

Network Meeting 1: How can academic research into adult learning inform and learn from international development agencies working in this field?

*University of East Anglia, Norwich
23rd October 2015
10:30 - 16:00*

Morning Sessions



The event started with welcome remarks and introduction by Prof. Alan Rogers from the University of East Anglia followed by three presentations. The first presentation made by Prof. Anna Robinson-Pant from the University of East Anglia, provided an academic researcher perspective. She set out to map the different directions of research in women literacy and also to highlight some of the challenges for academic researchers aiming to bridge the gap in women's literacy and development. The presenter has underlined the necessity



to move literacy research from its traditional direction of providing statistical evidence on the relation between literacy and development to more qualitative research approaches, including ethnographic and participatory methods that problematize concepts in women's literacy such as drop-out, give voice to women participants and analyse

gendered perspectives. Arguments provided by the presenter include criticisms made about the dominant direction which tends to take correlation as causation and consequently set limitation for researchers to produce knowledge about the process of literacy learning and outcomes. Anna's presentation has also underlined the need to embrace new research methods for the provision of in-depth data in order to move away from perspectives framed by policy. Her conclusion outlined particular areas of challenge for academic researchers: the growing gap between research and policy discourses around adult literacy (with the increasingly instrumentalist policy approach to promoting adult learning as related only to jobs); difficulties around communicating and using ethnographic research data in policy contexts; and the need to move away from 'women's literacy' (situating women as the problem) to a gendered perspective on literacy practices and programme structures.

The second presentation by Dr. Katy Newell-Jones from the British Association for Literacy in Development (BALID) focused on NGOs' perspectives. Based on her experiences and interactions with NGOs, the



presenter highlighted the extent NGOs are aware of the existence of research but also sceptical about it. One of the major issues she underlined is that of credibility where NGOs tend to see and prefer research in its technical form as highlighted in the first presentation. Yet, there are certain groups of NGOs who seem to be more open to ideological and ethnographic type of research. In terms of access to research, Katy has raised issues of perception (on the usefulness of research), time (devoting time to research is not a priority), fund, research skills and language. Beyond these, there is also the need for active involvement in research to have a cost-benefit impact for NGOs.



Another focus of Katy's presentation was on how literacy research is actually being used by NGOs. As she asserted, research is generally used by NGOs to provide evidence of need, to justify selection of approach, to quote impact in other contexts and to inform evaluation methodology. Donor requirements have a major impact on the type and nature of reports and publications produced by NGOs. Currently women's literacy has a low priority with donors and so it is not less prominent in the intended outcomes of projects. Evaluation funds are closely linked to the outlines and reporting tends to be highly controlled, often in specific boxes with word count limits which do not lend themselves to more discursive narrative. Consequently,

academics have limited access to the reports of NGOs and it therefore has only a limited impact. In order to improve this situation, the presenter has highlighted two key initiatives through which NGOs and academic researchers can inform each other. This includes funding Master's research projects in literacy and providing program officers with research training.

In the third presentation, Dr. Carew Treffgarne (UCL Institute of Education) gave a Development Agency perspective, based on her past experience at DFID. She cited four exciting



Research Papers on literacy practice funded by DFID in 1994, 1996, 1999 and 2003, and questioned why they had not had a more significant impact on UK policy? One reason could have been the political focus on UPE in the MDG framework, which led to Ministerial preference for Primary Education, rather than embracing the wider concept of Basic Education. However, adult literacy enjoyed a brief period of political focus during the interest in DFID in the sustainable livelihoods approach during the early years of the Labour Government. As an example of the outsider/insider alliances that can influence policy, the work of Gordon Conway and Robert Chambers at IDS Sussex, alongside advocacy from ODI, Oxfam and IIED, led to the establishment of the Sustainable Livelihoods Support Office in DFID in 1999. It provided a useful tool to map how literacy practice fits into people's everyday lives and

resulted in Natural Resource Advisers and Education Advisers jointly working on the DFID Background Briefing: 'Improving livelihoods for the poor: the role of literacy' (March, 2002). Hilary Benn, the Parliamentary Under Secretary of State for International Development, 2001/2, played a key role in encouraging this inter-sectoral connection, which embraced the concepts of literacy as social practice and multiple literacies.

The reasons why this interest in literacy and livelihoods did not become mainstreamed across DFID country programmes are manifold. The Community Literacies Project in Nepal influenced DFID thinking, but several large literacy programmes, supported by DFID at that time in Nigeria, Egypt and South Africa, did not embrace the same approach. Unfortunately, with the departure of Hilary Benn to the Home Office in late 2002, and the establishment of DFID's new Policy Division in 2003, the window of opportunity suddenly disappeared.

What this example illustrates is that insider/outsider alliances can be very significant in policy leverage, but such new initiatives will not necessarily be sustainable if the policy climate changes, or if the preferred channels for delivering aid are sectoral rather than multi-sectoral. In order to promote the research/policy/practice interface, she said that it is important to find the right entry point (which may or may not be women's literacy *per se*), to identify policy champions within the Development Agency and to select the channel for delivering that aid that appears to be the most feasible.

The presentations were followed by a plenary discussion led by Dr. Clare Meade from the National Institute for Adult and Continuing Education. Some of the issues raised by the participants were



difficulties in accessing research, the difference between academic and practitioner's ethical frameworks, the parallels that could be drawn in terms of literacy and development issues between the UK and international levels, challenges in communicating research and making research activities empowering.

Afternoon key presentations

The two key presentations during the afternoon sessions were chaired by Dr. Sheila Aikman from the University of East Anglia. For



the first presentation, Dr. Vicky Duckworth from Edge Hill University, highlighted how participatory research (PR) could be utilised to challenge the academic divide by demystifying the research process and the academy. In particular, she discussed how research empowered seconded practitioners who, in carrying out research, were supported by experienced researchers. Seconded practitioners were given training on research methods while continuously engaging with academic researchers through telephone, email and face-to-face support. Thus, the project was

empowering and liberating for the participants.

Vicky, then, gave a specific example how PR was used and how participants experienced the research process. The study

explored how sixteen Basic Skills learners were shaped by schooling, college and work and by the private domain of family, home and friends. This highlighted how learners perceived their own realities and how they untangled the links within their personal histories whilst dealing with how class and gender affected their pathways onto Basic Skills programmes and their trajectories. Offering models for PR, the research offered Vicky the opportunity to work with learners by involving them in the dissemination of research findings on local, national and international levels. The research also allowed her to involve learners in community initiatives, such as publishing and setting up awards to support future learners. Lastly, Vicky emphasised that academics and practitioners need to work together to transform and empower communities.

The other key presentation was delivered by Ms. Pallawi Sinha from the University of Cambridge. She talked about her work with the Sabar community in India for a period of eleven months. Her study tried to listen to perspectives, interests, priorities and values of indigenous communities with regard to education. She explored how arts, cultural practices and skills of these communities were integrated within school curricula, developing critical tool



for learning. One of the greatest challenges Pallawi posed during the session was the attainment of a sustainable future through the emergence of a self-determined community capable of defining its own educational and research agenda and democratic participation.

By constructing, deconstructing and reconstructing theoretical and methodological frameworks, Pallawi looked into the notion of "marginalised voice" and issues surrounding insider-outsider dichotomy. Her research tried to narrow the gap between the researcher and the community through ethnomethodology and by the utilisation of participatory tools. This offered ways of locating local ethics and local voices by drawing the relationship between culture, knowledge, arts and communities. Pallawi ended her presentation

by promoting empowerment of future citizenship through the development of sustainable systems characterised by authentic listening, reflecting and co-creating educational ideals and systems and the localisation of education.



Small group sessions

Vicky and Pallawi's presentations were followed by small group sessions, facilitated by Gina Lontoc, Clare Meade and Hamissou Ousseini. The groups were asked to share their positive and negative experiences in relation to research about adult learning and literacy. Based on their sharing, they

tried to identify the challenges which face academia in using NGO work in adult learning, literacy and women's literacy in particular. They also determined possible factors behind these challenges. Lastly, the groups looked at possible solutions or ways in which academics and practitioners might work more effectively together.



Each group presented their outputs and presentations were chaired by Dr. Catherine Jere from the University of East Anglia. The groups presented the following challenges that exist in terms of academic-practitioner collaboration:

academic-practitioner collaboration:

- lack of data sharing and access
- failure to consider the audience for the research
- most initiatives are short-term
- different ethical frameworks of academics and practitioners
- the idea of literacy is problematic in different communities
- different form of collaborations are not taken into consideration
- misunderstanding of the purpose of the research
- language of exclusion contributes to challenges of addressing ethical concerns
- issues on power differentials and voices to be heard as contributors

- too much value placed on quantitative than qualitative methods
- lack of recognition of the validity of local outcomes
- issue of "trust" among gatekeepers
- academic research is abstract
- a minimal space for reflection
- a need for Higher Education Institutions that value participatory research
- the changing landscape of education
- research findings are blocked by funders



In terms of possible solutions to bridge the gap between these collaborations, the following were suggested by the groups:

- create a portal where academics and practitioners can share resources - Research and Practice in Adult Literacy (RaPAL) might be able to identify volunteers who can do this
- locate academic research in practical contexts
- provide academic training for NGOs and for academics working in communities
- overcome patronising jargons
- have an awareness of different types of research (i.e. cross-sectoral) and provide evidence in terms of

their impact on policy and practice

- stakeholders should have a shared understanding of quality of evidence
- allocate budget not only for research dissemination but also for research collaboration
- involve MA and PhD students in the work of NGOs
- provide activities for capacity-building such as online forums, qualitative/quantitative research training, ethical training, and seminar-workshops on academic-practitioner collaborations
- create a common language between researchers, policy makers and practitioners
- have a continuous dialogue between academic and practitioner communities
- need for collaboration with academic and local communities
- create networks between academics and practitioners
- publish PhD abstracts (e.g. in the journal *Compare*)



Concluding reflections

Dr. Jan Eldred from the UK Literacy Working Group and Prof.



Brian Street from King's College London, who participated via Skype, gave their concluding reflections. After pulling together the themes of each presentation, Jan

remarked that it had been a day of tensions. She phrased this metaphorically by saying that, "*A bridge doesn't exist without tension*". In relation to academic-practitioner collaborations, there is a tension in the nature of language used; there is a tension regarding perceptions academics and practitioners hold toward each other; there is a tension brought by issues on authenticity; and there is a tension around policy and practice. However, as Jan added, "*We can meet on the bridge*". She stressed that seminars and conferences, portal, and social media can be the bridge.

Brian also provided an insightful conclusion. He emphasised that in translating research into policy and practice, there is a need to challenge policy makers, governments and international agencies. This requires more examples of practice where practitioners and academics have worked together, participating in, infiltrating and sharing activities of agencies. He further reiterated that to bridge the gap between NGOs and agencies, between policy and practice, and between practice and research, we need to spell out what information is

required for funding application and for the design of the project. These practices, as suggested by Brian, have implications for approach such as putting literacy for adults on the agenda, shifting the focus of policy from women's literacy to gender and literacy and considering what counts as literacy.



The successful network meeting was ended by closing remarks from Prof. Anna Robinson-Pant who also chaired the last activity.

*Report written by:
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with contributions from the presenters
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