Peer coaching and mentoring to improve teaching and learning

action research

How can practitioners work with practice-based research to develop skills further and learn new ones? **Warren Kidd** reports on an action research project at a sixth form college in east London.

Introduction

The 2004-07 action research project at Newham Sixth Form College (known as 'NewVIc') in Plaistow, east London, explored the ways in which mutual planning, observation and reflective dialogue can enable practitioners to innovate and to develop new creative routines and strategies to increase the success of teaching and learning.

'Action research' is a general term used to describe practice-based inquiry, usually of a very practical nature. It seeks to investigate practice in order to change, improve or better understand. It is often reflective in nature and asks 'what works?', 'why does it work?' and 'how do we know it works?'

A research-team of five practitioner-researchers was set up in order to support a wider group of colleagues on a voluntary basis in experimenting with new ideas. Practitioners and the internal research team worked together with the aim of enabling dialogue across faculty boundaries. The practitioners were drawn from various specialisms, but the focus was on generic, transferable skills and knowledge. A key principle of the support on offer was the transferable nature of good

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practice. Practitioner-researchers worked with 51 participants in year one, and 45 participants in year two.

The project was awarded a '*highly commended*' Beacon Award at the AoC Conference in 2007.

What we did

The role of the research team was to:

- help produce resources and learning materials to be used by colleagues in the classroom
- observe colleagues' classroom practice and to help engage colleagues in a critical dialogue
- encourage reflection before, during and after practice, with a view to trying something new and being supported in risk-taking
- encourage colleagues to 'try something new' and to 'make something new' in terms of resources.

At first, all potential participants were invited into an individual one-to-one meeting in order that the aims of the project were explained. Prior to this, at the end of the previous academic year, we spent time speaking to teams and groups of colleagues and mangers in turn, advertising and explaining the project and its nature. We also sent project proposals and a 'support

contract' to the whole college community so they could see the openness of the initiative from the very start.

It was good to establish a working relationship quickly, productively and to be able to reassure colleagues about the more sensitive and confidential aspects of the support on offer... We do not spend enough time as professionals talking about teaching.
Researcher journal entry

Nonetheless, it took time to make people feel comfortable with the initiative in order to build the essential trust needed between practitioner and the research team. Confidentiality was guaranteed. Each participant set their own focus, which was negotiated over time. Different participants opted for very different patterns of support to meet their needs. For some, support was regular and spaced all through the year. For others, support was focused on a particular period in the college calendar linked to their individual curriculum planning. It was essential for this project to work that we moved away from a model of standard lesson observation and moved towards a model based upon mutual reflection.

Planning the time

The project demanded a commitment to time spent with peers. Table 1 shows the time invested in the project by the end of the two-year period.

Table 1 Time invested for this project over two years

Activity	Time invested
In classroom with peer	Over 200 hours
Individual classroom sessions visited	180 sessions
Peer planning and resource development	Over 350 hours
Meetings/feedback sessions with participants	230 sessions

Separating the project from other college processes

The aim of the development was to increase variety and to do so through the dialogue and mutual planning of colleagues – the project was separate from the formal quality processes within the college.

While formal quality processes were located within teams, the project's 'rules' were such that coaching and mentoring of colleagues by the team could only take place from outside the immediate team/subject area/faculty area. This ensured that colleagues who would not normally work together did so.

Formal quality procedures graded lesson observations for appraisal, making this grade and a summary of the observation available to direct line managers. Our project at no point graded lessons – observations were used as a mechanism to aid reflection and discussion. The outcomes of observations in the lesson were confidential, although we encouraged participants to share with their colleagues what they were trying to do. It was important, however, that they owned this flow of information and dissemination.

Regarding debriefings following observations, I recognise that it can be difficult to accept comments from an outsider about the lessons that you have prepared and presented. My aim was to reach a common understanding with the observed teacher so that we both recognised the issues from a similar perspective.
Researcher journal entry

While 'observing', over time and with the agreement of those being supported, the roles between 'observer' and 'observed' blurred into a more team-teaching and shared approach. This is very different from

the rigid construction of these separate roles in quality observations.

Box 1 shows a case-study example of the individual development taking place through the collaboration and professional dialogue fostered by the project.

Reflective practice

All through the process, researchers and participants alike were encouraged to make reflective statements about their participation, documenting their fears, anxieties, excitements and risk-taking.

By the end of the project, most of the participants reported that they felt the experience and their involvement had led them to develop their teaching. Participants frequently linked their development to the increase in peer dialogue and in engagement with the reflective practices the project advocated. For example, one said:

> *'The project has certainly caused me to introduce more variety into my teaching and having someone with whom to discuss my efforts and encourage me to keep trying when things don't work out so well has been invaluable'*

participant statement

Box 1 Case study

This colleague developed new resources aimed at 'revision games' – using card matching and sorting ideas already in use in another team, and adapting and applying them to their own subject specialism. They were also able to 'offer' to other colleagues ideas for physical warm-ups to engage and motivate learners at the start of lessons.

The project has been very useful in moving my own practice of student centred learning forward and in trying new avenues of exploration in my teaching. One of the best aspects of the project has been trying new ideas and having another objective voice in the room to help me reflect upon the efficacy of the techniques used at the time. In terms of individual lessons I found the 'card game' technique (used for differentiation, in addition to student centred learning) for the drama module for AS particularly illuminating and the project helped me to decide how I would like to revise and enhance this teaching technique when I apply it again next year. Obviously meeting with another teaching professional from a different academic discipline has been a good way to reflect, share ideas and different approaches to teaching AS, and most importantly to take my teaching practice forward. Overall I feel the project has been a major success and I have enjoyed it.

I have found the process valuable in discussing new teaching and learning with someone who knows the students and their ability. I have found it beneficial to have someone to help me develop resources that engage and stimulate the students. The strategies have helped the students to look at the bigger picture and link the relevance of one lesson to another. I have found the programme useful in terms of peer review and support. I would definitely get involved again and recommend it to others.

Participant statement

case study

Colleagues spoke about having really enjoyed opportunities to share with others. It has been refreshing for many to feel supported and to be able to discuss their teaching openly. Many colleagues, over time, opened up their classrooms not just to the research team but to others, swapping ideas and approaches.

One of the best aspects of the project has been trying new ideas and having another objective voice in the room to help me reflect.
Participant statement

The flexibility of the support was really valuable as during the course of the support the issues that needed to be addressed changed and we were able to address issues such as motivation. It made a difference to students…
Participant statement

The clear aim of the project was to enable and empower participants to feel supported in experimentation. This was achieved, and another outcome was the value for the research team members themselves in sharing ideas on teaching and learning.

Helping other teachers to develop…has enabled me to reflect on my own performance…I am now more analytical and can identify why I succeed in specific areas.
Researcher journal entry

I have experienced a shift in the dialogue that I am having with the participants of the project; increasingly they are developing new ideas and strategies for themselves…this is really exciting and I have decided to try some of these out myself.
Researcher journal entry

Measurement

The members of the project team logged weekly timesheets documenting which colleagues they were working with and how often. Having said this, it was openly acknowledged that many colleagues wanted 'lighter' or 'heavier' touches than others and

'hours-involved' was not itself necessarily a measurement of the quality of the support and the resulting development in classroom practice. It was, however, an essential process for our own data management and coordination of the project.

We captured the voice of the participants receiving the support in two main ways:

1. through regular informal reflective writing illustrating what changes the participants felt were taking place in their own teaching

2. through a once-yearly 'teaching and learning fair' where participants ran 'market stalls' and displayed what they had generated through the project (the fair was held at the end of both years of the project).

In terms of quantitative measurements, we felt that we did not wish to crassly and simply try and identify causal relationships between student grades and the support of the project, feeling that the effects of the work would be longer-term. Having said this, many colleagues themselves did testify within formal quality self assessment reports that they felt the support they received had raised results. Equally, many participants obtained higher grade profiles in quality appraisal observations. We asked colleagues themselves to tell us what they felt were the measurable benefits and outcomes rather than trying to make assumptions.

Results and dissemination

Practitioners learned and further developed new skills to enable them to help other colleagues to work on aspects of teaching and learning. We also found that communication across faculty boundaries had improved as a result of working together on the project.

In order to make the process of support more open – more of a celebration, once confidence levels amongst the participants were high – a 'teaching and learning' fair

was set-up. Participants set up and ran market-stalls showcasing the new ideas and approaches they had been working on, to share with the wider college community and interested invited outsiders.

Of the 96 participants (51 in year one and 45 in year two), the majority said that the project had benefited their work and their students' learning. Many colleagues not involved as direct participants, nonetheless reported favourably that the 'teaching and learning fair' event was the most interesting dissemination and training activity they had received. The benefits described included:

- understanding risks and when to take them

- sharing ideas with colleagues and researchers

- making a deliberate effort to reflect on practice

- seeing the value of cross-subject transferable teaching ideas

- demonstrating to learners that teachers are learners too

- discussion with colleagues as part of reflective practice.

The researchers felt that they had learned a lot, too, as they left with new ideas for their own teaching and respected the realities of taking risks in the classroom,

I really do respect the realities of taking risks in the classroom. I do not underestimate the amount of courage and commitment required when teachers are taking a risk and trying something new in their classroom.
Researcher journal entry

On the most successful occasions I have met with colleagues and we have planned lessons and materials together. We have both made resources and contributed ideas and finally I have seen the outcome of this collaborative work in others' classroom practice. In this way, lesson 'observations' become less about observing as such, and more about reflecting and evaluating while practice takes place.
Researcher journal entry

Conclusion and implications

The project had a positive impact on

- increasing peer observation across the college as a whole

- creating the opportunity for an extra level or layer of collegiate support

- increasing peer dialogue and communication across the faculty structures.

A number of implications and benefits have arisen from this action research work.

- The project has allowed the cross college exploration of the commonalities of the teaching role.

- It allowed some staff to demonstrate an expertise in aspects of classroom practice and to be rewarded through recognition amongst their peers.

- It encouraged staff to take risks in the classroom – to try something new. It challenged conservatism on the one hand, while reminding us of pragmatic, simple strategies that work on the other.

- Working with a research team member inside the classroom allowed students to see staff exploring ideas together, trying new ideas and seeking to improve their own practice.

- The project reminded some colleagues of the value of reflective practice and increased the level of reflexive and
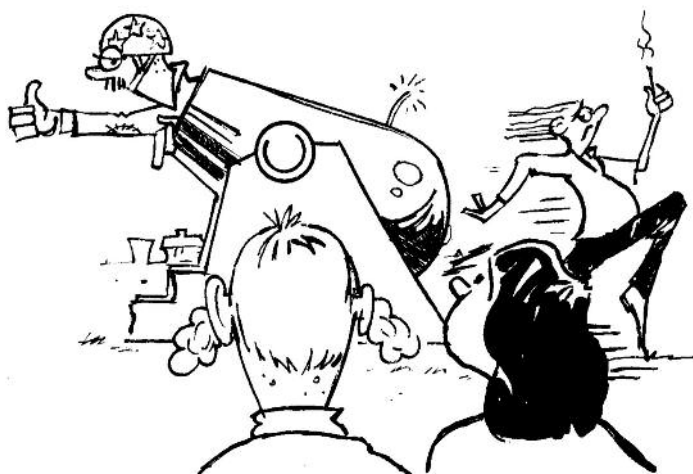
It encouraged staff to take risks in the classroom

professional discourse between colleges from often very different academic and teaching backgrounds.

- The project became a melting pot for new ideas (and the continued reminder of the importance of some basics); resulting in regular formal and informal staff training opportunities provided by the research team throughout the research's duration.

- The project has allowed the college to increase its support given to new staff and to both BTs and NQTs.

There are a number of issues to be considered before starting this kind of project.

1. How the research team would be staffed and what each practitioner-researcher would need in terms of their own support.

2. How best to match researchers with participants to ensure effective support and best working relationships.

3. How to document the work and capture data.

4. How to best communicate the aims of the project to potential participants and how to promise and maintain sensitivity and confidentiality.

5. How to measure the success and impact of the project.

6. How the professional learning undertaken by participants can be showcased and disseminated to wider audiences at the end of the project.

Weblinks

A very useful and simple guide to setting up your own action research project. www.edu.plymouth.ac.uk/resined/action research/arhome.htm

A useful description of action research with some excellent examples. www.infed.org/research/b-actres.htm

About the author

Warren Kidd is Senior Lecturer in Post-Compulsory Education and Training (PCET) at the Cass School of Education, University of East London (UEL). For the duration of the action research project that this article discusses he was the Teaching and Learning Development Manager of Newham Sixth Form College, running the action research alongside a team of five other colleagues. Warren would be very interested to discuss this project or work with new partners in setting up action research projects of their own. Colleagues interested in hearing more about the project and exploring ideas for mutual work could also contact the Assistant Principal at Newham Sixth Form College.

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