of measures of impact.

The above data sets are regularly supplemented by data from evaluations of residential research development workshops. For the purposes of this article, data sets are limited to extracts from a sample of impact grids produced by 2018–2019 PRP cohorts. These are drawn upon to illuminate practitioner-researchers’ experiences of engaging in the programme including the impact to date of their PRP-supported research projects on educational practice in their institutions.

2. Materials and Methods

2.1. Evaluation and Analytical Framework

In the PRP, impact is viewed and chronicled as process not an event. The evaluation framework and processes of and pathways to impact employed in the PRP involve the collection of three kinds of data: what went before (antecedent), what is going on (transactional) and outcomes (hard and soft indicators of impact). This requires a portrayal of research which does justice to the uniqueness and setting of each practitioner-researcher and the context in which their research is being conducted. “Harder” and “softer” measures of impact incrementally coalesce in the PRP to contribute to evidence of impact over time in situations where data is derived from a variety of research methods and sources. This is not to suggest casual connections of impact but only to bring to light patterns and themes in the

data which appear to be important in influencing and improving practice and to indicate that these may be worthy of closer consideration and further research.

The analytical framework employed in the study is ideographic, interpretive, pragmatic and incremental. The logic is therefore inductive. The PRP begins with problems and concerns in educational practice which have been identified by teachers “from the ground up”. Matters of trustworthiness and credibility move from particular cases toward more general understandings where cases cohere into interpretable factors. The intent here is to provide authentic accounts of subjective experience. Its purpose is not to lay claim to objectivity but to pursue incremental authenticity.

2.2. Rationale for Selection of Cases

Generalization to larger populations is not a strength or even an aim of case study research such as that reported here. This qualitative, empirical research study provides examples of a small number of illustrative cases embedded within the PRP. Each case is situated within its own specific context. Each offers insights into and evidence of how the PRP is building research capacity in the Post Compulsory Education sector in England. Each case reports upon how the research is bringing about changes and improvement in educational practice. This research does not therefore aspire to claims regarding the validity or reliability of these cases or that their selection is in some way detached or objective. Instead, each case is presented in some depth and over time to generate knowledge grounded in human experience in order to produce authentic and trustworthy descriptive accounts of experiences of the PRP and its impact which go beyond the particularity of each case. The aim here is to enable readers to arrive at broader inferences regarding participants’ experiences of the PRP and the impact of PRP research on educational practice in the contexts of each participant’s work.

Sampling is to a large extent naturalistic in that the research population is drawn from the 47 practitioner-researchers who are currently engaged in the PRP in 2019–2020. All of the teachers in the research population are fully qualified in the vocational subjects that they teach. They are all also fully qualified and experienced teachers working in a range of contexts in the Post Compulsory Education sector. These include, Further Education colleges, Private Training Organizations and in Adult and Community Learning organizations. Specific case studies are chosen for inclusion as they are illustrative examples of variations of the types of research undertaken by participants in the programme and the range and levels of research being pursued by PRP participants including progression from one pathway to another. This allows for common patterns across diverse cases to be traced leading to the identification of key characteristics of each case. It also enables exploration of variation. The purpose here is to balance and in-depth understanding of each case with the breadth of understanding gained by consideration of multiple cases.

Criteria for selection are, that all of those included in the sample are teachers, curriculum managers and education leaders working in FE colleges in England. All had experience of engaging in the PRP on at least one pathway. Cases involve a range of male and female PRP participants and include single and joint research projects. Cases are drawn from all three pathways and include PRP participants who have progressed from one pathway to another as well as those who have only engaged in one pathway. Ages of those in the sample range from late 1920s to late 1950s.

Case Studies 3.1 and 3.2 are included in the sample because these PRP participants are at the same level and stage of study and are following their first MA pathway. The MA pathway is on offer to practitioners with little or no recent experience of research. Case Study 3.1 is a joint project being undertaken by two teachers from the same FE college. Case Study 3.2 is a single project. Both projects reported in cases 3.1 and 3.2 focus on the provision of assessment and feedback. In these cases, the literature and research informing each study is to a certain extent shared and located in the field of assessment theory and practice. However, the interventions employed by these researchers are quite different. One draws upon literature and research from the field of digital technology while the other draws upon research from the discipline of psychology.

Case Study 3.3 is included to present the work of an MPhil practitioner-researcher who has progressed from the MA pathway to MPhil year 1. This research study is a single project and focuses on models of mentoring and coaching. It has been selected to illustrate how the programme is supporting an FE college to use this research to inform whole-organization policy related to its approaches to continuing professional development.

Case Studies 3.4 and 3.5 relate to the research being conducted by PRP participants who have progressed from MPhil year 1 to MPhil year 2. Both are single projects. Both are being conducted by senior teachers in the college with educational leadership responsibilities. Case Study 3.4 is another example of how a PRP project is influencing whole-organization policy on the sharing of good educational practice via the internet, while Case Study 3.5 illustrates how technology-supported approaches to learning in the development of learners' literacy and the assessment of creative writing in a single college department.

2.3. Scale and Scope of PRP Projects

The production of material for these case studies has been consistently funded by the Education and Training Foundation (ETF), the national representative body for Further Adult and Vocational Education (FAVE) sector in England. The Foundation has supported the research of over 500 sector practitioners over the past 10 years as part of this national innovative approach to educational evaluation and improvement. The PRP is offered as three pathways. The first is at an introductory pathway in the form of a short 30 credit short course at Master of Arts Level. In its first few years of its implementation, this pathway was originally described as the Research Development Fellowship (RDF) programme. The second pathway, was introduced to the programme three years ago and is now offered in the form of a practice-focused Customized Master of Philosophy (MPhil) year 1, while the third pathway offers progression to MPhil year 2. At this point, all pathways became known as the Practitioner Research Programme (PRP). The methodology employed in PRP is essentially pragmatic and interpretive. The overarching aim is to open up practice-focused, pragmatic, liminal, epistemic spaces in which teachers, education leaders, policy professionals and university research-active staff can systematically and candidly talk about what is really happening in practice. This involves the development of high levels of trust and cooperation between all stakeholders in identifying an aspect of educational practice in need of improvement; in testing out ideas from research and literature in the arena of practice; in attempting to improve that aspect of practice in context; and in interpreting findings from practitioner research together in the light of evidence. Depending upon the scale and scope of the research, the programme includes documenting the investigation and its contributions to knowledge, through the production of a Master of Philosophy thesis of around 60,000 words. Other research outcomes include the production, presentation and justification of the findings of each practitioner-research project in the form of a research poster and a presentation at the Foundation's National Annual Research Conference. These research outputs are providing important sources of evidence of the impact of the PRP. In addition to the above, different sets of quantitative and qualitative data are being collected in the form of impact grids and evaluations of residential research development workshops. These workshops provide regular and intensive research support for practitioner-researchers from the sector to enable them to systematically research and improve educational practice in context. This includes sharing the findings of their research with their colleagues, wider stakeholders, policy professionals and other researchers in the field. The purpose of the PRP is to create epistemic conditions in which teachers, education leaders, policy professionals and university researchers can enter the "core reality" of educational practice together by being able to talk openly about problematic aspects of educational policy and practice from a teacher's perspective in context and in the light of direct experience and evidence [13].

3. Results

The examples reported below offer insights into the ways in which the democratic and pragmatic model of educational evaluation and improvement employed in this study is increasing research capacity and achieving sustainable improvements in educational practice in vocational education contexts. In each of the cases described, the teacher participating in the PRP has already identified a problem in educational practice in the context of their own institution. Through their participation in the programme, each teacher is provided with support from the university team in order to identify and critically engage with relevant research and literature in the field of education. The purpose of this phase is to help the teacher to think carefully about the nature of the problem and progressively sharpen the focus of the research in order to identify a theory or idea or evidence from educational research which might contribute to addressing the educational problem in practice. In each case, the teacher puts the theory, idea or findings from empirical research into practice through the conduct of a systematic and supported practitioner-research study carried out the context of their work. Finally, each teacher reports the findings of their research in the form of a research poster, presentation of their research findings at a national research conference, the production of a scholarly written report and an impact grid which traces and evidences the impact of their research upon their own educational practice and those of others.

It is not possible to publish an in-depth analysis of these cases here. However, a brief analysis of each of the case studies set out below is presented below and summarized in the Discussion and Conclusion sections of this article.

3.1. Case Study 1: B and H

MA short course practitioner-researchers B and H conducted a joint research project exploring the use of digital technology in the provision of assessment feedback in their FE college.

3.1.1. Background to the Research

While the use of digital technologies in teaching and learning is increasingly promoted, the way in which assessment feedback is provided appears as yet to be underdeveloped. With increased time constraints upon resources available for teaching, learning and assessment, coupled with often strict and varied guidelines for feedback set out by Awarding Bodies (ABs), the potential benefits of digital feedback to both practitioners and students are on the face of it intuitively appealing but underused.

3.1.2. Aim of the Research

The primary aim of this study is to assess student engagement and perceptions of digital feedback in contrast to written feedback on Level 3 vocational study programmes. Questionnaires containing both open and Likert scale questions were administered to 73 students regarding their experiences of receiving feedback about their written assignments before and after the use of audio and visual feedback through Google for Education add-ons, Kaizena and Screencastify.

Common themes identified by students relating to what they expect from feedback, intimate their desire for more personal, specific and useful dialogue with their teacher-assessors. Preliminary results indicate that student expectations are perceived by them to be more closely met through the use of digital technology, particularly in relation to their perceptions of the detail and quality of the feedback they received, which they regarded as being greatly improved when compared with written feedback. Data from the study show that digital feedback was valued higher by the majority of students and in turn apprehension towards using digital technology reduced. Surprisingly, despite feedback being viewed as more personal and helpful through the implementation of digital technologies, student engagement with feedback offered appears to be unchanged. Results of this study have given rise to future research questions surrounding the use and implementation of digital technologies for feedback from the viewpoints of both students and practitioners. The effectiveness and efficiency of digital

technologies for practitioners, combined with questions of whether digital technology actually supports the improvement of students' written work in response to feedback, including any changes learning behaviours, are aspects of the study which are now being explored through MPhil research.

3.1.3. Immediate Impact

In terms of the immediate impact of this joint study, practitioner-researchers report that digital technology is now being used by a number of members of staff to enhance the assessment feedback that learners receive. They also report that students surveyed regarding their perceptions of feedback and current experiences and have become actively involved in the research in terms of exercising their student voice in relation to their preferred forms of feedback. The study found that written feedback is students' least preferred method of feedback. Above all else, the study found that students want to know how to improve their work. Students rated the importance of feedback more highly after experiencing digital-audio, digital-visual feedback in comparison to written methods. Apprehension among tutors and students towards use of digital methods for the provision of feedback on assignments has reduced significantly. While the majority of students rated digital methods of feedback higher than written feedback, levels of students' engagement with the feedback they receive have barely changed.

The college continues to support this research through the purchasing of webcams and headphones to use with the audio and visual marking. These are available to all department staff and more will be purchased as requested. Training and support sessions with other staff members have taken place, with a lot of interest expressed in the research findings from staff within the college and from other colleges. New facilities are focusing on Chromebook rooms where the use of digital technology is being explored further. This study provides evidence which lends tentative support to the use of online (audio/visual) feedback as students' preferred media for receipt of feedback on their work. In October 2019, both practitioner-researchers provided a keynote contribution to staff attending a professional development event involving approximately 1000 staff from the college originating the research as well as staff from another college. Evidence of further impact can be found in changes made to standardization of marking and feedback across teaching teams. The introduction of a college-wide strategy for the use of digital technologies in providing assessment feedback includes changes to college policy, designed to ensure that certain digital software packages are readily accessible on campus.

3.1.4. Wider Impact

Digital training has been made part of the college quality cycle as of September 2019. This has reached over 900 teaching staff across three campuses. Both researchers are sharing the findings of this study and identifying different methods of providing feedback at all of these staff development events where the focus is upon providing practical examples and selecting the most appropriate method of feedback for the type of assessment being employed, (which may for some staff and students, be a combination of all three methods. Both practitioners have presented the findings of their research on the college's website. Both have received offers to publish their research in educational journals and to engage in further research opportunities with a local university. Both are now affiliated with Google for Education through Certified Trainer Certification and Google Innovator Academy. This is serving to further strengthen the quality of training in digital technologies across the college. Training is also being provided externally to local colleges and educational providers. The college has now implemented this training and software across all of its 3 campuses. One practitioner-researcher (B) has taken this in the use of digital feedback research forward to MPhil study, while co-researcher (H) is now conducting research into the "gamification" of teachers' professional development at MPhil level.

3.1.5. Analysis

Data from this case study provides evidence of how both of the researchers participating in this joint PRP research project were able to engage in a systematic practitioner-research study and to see their research through to successful completion. It is also encouraging to note how the researchers are

prepared to admit that the findings of their research are inconclusive and that while their study found that students' perceptions of the quality and detail of the feedback they received using digital media, students had improved their engagement with the feedback they received had not changed. It also demonstrates the willingness of these practitioner-researchers to keep an open mind and how they are prepared to investigate the issue of low student engagement with feedback in greater depth through further research. This case study also provides evidence of an increase in the confidence of these practitioners in terms of their ability and to take themselves seriously as researchers as well as their commitment to uphold rigour and high standards of educational research. Practitioner-researchers' reports of the immediate and wider impact of the research reveal how these researchers have developed the confidence to share their experiences of engaging in research and their research findings with a wider community of practitioners and researchers and how their work is influencing whole organization policy. It is also interesting to note that both of these researchers have progressed to study at MPhil year 1 level.

3.2. Case Study 2: Researcher O

MA short course practitioner-researcher O is engaged in an investigation into the extent to which the quality and cycle of feedback can contribute to the development of students' thinking skills and the influence of this upon student achievement.

3.2.1. Background to the Research

Assessment feedback plays an important role in improving learner performance. However, the mental processes required in using feedback effectively, involve learners in planning, monitoring and evaluating their own performance in relation to feedback they have been given. A key problem is that tutors know that their feedback is often either misinterpreted, or not used very effectively, or worse still not used at all by the learner. This results in the costly and considerable time tutors spend marking student work in order to provide students with formative feedback, being wasted and serving little or no educational purpose.

3.2.2. Aim of the Research

The aim of this research is to take a new approach to the provision of assessment feedback. This involves ensuring that the learner engages with the three key metacognitive activities; planning, monitoring and evaluating their own progress in order to make improvements to their written work and to raise their levels of achievement. This includes inviting students to focus mainly on written feedback on formative assessments on student scripts and examining the extent to which removing grades from these scripts and replacing them with high-quality constructive feedback impacts on the student's level of engagement with the feedback offered. Results reveal that although tutors found the metacognitive strategies used in the research helpful, the formative feedback provided by tutors was often more of a reflection of the quantity rather than the quality of work submitted and feedback comments offered by tutors were often still too vague. In addition, there was found to be an over reliance on written methods of formative assessment and that students remained reluctant to engage with feedback in written format. Staff involved in the study report that they found the provision of written formative feedback very time-consuming, ultimately disappointing and quite demoralizing when it was evident that students were clearly not engaging with the feedback provided by their teachers.

3.2.3. Immediate Impact

In terms of immediate impact, the practitioner-researcher leading this study presented findings in the form of a research abstract and poster at a national conference to an audience of 19 colleagues from a range of FE organizations based throughout the UK, with the aim of raising awareness of the progress of the research so far and the impact it is having on both learners and whole-organization policy. The

next day at a Sixth Form Research Meet, a CPD event attended by approximately 50 delegates, this research was shared in a workshop which was attended by 14 colleagues from a variety of FE settings. Attendees left with copies of the in-class formative interventions used in the study and there was a great deal of rich discussion around how these interventions could be implemented into their practice. One attendee who is Head of Mathematics in another FE college subsequently contacted the PRP researcher to say that he could definitely see the value of one of the interventions which he now intends to pilot in his mathematics classes.

Later that month project findings were presented to colleagues within the college group over a three-day staff development event which included senior and middle management colleagues. The immediate impact has been the sharing of different types of feedback using different media including the use of in-class formative feedback interventions together with discussion of how these interventions could be adapted to improve learner outcomes across curriculum areas. This is currently being explored further.

3.2.4. Wider Impact

In addition, the results of the study were presented at the college's annual teaching conference in August 2019 in the form of two workshops attended by colleagues from the three campuses (42 attendees). This has led to this practitioner-researcher working collaboratively with other practitioners across the institution to develop the college's assessment and feedback strategy. Further evidence of impact can be found in a colleague having been inspired to take on her own research project and apply for the PRP as a result of involvement in the original project. Moreover, in August 2019 the results of the project were shared with the curriculum manager for Sport and Public Services for the same college group where the feasibility of the interventions investigated in this PRP project were explored in relation to them being implemented on Business and Technology Education Council (BTEC) courses with a view to improving student retention and achievement. Further discussions have taken place in September 2019 so that an action plan for the improvement of formative assessment can be introduced and implemented in the above contexts. A colleague of the same practitioner-researcher has also expressed an interest in conducting his own PRP supported research.

3.2.5. Analysis

Data from this case study demonstrates how this PRP researcher turned to research from the field of educational psychology to investigate how learners could be encouraged to engage with the feedback provided by their tutors regarding their written assignments. Again, it is encouraging to note how this practitioner-researcher is prepared to recognize the limitations of the study in that while tutors found the metacognitive strategies used in the research helpful, it was also found that the formative feedback provided by tutors was often more of a reflection of the quantity rather than the quality of work submitted. The study also found that the feedback comments offered by tutors were often still too vague and based upon an over-reliance on written methods of feedback, paradoxically the very format with which students were most reluctant to engage. The study also highlights the dilemma that although staff were aware that students were not engaging with the feedback which was so proving so time consuming for them to produce, they continued to provide it. The study also shows how this practitioner-researcher (who has also now progressed to MPhil year 1) continues to pursue research in the field of formative assessment. Impact data from the study also illustrate how this research is influencing whole organization policy and how this teacher is now confidently sharing her experiences of research and her findings at research conferences, seminars and workshops.

3.3. Case Study 3: Researcher K

MPhil year 1 practitioner-researcher K is conducting research regarding the impact of coaching programmes on teachers' professional development.

3.3.1. Background to the Research

The widespread use of the term “coaching” has led both to a greater interest in “coaching in post-compulsory education” alongside conceptual uncertainty about its intended purpose. Prerequisites of the model for successful educational coaching currently being used in this PRP practitioner’s Further Education (FE) college include, empowerment, liberation, trust, collaboration and shared goals. However, little is known about the wider use of coaching models in the FE sector.

3.3.2. Aim of The Research

This study is concerned with evaluating the impact of a coaching model where “coaching” is seen as a key tool for developing teachers’ professional learning and supporting cultural change at strategic and operational levels. The underlying concern of this study centres around the timing of coaching programmes at a point when staff morale is low, and funding in FE has been substantially cut to what could be argued to be unsustainable levels. The sector continues to face unprecedented levels of mediated state intervention and a continuous stream of policy initiatives. The study indicates the FE sector is caught in a culture of performativity in which fear has replaced trust. Data from the study suggests that educational workplaces are no longer environments in which teachers can grow and flourish; instead, it is argued that we have a workforce of fearful and wary teachers. A key question at the centre of this research is upon how effective the move to coaching really is in developing teachers’ professional learning in the current context of the FE sector. The study takes a systematic approach to evaluate the effectiveness of the coaching model currently in use, through accounts of experience of “coaching” at practitioner and management level. Using a qualitative methodology combined with predominantly phenomenological methods, data sets are collected from 12 purposively sampled teachers and managers through one-to-one semi-structured interviews. A further aim of the project is to establish what impact, if any, coaching is having on developing collaborative professionalism at the FE college which forms the site of this research.

Early findings suggest that the managers of the FE college in question have recognized that asking managers to “coach” staff rather than helping them to fix problems in practice, is unexpectedly problematic for many, due in some cases, to the complexity of their roles and their levels of expertise. The practitioner-researcher conducting this study is part of this coaching model and recognizes that in this sense he is part of the problem.

He is conducting this research therefore in an attempt to search for a way to improve the college’s approach to coaching. This research takes a detailed and systematic approach to evaluating the effectiveness of the coaching model employed in the college through direct accounts of experience of “coaching” at practitioner and management level. In particular, the study aims to explore the relationship between coaching and the development of professional learning as well as the extent to which models of coaching can lead to cultural change and better outcomes for learners.

3.3.3. Immediate Impact

Examples of the immediate impact of this research study include, this practitioner-researcher being invited to present a guest speaker keynote contribution to a Research in FE event to an Education and Training Group at his college (group size: 16). He was also asked to deliver an invited guest speaker talk at another professional development event for Level 4, 5 and 6 teachers at his college (group size: 35). In addition, he presented the findings of the research to the college’s weekly Quality Improvement Team Meeting (team size 7–12 colleagues). He posted a Tweet online promoting the outcomes of this research which reached an audience of 3,819 on Twitter. Furthermore, he was invited to meet his college CEO and Head of A-Levels (two colleagues) to discuss the findings of his research and their implications for college-wide policy. He presented the results of this research at a workshop at the ETF National Research Conference in London on the 1st July 2019, followed the next day by a

further workshop discussing his research and its relationship with Quality Improvement strategies at the national Conference at Birmingham University in July 2019.

3.3.4. Wider Impact

This PRP practitioner was also invited to work internationally in the Caribbean to deliver teacher training to a group of 40 teachers and managers from 16–30 June 2019. This also gave him the opportunity to share his PRP research and its findings to date. More recently, he has been recognized as one of the top 100 FE Educators to follow on Twitter. He now has 574 followers who are aware of his current MPhil research.

3.3.5. Analysis

Data from this case study highlights how this practitioner researcher now has the courage and confidence to challenge taken-for-granted assumptions regarding organizational policy in relation to approaches to coaching as part of the college's CPD strategy. The impact of this practitioner-researcher's work is also striking in its national and international reach. It is again notable how he is clearly confident in sharing his research experiences and findings with a wider community of national and international practitioners and researchers.

3.4. Case Study 4: Researcher G

MPhil year 2 Practitioner-Researcher G presents an Account of an Exploration into the Possibilities, Problems and Practicalities of Effectively Sharing "Good Practice" in Education Contexts Via the Internet.

3.4.1. Background to the Research

The study investigates the extent to which sharing good practice via the internet might operate to save time and bring about real and sustainable improvement in educational practice.

3.4.2. Aim of the Research

This study aims to identify the reasons why widely taken-for-granted approaches to the improvement of educational practice via the internet are failing as well as exploring if/how alternatives to traditional "top down" and "outside in" approaches to teachers' CPD might be capable of addressing some of these issues. In doing so, this study attempts to bring into view the impact of different approaches to CPD upon educational practice. In more general terms, the aim of the study is to explore the nature of practice, the process through which a practice actually develops and what makes a practice "good" in educational contexts. Findings from the study suggest that time is a significant resource that teachers repeatedly identify as being in short supply. With the ever-increasing demands on the teachers' workload, the time and opportunity to engage in meaningful CPD can be seen by many as unrealistic.

The study highlights that doing a good job takes time and how doing our own work well, can enable us to "imagine larger categories of good" [11]. Data from the study suggests that the reality of the current economic climate in the UK often works against the concept of long-term job tenure and time spent on continuing professional development (CPD) for many staff, including those employed in Further Education (FE). The pressure and pace to find a quick solution to the problems generated by a rapid succession of policy imperatives can come at the cost of reflection and the reduction of the refinement of skills. In these situations, spaces in which teachers in the sector can engage in careful observation, repetition, modification of educational processes and decisions reviewed in the light of evidence can be lost. More specifically, this research study aims to evaluate the impact of the "Teacher's Takeaway", a video-based social media platform, in creating opportunities to capture and share "good" practice. It explores the extent to which this social media platform can encourage collaboration in situations where the teacher can show problem-finding and problem-solving in action in educational

contexts including the journey and the distance travelled by teachers in relation to their professional learning and the development of their practice. The comparisons and contradictions of the methods and data underpinning this research are also discussed in the study from a combination of quantitative and qualitative perspectives [14]. The quantitative data sets in the study are included to support critical analysis with a strong focus on the value of qualitative data. Quantitative findings are showing varied levels of engagement of the social media platform which was launched in September 2017. Google analytics show over 3,900 visitors to the site with a bounce rate (the percentage of visitors only viewing one page) of 31%. The site has 2% of visitors sign up to be able to comment and engage with the social forum. Interviews are conducted in a semi-structured way to provide opportunities to probe and expand upon the interviewees' responses. Emerging themes in the data highlight a trend for users to interact with resources that feature colleagues with whom they have previously developed rapport. Suggestions are offered to improve the platform's functionality. Insights are also provided regarding barriers restricting individuals to engage as creators of content for the site.

3.4.3. Immediate Impact

This study involves a direct research population of 10 teachers who are employing narrative inquiry and semi-structured interviews to capture their experiences of engaging in the research. An integral part of the college's induction process is that all new teachers are introduced to the social media platform website in order to raise awareness of and increase commitment to a culture of collaborative working and sharing good practice across the college. The Teacher's Takeaway website now hosts 37 videos created and published by the college's teaching and support staff. Regarding site subscriptions and interactions, 147 contacts have been made via the social media forum accounts created on the site. As a result of the project, reinvestment approval for this research has been secured from the college's senior leadership team to sponsor the site for a further two years. This research has also supported the work of the college's Quality Office in achieving key objectives structured around increasing the number of videos produced to support the sharing of good practice. This research study includes a team of one learning manager, seven teaching and learning coaches, each working with allocated departments across three campuses and two digital creation designers to support the resource development. In addition, the college's cohort of year 1 Teacher Training students (23 in total from a range of teaching backgrounds including NHS and Hampshire constabulary) are introduced to the research and are offered opportunities to create videos and other materials for sharing on the platform. Year 1 Student teachers are also able to share the final problem-based enquiry project on their course via the website.

3.4.4. Wider Impact

As a result of engaging in this research this practitioner-researcher has been appointed as Southern University Network coordinator as part of the Office for Students National Collaborative Outreach programme. The practitioner-researcher leading this study has submitted a proposal to the National Crime Agency in England to deliver a CPD training session for 60 staff from the college's Communications Team supported by research from the project. He has also been appointed as a part-time Associate Lecturer by his local university where he is teaching year 2 of their Certificate/Post Graduate Certificate in Education (PGCE). Following research presentations <https://teraweb.org/conference/technical-committee/> made to the Teaching & Education Research Association (TERA) conferences in Barcelona 2018 and in Dubai 2019 TERA with approximately 25 delegates at each international presentation, he was invited to become a full member of TERA. In addition, he has presented the findings of his research at the college's Staff Development Day (200 staff). He has also presented at the ETF Annual Research Conferences in London in 2018 with 25 participants in a break-out session and at the ETF 2019 Conference with 25 participants attending a workshop. His research presentation at a conference in June 2018 attracted approximately 25 participants. This research has also resulted in published work by Palgrave Macmillan (in Gregson and Spedding, 2020).

The number of first-time users of the social media platform currently in January 2020 stands at 2523 with 19,291-page views. This research study has been promoted on the Times Educational Supplement (TES) website and was a contributing factor to the college's FE college of the year 2018 award.

- <https://www.tes.com/news/further-education/breaking-news/fe-college-year-tes-fe-awards-fareham-college>

The practitioner researcher attributes an improved culture of educational research to his engagement in the PRP at the college. This has led to five other members of the staff having joined the ETF Customized MA/MPhil programme as a direct result of the positive experiences shared with them and support offered in the completion of their applications. In addition, three further projects led by PRP practitioner-researchers from the college have attracted funding from the ETF Outstanding Teaching and Learning (OTLA) programme. When combined with the PRP, these projects have contributed to an increased capacity for research and extended engagement in research across the college. The practitioner-researcher leading this project also reports that his presentation of the findings of this study have recently led to invitations for potential respective international research collaborations with the University of Valencia and a university in Florida.

3.4.5. Analysis

This case study of an MPhil year 2 practitioner-researcher illustrates how his work is influencing whole organization policy in relation to the sharing of good practice. It addition, also shows how his original engagement in the PRP is now encouraging more of his colleagues to engage in the programme and is changing attitudes toward research and contributing to the development of a nascent and strengthening research culture across the institution. Immediate and wider impact evidence from this case also illustrates the national and international impact of this PRP project. It also provides evidence of how the PRP supports practitioners in conducting systematic and rigorous research at the highest level and how PRP participants go on to lead collaborative research projects with their colleagues as well as engaging in international research collaborations.

3.5. Case Study 5: Researcher M

MPhil year 2 Practitioner-Researcher M explores Vocational Teachers' Experiences Implementing Technology-Supported Approaches to Learning in the Development of Learners' Literacy in a College of Further Education (fe) in England.

3.5.1. Background to the Research

A key purpose of the research is to directly expose staff to technology-supported learning experiments which they then might try with their students. The supported experiments which form the main focus of the study, collect and analyze data regarding how students react to the above activities. The research population includes three groups of learners, all of whom need to retake General Certificate in Secondary Education (GCSE) English examinations alongside their chosen vocational study programme. Each group has been selected based on their current (self-assessed) level of adoption of technology-enhanced learning. "Group A" comprises 26 learners, self-assessed as "low-level" adopters; "Group B" comprises 24 "average" level adopters; and "Group C" comprises 22 "high-level" adopters. In addition, the project involves four teachers; two instructor-demonstrators; two GCSE English consultants and two members of the senior management team.

3.5.2. Aim of the Research

The research aims to engage vocational teachers and trainers in the design and delivery of alternative CPD activities, with a focus on improving learners' literacy through technology-supported learning. This mixed-method collaborative research study includes: qualitative data analysis;

consultation with subject “experts”; quantitative data collection and analysis; observational studies of participants; and evaluative case studies of individuals. Data sets are being collected across all three groups of students as well as from all of the members of college staff participating in the study.

3.5.3. Immediate Impact

A dedicated website has been created as a means of recording the project’s process and outcomes. The project’s first supported experiment involved “reimagining” the college’s current CPD practice. Consequently, CPD activities were redesigned to include the delivery of nine, two-hour sessions. These resulted in the creation of over 960 hours of online video discussion and debate being uploaded to the project’s website which subsequently received over 2,000 views. The project has been extended to include Teaching and Learning Mentors (TLMs) from four local colleges who are all now actively participating in the design and delivery of the supported experiments which constitute the study. A CPD event at the originating college in April 2018 shared emerging themes from some of the early technology supported learning experiments in relation to how these learning approaches appeared to be impacting upon students’ literacy development. All four TLMs involved in the study, together with the lead practitioner-researcher presented the findings from the first experiment to peers at the annual ETF-SUNCETT Annual Research Conference in London in July 2018. Later that month, the practitioner-researcher leading the original project presented a paper on “Research Methods and Methodologies” at the college’s institution-wide conference for all of its teaching staff engaged in the delivery of higher education (HE) programmes. Results to date are predominantly to be found in the influence of the research upon the college’s approach to CPD. While it is too early to determine the impact upon of technology-supported learning upon learners’ literacy through technology, early indications are encouraging although not yet corroborated by sufficiently robust evidence.

An important and immediate positive outcome from this project is that it has brought about a change in an institution-wide CPD policy which increased investment in future practitioner-research projects at the college in which the research originated, embedding practitioner research in expectations of “scholarly activity” for all of the college’s HE staff.

3.5.4. Wider Impact

Data sets from this study show how this research influenced the attitudes of the college’s senior managers’ in relation to the contents of job descriptions for future teaching and training roles. The findings of the project are shared regularly with senior managers and governors of the college at their request. Though currently “private”, the website is accessible to the college’s Higher Education staff, who are using the uploaded materials and processes to develop their understanding of peer review.

3.5.5. Analysis

This practitioner-researcher had progressed through each pathway of the PRP and has now progressed to study at PhD level. This case study demonstrates how the PRP is influencing assessment theory and practice in the field of GCSE English and creative writing. It provides further evidence of how the PRP supports practitioners in conducting systematic and rigorous research at the highest level and how PRP participants go on to lead collaborative research projects with their colleagues in their own institutions. This PRP researcher has since gone on to co-author peer-reviewed published works with his SUNCETT Mentor, a member of the university team.

4. Discussion

A number of important and recurring themes emerge from analysis of the small sample of illustrative cases presented above. These are summarized in brief below. Similar emerging themes are also evident in the impact grids and other research outputs produced by the wider PRP research population.

Common patterns across these diverse case studies can be clustered around a number of factors framing this ground up and inside out approach to educational evaluation and achievement. These may be grouped as follows.

4.1. Engagement with Research and Scholarship

All of PRP practitioner-researchers in the sample are critically engaged with peer-reviewed, published research. All of the PRP practitioner-researchers in the sample have presented their research at a national research conference. All of the PRP practitioner-researchers in the sample have had work successfully peer-reviewed/published/presented at national/international research conferences. Some practitioner-researchers have contributed to other peer-reviewed publications as co-authors in books and peer-reviewed journals with members of the SUNCETT team. One practitioner-researcher has been awarded a PhD on the basis of her PRP research, five others are now close to thesis submission, one PRP has already been awarded an MPhil with seven others close to MPhil submission.

4.2. Collapsing the Theory–Practice Divide

All of the PRP practitioner-researchers in the sample are testing out the findings of their research studies in the arena and contexts of their own practice in systematic, careful and measured ways. They are also using the findings of their research to support/challenge theory where appropriate. In addition, they are using the findings of their research to improve educational practice in the context of their own organization and in other organizations.

4.3. Developing International Collaborations

Some practitioner-researchers in the sample are using their experiences as a springboard into working in international collaborations with educational researchers in other countries including, Spain, USA, the Caribbean and the Middle East.

4.4. Impact upon Practice

Variations in case study data point to how practitioners exploring the same problem in educational practice can turn to different bodies of literature. For example, Cases 3.1 and 3.2 illustrate how two studies regarding problems with student engagement formative assessment can draw upon different bodies of literature for good reason. Evidence of impact from Case Studies 3.3 to 3.5 shows how the different PRP practitioners can impact upon their institution at individual, departmental and whole organization levels.

The evidence of impact from this small sample of research outputs from the PRP, lends support to the claim that the PRP model of educational evaluation and improvement from the ground up and from the inside out, possesses the potential to, not only increase research capacity across the vocational education sector, but also improve teachers' experiences of CPD. Data sets from the study show how this model can increase the impact of research upon practice at the level of the individual teacher, specialist departments, whole organization and in some cases at a number of levels in the form of regional, national international collaborations. The same evidence shows how practitioner-researchers supported by the PRP model of educational evaluation and improvement are able to produce high-quality research outcomes which, have credence in and are valued by the wider research community in the form of peer-reviewed research conference presentations and publications.

5. Conclusions

It is hoped that the model of educational evaluation and improvement underpinning the PRP, together with the evidence provided in this article, will be of interest and use to politicians, policy professionals, education leaders and teachers interested in educational evaluation and improvement in systems of vocational education in other countries and in other sectors of education. This article

extends an invitation to them and to others with responsibility for educational improvement to engage with this research to consider potential applications of this approach in other national systems of vocational education.

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