

Making a Difference

Collaborating with users to develop educational research

TLRP was the first large-scale systematic attempt to develop robust research on teaching and learning by building partnerships between researchers and research users. One vital way of doing this was a seminar series which brought together researchers, educational practitioners and those involved in designing and taking forward educational policy to examine the processes and implications of user engagement. The series drew on the experiences of TLRP projects to reveal the purposes and practices of involving users in funded research.

- Understandings of user engagement are still developing. → Different stakeholders hold different expectations of user engagement, and different research genres have different rationales for it.
- User engagement is more than careful dissemination and presents important new challenges for project management. → User engagement needs to be built into research designs from the outset and capacity building for project management is an important priority.
- Across the UK as a whole, research does not influence policy as much as its supporters would like. → Brokering research into policy settings is an important new specialist expertise.
- Practitioner research in the UK is strong, but its impact tends to be local. → TLRP has shown that large-scale practitioner research in funded projects can generate knowledge which can inform practice more widely.

The research

The Series of Seminars

The aim of the series was to examine how user engagement strengthens research on teaching and learning and its implications for carrying out research.

Five one-day seminars were held between March 2005 and June 2006 to examine:

- different interpretations of user engagement in different groups including policy makers, funding agencies, higher education research teams, practitioners and learners;
- different frameworks used by social scientists for ensuring user engagement;
- the implications of these frameworks for the design of educational research and for building impact into research design;
- the implications of these design options for the building of research capacity in policy and practice communities.

The series started by scoping current knowledge about user engagement within TLRP. The second seminar examined principles, purposes and approaches to user engagement in policy contexts. The third looked at practice contexts. The fourth session discussed user engagement outside educational research. The series ended by examining the implications of the thematic analyses that were being developed in the sessions and on the web site which had been set up to support these discussions.

Seminar participants included researchers from TLRP projects; senior civil servants; representatives of research funding

organisations; education practitioners; research mediators; and researchers from outside TLRP who were taking forward user engagement in their work, including AERS, the Scottish education research initiative, and the Research Utilisation Research Unit. More details and accompanying papers can be found at <http://www.tlrp.org/themes/seminar/edwards/index.html>

The Themes

The final seminar brought together the discussions under four themes.

Knowing what

It was agreed that knowledge about pedagogy is more 'socially robust' (Gibbons 1999) when it is co-constructed in research partnerships between education practitioners and university-based researchers, regardless of the approach to user engagement that is taken, than when it is produced by researchers in isolation. It was therefore expected that user engagement in the processes of research would be a powerful warrant with policy communities.

Although there were several examples where that warrant operated successfully, some UK policy communities had yet to recognise the value of the products or the 'whats' of educational research. In an internal survey within the English government, Phillip Davies (see Seminar Five summary on the website) noted that academic research was the last source of evidence considered by the English government as a policy community. Special advisers, experts, think tanks, the media and professional associations were more likely to be used.

It was also agreed that researchers need to focus more on sharing ideas and concepts, and that policy makers need to see researchers as sources of ideas. All

the TLRP projects discussed during the series were forward-looking and were offering refined practical concepts that could advance their fields. At the same time, efforts at across Programme synergy were ensuring that projects linked together to avoid producing piecemeal research.

Knowing how

Our examination of specific projects allowed us to construct three broad ways in which educational researchers engage with educational practitioners. They are

- university-led relationships where practitioners operate as field testers, consultants and so on;
- research partnerships which were managed from universities but which involve practitioners as research partners, for example in action research or design experiments
- research partnerships where both practitioners and university-based researchers are trying to understand the formation of new practices, for example in response to policy changes.

The second and third of these involve practitioners as full partners in the research process, but the first two are likely to give more weight to matters of 'what works' than is the third. To some degree, all three types of engagement involve the co-construction of knowledge. In Figure 2 we give more detail of the three approaches.

Knowing how to engage with policy communities was more difficult than working with practitioners. Discussions echoed Weiss's view of the complex relationships between educational policy and educational research that defy 'neat diagrams' (Weiss, 1979). Sandra Nutley's contributions were helpful in unpacking current complexities and pointing towards the importance of avoiding simplistic expectations of linear relationships (www.ruru.ac.uk). The concluding discussions in Seminar Five nuanced the differences between knowledge transfer, knowledge translation, knowledge brokerage and knowledge transmission, and recognised how important it was for researchers to consider how they might work with these concepts.

Knowing who

The relational aspects of user engagement emerged as a strong element in research partnerships with practitioners, and in links with policy communities. The idea of 'knowing how to know who' (after Lundvall 1996), appeared an important attribute for researchers. Discussions of 'how to know who' during the research process suggested that we should see research partnerships as networks of specialist expertise where all participants are contributing to the development of pedagogy and the ideas that underpin it. The orchestration of knowledge flows in these networks highlights the need for project management. Figure 3 outlines the resources offered by different stakeholders and indicates when in the research process they might best be engaged.

'Knowing how to know who' was also a feature of seminar discussions of how

Seminar	Title	Date/Location
1	<i>Identifying Lessons for Research Design from Experiences of User-Engagement in TLRP Projects and Scoping the Challenges for the Seminar Series</i>	2 March 2005 Institute of Education, London
2	<i>Knowledge Generation, Knowledge Management and the Links between Research and Policy</i>	24 May 2005 Institute of Education, London
3	<i>Research and Practitioners: People, Organisations and Systems</i>	10 October 2005 University of Birmingham
4	<i>What Can Education Learn about User-Engagement from the Wider Social Science Community?</i>	8 March 2006 University of Oxford
5	<i>A Review of the Learning from the Previous Seminars with a Focus on the Implications for the Development of Educational Research</i>	15 June 2006 Institute of Education, London

Figure 1: The Seminar Series

Types of research partnership	<i>University-led studies</i>	<i>Action research or design-experiment research partnerships</i>	<i>Co-construction of understandings of new practices in research partnerships</i>
Primary approaches to using research knowledge	The application of research findings	Improving education while studying it	Developing ideas and mediating them
Forms of user-engagement	Users commenting on research instruments and assisting with data collection and dissemination	Iterative research designs where ideas are tested and developed in classrooms by practitioners	Long-term partnerships aimed at generating fresh ways of explaining what is going on in existing and emerging practices

Figure 2: Three Ways of Engaging with Users in the Process of Research

educational research might inform policy, which focused on how to erode barriers and build trust between researchers and policy makers. At the same time, several notes of caution were sounded. Firstly, good relationships with policy communities were no substitute for robust research findings. Therefore attention should be given to research reviews and the strong evidence base that they might bring to research-policy conversations. Secondly, researchers could only offer ideas at best. How these might be taken up was beyond their control. Finally, it was noted that there was a growing specialist expertise in brokering research into policy by, for example as Phillippa Cordingley explained in Seminar Five, connecting educational research with current 'wicked issues' in the policy domain.

Discussions of 'knowing who' included an unpacking of who and what was meant by 'user'. Most participants preferred the term 'decision-maker' to 'user' as it captured a democratic approach to engagement with research knowledge and the potential for research-based knowledge to inform a wide range of decisions.

Knowing when

The diverging time-scales of policy, practice and research were mentioned frequently. Weaving together different timescales across research sites was a major element in project management for some studies and made considerable demands on the time of university-based team leaders. One lesson from TLRP's pioneering work on user engagement may be for funding bodies to acknowledge the time involved in project management and fund it accordingly.

The work of professional research mediators was recognised as particularly important when timing links with government. Their ability to identify the hot topics and broker connections was seen as very helpful. Work with mediators needs to be costed into research projects if impact is to be taken seriously.

Ideas Developed in the Seminar Series

The following ideas were developed during the seminar series and potentially add to existing understandings of user-engagement.

- **The co-construction of socially robust knowledge**
User engagement has done more than just provide a warrant for 'socially robust' (Gibbons, 1999) pedagogic research. It has also increased the

Major implications

- User engagement can enhance the quality and impact of research on teaching and learning. It should be built into research designs from the outset and may involve two phases. The first is close engagement with practice-based co-researchers to ensure that research reflects current and emergent priorities and is accessible and useful to practitioners during the research process. The second occurs once the study is completed, when the user warrant strengthens research claims in policy communities and researchers need to allocate time to making findings accessible to these communities.
- The different time scales and priorities of research partners present considerable challenges for project management. Project management in this context has become the weaving together of different forms of expertise, priorities and time-scales across a variety of sites to ensure that projects remain focused on the agreed objectives. Capacity building for project management is an immediate priority and should be part of advanced training programmes for early and mid-career researchers.
- Capacity building for 'knowing how to know who' should be part of staff development for educational researchers at all stages of their careers. It should occur alongside help with communicating with policy and practice communities. Good communication involves: identifying key messages; recognising the limitations of evidence; being persistent; using multiple formats (one page, three pages

and 25 pages); but not dumbing-down or blinding with science.

- Alongside an increased emphasis among researchers on better communication of research findings, members of policy communities need to become more adept at listening to the messages brought to them by researchers and indeed at seeking their advice.
- There are two implications for research funders. Working with users in research studies may require adjustments to research objectives as new priorities can arise when researchers work alongside practitioners in changing policy contexts; and project management is complex and needs to be recognised as a legitimate part of research awards.
- TLRP has offered a powerful model of large-scale practitioner engagement in research, and the impact that research can have on the knowledge which informs teaching. It is important that this model not become forgotten when the Programme ends.
- The mediating role of professional knowledge brokers who work between researchers and policy communities is important, because the relationship between findings and policy is not linear. There are nuanced differences between knowledge transfer, knowledge translation, knowledge brokerage and knowledge transmission that researchers need to understand, and brokers can help with this.

impact of educational research through the co-production of pedagogic knowledge in the sites where it is used. We suggest (Edwards, Sebba and Rickinson 2007), that TLRP is the first systematic attempt in education at the production of 'Mode 2' knowledge, knowledge produced in partnerships between academics and those involved in the use of knowledge in practice (Gibbons et al, 1994).

- **Mediation and brokerage**
This occurred in three settings:

the mediation of understandings across organisational boundaries as a feature of project management when projects involve multiple sites;

when researchers present findings to practice and policy communities.

when specialist knowledge brokers work closely with policy-makers.

- **Knowledge flows**
We distinguished between knowledge flows which run horizontally between research partners in research projects, and to an extent between research projects in related areas, and knowledge flows which run vertically from practice-based research to national research communities or national policy. This distinction was particularly useful in Seminar Three, when comparing knowledge flows in TLRP projects with knowledge flows from practitioner research. It was clear that university-practitioner research partnerships, which were focused on common research objectives, enabled successful upstream knowledge flows and the consequent up-scaling of findings emerging from practice-based research.

- **Knowing who**
The relational aspects of user engagement at all stages of the research and knowledge sharing process were crucial. The importance of knowing who to involve, how and at what stage in the construction and mobilising of knowledge calls for researchers in many areas of educational research to learn to be outward-looking when designing and managing research.

Users	Resources they offer to research processes	Why and when they are useful
Policy Makers	Funding, networks, ideas in play in policy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Can contextualise the research problem throughout the process • Can respond to developing conceptualisations from the research
Practitioners	Research sites, networks, ideas based on current experience	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Can add detail to initial interpretations of the research problem • Can keep researchers in touch with changing conditions • Can confirm relevance and validity of interpretations
Users of educational services	Insights into their experiences of policies and practices	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Can add detail to initial interpretations of the research problem • Can confirm relevance and validity of interpretations during research

Figure 3: The Resources Offered by Research Users

Further information

Publications:

Bevan, R. (2006). 'Turbulent flow into smooth streams: transferring research knowledge between academic environments and practitioner contexts', *Reflecting Education*, 2, 1, 55-72.

Edwards, A., Sebba, J & Rickinson, M. (2006) 'Working with users in educational research: some implications for research capacity building', *Building Research Capacity*, 11, 1-4.

Edwards, A., Sebba, J & Rickinson, M. (2007) 'Working with users: the implications for educational research', *British Educational Research Journal*, 33(5) 647-661.

Rickinson, M., Edwards, A. & Sebba, J. (forthcoming) *Improving Research through User-Engagement*. London, Routledge.

Sebba, J. (2007) Enhancing impact on policy-making through increasing user-engagement in research. In: Saunders, L. (Ed.) *Educational research and policy-making*. London, Routledge.

Conference papers and other presentations

Edwards, A. (2006) 'Making a difference: the importance of practice-based research', Keynote at Institute of Education Conference on Applied and Practice-based Educational Research, London.

Edwards, A. (2007) 'Conceptualising user-engagement in educational research: working on the boundaries' AERA Annual Conference, Chicago.

Rickinson, M. (2007) 'Knowledge creation for evidence-based policy and practice in education', Invited presentation at Joint OECD-European Commission Seminar on Evidence-based Policy and Practice in Education, Paris.

Sebba, J. (2007) 'Some implications for research design and user-engagement in the research process', AERA Annual Conference, Chicago.

Sebba, J. (2007) 'Use of research in education policy-making' Keynote Annual Conference of the Royal Statistical Society, York, July 2007.

The warrant

The seminar series created a forum where a broad range of stakeholders in educational research could engage in a sustained conversation which was supported by web-based papers.

The series was designed to:

- learn from projects from across TLRP;
- provide fora for informed discussion between specialist stakeholders, for example funders and policy communities in Seminar Two and practitioners from across educational settings in Seminar Three;
- bring together the ideas generated in the final session;
- draw on experiences across the UK;
- learn from existing work in other social science disciplines;
- develop concepts that will inform the design of high impact research which involves research users.

It therefore modelled the system of distributed specialist expertise we are suggesting as a framework for understanding the engagement of researcher users in research. The series produced ideas that were informed, reflected on and refined by the different communities over the 16-month period. Its relevance to each of these groups was evident in the quality of the discussion and in the sustained engagement that so many busy people gave to it. The ESRC graded the series 'outstanding.'

Other References

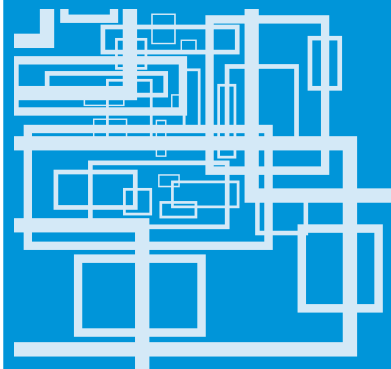
Gibbons, M. (1999) Science's new social contract, *Nature*, 402, pp. 11-17.

Gibbons, M. Limoges, C., Nowotny, H., Schwartzman, S., Scott, P. & Trow, M. (1994) *The New Production of Knowledge*. London, Sage.

Lundvall, B-Å. (1996) The social dimension of the learning economy, *DRUID Working Paper No 96-1*.

Weiss, C. (1979) The many meanings of research utilization, *Public Administration Review*, 39(5) pp. 426-431.

Teaching and Learning Research Programme



TLRP involves some 90 research teams with contributions from England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales. Work began in 2000 and the Technology Enhanced Learning phase will continue to 2012.

Learning: TLRP's overarching aim is to improve outcomes for learners of all ages in teaching and learning contexts across the UK.

Outcomes: TLRP studies a broad range of learning outcomes, including the acquisition of skill, understanding, knowledge and qualifications and the development of attitudes, values and identities relevant to a learning society.

Lifecourse: TLRP supports projects and related activities at many ages and stages in education, training and lifelong learning.

Enrichment: TLRP commits to user engagement at all stages of research. It promotes research across disciplines, methodologies and sectors, and supports national and international co-operation.

Expertise: TLRP works to enhance capacity for all forms of research on teaching and learning, and for research informed policy and practice.

Improvement: TLRP develops the knowledge base on teaching and learning and policy and practice in the UK.

TLRP Directors' Team
Professor Andrew Pollard | London
Professor Richard Noss | London
Professor Miriam David | London
Professor Alan Brown | Warwick
Professor Mary James | London

TLRP Programme Office
Sarah Douglas | sarah.douglas@ioe.ac.uk
James O'Toole | j.o'toole@ioe.ac.uk
tlrp@ioe.ac.uk

TLRP
Institute of Education
University of London
20 Bedford Way
London WC1H 0AL
UK

Tel +44 (0)20 7911 5577



Project website:

<http://www.tlrp.org/themes/seminar/edwards/index.html>

Project contact:

Anne Edwards: anne.edwards@education.ox.ac.uk

Judy Sebba: j.c.sebba@sussex.ac.uk

Mark Rickinson: m.rickinson@dsl.pipex.com

ISBN-978-0-85473-874-8



February 2009