DOING ACTION RESEARCH

A GUIDE FOR POST-16 PRACTITIONERS

The Education and Training Foundation (2021)

Doing Action Research – A Guide for Post-16 Practitioners.

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Is this guide for me?

We hope that all practitioners working in post-16 and further education (FE) contexts will benefit from reading all of this guide, but we know that you will have different reasons for reading it. Perhaps, to make best use of this guide, it is helpful to think of some different readers' starting points:

> **I'm teaching in a hair and beauty department and have been invited to join an action research project improving Level 2 learners' use of digital technology.**

If this is like you, then you may want to begin by getting a taste of practitioner action research in Part 1 before dipping into Part 2 for some practical advice that will help you start your action research in your classroom or workshop.

> **I'm hoping to lead our team to build our learners' confidence to track their own progress.**

If this is like you, then you may want to begin by looking at "Leading a practitioner action research team" in Part 3, before reviewing Parts 1 and 2 to see where your team might need timely support.

> **I've started studying for a Masters in Education and I'm expected to do an action research project**

If this is like you, then you may want to begin by looking at "Doing action research towards a qualification" in Part 3 and then revisit Parts 1 and 2 to get you started doing meaningful research that inspires your teaching. You may also find Part 3 helpful in illustrating how we writers have interpreted the literatures on practitioner action research in relation to our own experiences within the post-16 sector.

Whatever your starting point, we hope you find that this guide contains enough practical examples, useful explanations and stimulating opportunities to carry you through the next enjoyable and exciting stage of your teaching journey.

Who has written this guide?

This guide was written as part of the **Outstanding Teaching, Learning and Assessment (OTLA) action research programme**[1] by a team from ccConsultancy: Vicky Butterby, Claire Collins, Andy Convery, Chloë Hynes, and David Prinn. ccConsultancy have been a delivery partner leading this programme on behalf of the Education and Training Foundation since 2017. We are a team of FE and post-16 practitioners who, between us, have over one hundred years' experience of teaching, supporting and managing post-16 learning in classrooms and workshops, in colleges, adult learning providers, training agencies, industry, the voluntary sector and secure estates around the UK. During our teaching journeys we have ourselves used action research approaches to improve our classrooms and to gain in-service Masters and PhD

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[1] https://www.et-foundation.co.uk/supporting/professional-development/practitioner-led-development-and-research/otla/

qualifications. Most importantly, we have all experienced the delights, the sleepless nights, the frustrations and the triumphs of working with the variety of learners whose lives are changed by Further Education. Our collective experience suggests that adopting action research approaches can be a highly effective and engaging way for practitioners to make improvements within their teaching practices that support and encourage learners to succeed.

The idea of doing 'research' can make teachers nervous, as research can sound quite technical and best conducted by outside experts, but we hope to persuade you that research is very 'do-able', that we are all researchers, and that the action research we produce as practitioners of FE and post-16 learning makes a valuable and important contribution to educational knowledge. We have tried to write the guide in an accessible and straightforward way that we hope will help put aside any worries you may have about doing research. We hope we have offered enough practical examples, useful explanations and stimulating opportunities to convey our enthusiasm for practitioner action research and to support you in your own work too.

Who are you?

We use the terms 'practitioner' and 'teacher' interchangeably. Teachers help learners learn, and in our view, 'teacher' also embraces all those trainers, instructors, support workers, administration staff and managers whose concern is supporting learners to make progress through their Further Education.

PART 1: AN INTRODUCTION TO ACTION RESEARCH

1.1.   What is action research?

Action research involves practitioners investigating their own teaching (that's the 'research') and then using what they find out to make improvements (that's the 'action'). Engaging in action research will help you to improve your teaching, and sharing what you discover will help your colleagues develop approaches they can use to help their learners too.

Examples

Let's look at some examples of practitioners in post-16 contexts doing action research so we can draw out what action research involves:

Jim is a Painting & Decorating teacher. His Level 1 learners worked well in practical workshop sessions but often performed poorly in their written work. Jim joined a college action research project looking at ways to support learners to take more responsibility for their progress. The project leader shared some practical suggestions taken from Black and William's 2004 '**Assessment for Learning**'[2] handbook, and Jim chose to design a very simple checklist that the learners themselves could use in the workshop to make notes about their practical work as they finished each task.

At first the learners were not keen to do any writing at all, arguing that they were in a practical workshop session. Jim listened when they pointed out why some parts of the checklist were difficult to fill in, and he then made some changes to the checklist so his learners would find it easier to complete.

The learners gradually began to make more comments on their workshop checklists, and then they took them back into the classroom to help with their assignment tasks. Jim found that this group of Level 1 learners gradually became more confident about tackling their written work, and his record book showed that more students completed their workbook tasks to a higher standard.

Jim has shared his checklist with other teachers in the Construction department and he is now adapting it to help his higher-level learners in other classes who might also lack confidence when faced with having to produce written work.
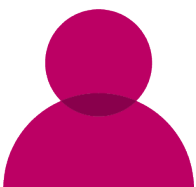
Nadia provided Learning Support for learners who have difficulty with their written work. Sometimes she found it difficult to know the best way to help learners, especially when they didn't make much effort themselves and relied on the support workers to help them to complete their work. She wasn't sure how best to challenge them to build their confidence (and quite often she wasn't sure what the teachers expected her to do in the sessions).

Nadia joined an action research project team, which included other support workers and teachers. The project leader shared with them some bullet point findings from **the Education Endowment Foundation's (EEF) guidance**[3] based upon research into learning support. Following discussion about how their experiences compared with the external research, Nadia and the teacher whom she worked with decided to try a checking strategy to help learners become more active throughout the sessions.

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[2] Black, P., Harrison, C., Lee, C., Marshal, B. and Wiliam, D. (2004). Working Inside the Black Box: Assessment for Learning in the Classroom. Phi Delta Kappan, 86(1) pp. 8–21.

[3] The pdf of the guidance can be downloaded at https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/public/files/Publications/Teaching_Assistants/TA_Guidance_Report_Making BestUseOfTeachingAssistants-Printable.pdf

Nadia chose to adapt a simple 'Check-in ticket' to use midway through a session. She asked the learners to note down on the 'ticket' what they had learned so far in the lesson, and also to point out if there were any areas they were finding difficult. This meant that Nadia could check with the learners if they were having difficulties, and she could try to help them tackle these areas. Nadia could also flag up "sticking points" during the lesson to the teacher so that the teacher could also recap and explain in different ways. This seemed to help everyone: the learners said they felt that they were getting more done, and Nadia said she felt reassured that what she was doing was more worthwhile.

The teachers and support workers had several meetings to discuss the effectiveness of these different approaches, and everyone agreed it had really helped support workers and teachers to work together. One of the teachers commented, "I never realised how much work the support workers actually do".

Some of the teachers and support workers shared their findings at a national conference. They were able to show evidence demonstrating how their successful action research into improving learning support in FE challenged some of the findings from the research which had been done in schools.

Amanda had been invited to join colleagues in her English Department's project working on an action research project to improve the performance of the large numbers of GCSE resit students who achieved disappointing results. Following a discussion with her project mentor, Amanda decided to experiment with a peer-feedback activity. She hoped that this approach would help her students become more interested in their work and improve their performance in English.

However, her first attempts were disappointing, as students often missed their partner's errors or even made mistakes when they gave feedback, and she couldn't see from their work that they were improving their English. The students said they enjoyed working with friends but wanted the teacher to correct their work.

Amanda shared her disappointment with the project team. A colleague described how he had used peer-feedback more successfully in creative tasks, so Amanda decided to trial a writing feedback template he had designed. She adapted that template to encourage the learners to identify expressive vocabulary in their learning partner's work and to prompt them to suggest additional words. Building on this, she returned the new templates to the students and asked each student to select the word that had provided the most useful improvement to their writing and wrote these on the whiteboard. In this short class activity, nearly every student had made a helpful contribution. Amanda decided that, as these activities had contributed positively to learners' use of English and the peer-feedback sessions seemed to improve confidence and motivate re-sit students, she would keep using this approach.

At the end of term, Amanda photocopied examples of some completed templates to show the team what her class had been doing. She also shared with them some examples from submitted assignments where she thought students had been influenced by the peer-feedback activities. Her Head of English persuaded her to share these experiences on an English teachers' blog, and several teachers responded with 'likes' and some of their own helpful suggestions.

From these accounts, you can see what action research looks like, and that all FE practitioners can be researchers. Each of these action research accounts have common themes:

- Teachers (and support staff) investigated how to improve everyday practical problems in classrooms and workshops.
- Practitioners took onboard new practices suggested by outside researchers and tried them out in their FE settings.

- All the practitioners shared their issues and their findings with their colleagues and learnt from one another's practical experience.
- Teachers tried out solutions and used learners' feedback to make the solutions more workable.
- Teachers studied learners' work to judge how effective their research was in practice
- Teachers investigated their teaching and adapted their customary approaches to help learners make progress.
- Engagement in action research activities led to learners improving their confidence, and teachers enjoying better relationships with learners (even where the actions had limited effectiveness at times).
- All of those taking part – teachers and learners – felt that what they were doing was more worthwhile.
- Teachers behaved ethically, ensuring that their learners and colleagues were treated in a respectful and caring manner.
- Teachers' research activities were planned around meeting their learners' needs.
- With support from project leaders and managers, practitioners shared their findings across the organisation and also to the wider world.

The themes above can be found in many action research projects but there is no definitive approach to action research that you must take in FE or anywhere else. Action research means investigating and learning from your teaching, often finding and testing new ways to help learners and sharing what you find. In the following pages we will share many examples of rewarding real-life action research in FE to help you think about what you might do and how you might do it.

You can also find FE practitioners' reports from previous ETF action research projects at **CCC Practitioner Research**[4]

Two important questions

1. Why can't I just leave research to people who work in universities and can give me all the answers I need?

You might ask why FE practitioners do not simply use research findings that have been carried out elsewhere by external researchers. There is a shortage of published research that focuses on FE[5] [6]settings, and FE teachers work in a wide variety of situations with a vast range of learners and qualifications. Action research gives you freedom to question and test ideas (your own and other people's) to see what actually works most effectively for your learners in your setting.

It is important that you then tell others about your research and share your findings and insights with other FE staff. Your practical decision-making recognises the 'insider' realities of our situation that sometimes wouldn't be noticed by external ('outsider') researchers from different backgrounds. By sharing your findings from your teaching, you are contributing to a worldwide research bank about effective teaching and learning in the sector.

Jim, the Painting and Decorating teacher whom we met earlier in this guide, would have been unlikely to turn to published research to tackle the problem of his Level 1 learners who didn't want to write in practical lessons – at the time, consulting educational research literature wasn't how Construction staff addressed

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[4] https://ccpathways.co.uk/practitioner-research/

[5] See p2 Mobility Commission
https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/859088/SMC_FE_evidence_review.pdf

[6] https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/926366/Educational_effectiveness_research_and_FES.pdf

teaching issues. He may have also been unlikely to share findings from his own teaching experiments with learners in his class, or with colleagues in his staffroom. However, through joining a college action research project, he now contributes to college staff development sessions. He chose to write up his research in a project booklet for other staff (**OTLA 3, Bishop Auckland College**)[7], and Jim now feels more comfortable engaging with accessible types of written evidence and supports colleagues to do the same through the CPD sessions. You can read more about engaging with accessible evidence (and where to find it) in sections 2.1 and 3.6.

2. Is the purpose of action research just to find better teaching methods?

You almost certainly will arrive at more helpful ways of teaching and assessing learners through engaging in action research but, although you might begin the research looking at a specific issue, you will probably arrive at a deeper understanding of yourself as a teacher beyond discovering some strategies and resources to address an immediate sticking point. Doing action research awakens your curiosity, and you suddenly find so many more dimensions to your everyday professional practice and relationships, for example:

a)   Connecting with learners

Through discussing your research with learners – and valuing their opinions, you can discover more deeply what helps learners to learn – and, importantly, what gets in the way of their learning. You can use this knowledge to refine your teaching approach. (See Section 2.3 for examples about engaging learners in your research.)

When teachers begin talking and listening more to learners, they often find that relationships improve. Furthermore, learners become more motivated as they realise that their classroom performance can be improved through working with more appropriate strategies, and this often leads to improvements in learners' longer-term commitment.

b)   Getting on better with colleagues

> ❝ **I never realised how much the support assistants do.** ❞

Many teachers find that engaging in an action research project with colleagues is incredibly refreshing. Instead of just working comfortably alongside colleagues with each teacher doing their own thing, an action research project gives you the opportunity to explore together how to change things in your team and develop effective, learner-centred practices for teaching, learning and assessment. (See Sections 2.1 and 2.7 for further examples of engaging colleagues in your research.)

c)   Understanding how learners learn (and why sometimes they don't)

Most of us make intelligent assumptions about what will help learners learn, yet often we are frustrated when our good intentions don't work. Action research gives you the chance to really examine why things aren't working as well as hoped in your classroom, and research teams can give you the confidence – and some additional strategies – to challenge these assumptions and help you arrive at a new understanding of how learners learn. (This is sometimes described as developing a 'personal theory of learning'.)

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[7] This report was part of OTLA 3: https://www.excellencegateway.org.uk/content/etf3006

d)   Better understanding of yourself as a teacher

Often teachers realise through doing action research that they are the ones who may be getting in the way of learners achieving all they might. We FE teachers can sometimes become fixated with being in control – both in terms of managing students' behaviour and also in wanting to be over-protective in leading learners towards the desired endpoint. Being part of an action research project team can give us the insight to see where we might be limiting learning, and provide us with strategies and support to help refresh and renew our thinking.

e)   Becoming a happier and more confident professional.

> **"** **I'm enjoying teaching again.** **"**

As you can see, action research is about individual practitioners' full professional development, rather than just the development of immediate teaching methods. It is about improving knowledge of practical teaching and assessment strategies, and it is also about taking pride in understanding ourselves as professional educators who enjoy being part of a professional community.

📑 Recommended Reading

If you are interested in discovering more about how action research can help you structure your professional development, we recommend you explore "Action Research for Professional Development: Concise advice for new and experienced researchers" by Jean McNiff.

Will I enjoy being part of an action research project?

Yes, you will

- ✓ If you enjoy teaching but feel frustrated that you can't do more to help your students because of the way things are.

- ✓ If you're exasperated that you're sometimes being expected to follow unrealistic guidance about what and how your students should learn.

- ✓ If you are proud to be a teacher, trainer or support assistant who wants to make a real difference for your students.

- ✓ If you like the excitement of working alongside other teachers who want to make things work for their students in the real world.

- ✓ If you enjoy good relationships with your students and recognise that you can also learn from them.

- ✓ If sometimes you discover things through your teaching that might be worth sharing with other teachers

- ✓ If you love to tap into new ideas and think that educational research should make a difference in your classrooms and workshops.

- ✓ If you are keen to grow, develop and challenge yourself in your subject specialism.

- ✓ If you are a teacher, trainer, support worker, instructor, volunteer, technician, library assistant or manager who tries to help learners in further education, training, adult education, prison education or the voluntary sector.

However,

- ✘ If you're quite satisfied with the way you teach and have no difficulties.

- ✘ If you don't think you've got much to learn from working more closely with other teachers.

- ✘ If you believe that people can either teach or they can't, and nothing much can change that.

- ✘ If you think that educational research is best left to people in universities who know more about teaching than you do.

<div align="right">....then you probably won't enjoy engaging in action research.</div>

1.2.   Could I do action research?

As we've seen from Jim, Amanda and Nadia, action research involves practitioners exploring how they might best meet learners' needs by making amendments and adaptations to their teaching and learning practices. These practitioners judged how well the new approaches worked by looking at how learners used resources and carried out tasks. They also talked openly with learners and colleagues to learn how they needed to adapt their approaches further for best results.

A reminder: if you want to do action research, you need to investigate what happens in your classroom (that's the research) and use what you learn from your investigation to change the way you teach (that's the action).

One simple way to start doing action research

The diagram below illustrates how an English teacher, working with a team of colleagues, decided to try experimenting with using emojis as a first step to encouraging learners to use a wider vocabulary in their English lessons:

1. Explore how others have tried to tackle the issue

2. Decide how you might introduce change and draw up a practical lesson plan
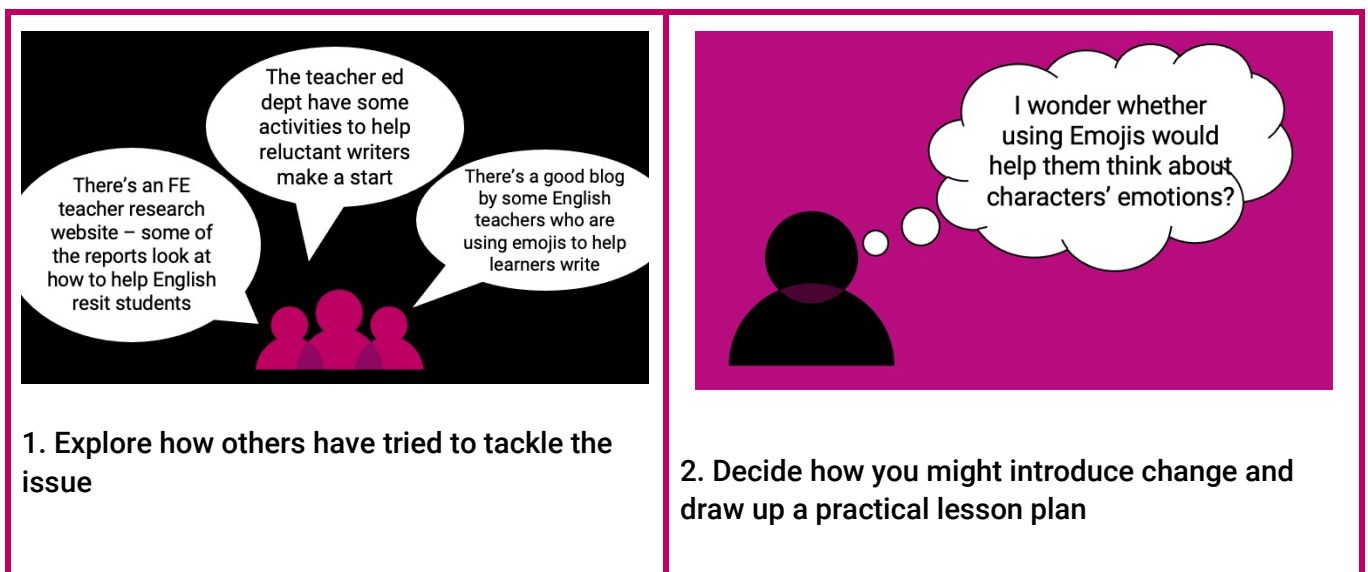
For example…

Choose which face best fits Hamlet and say why:

3. Tell your learners what you're doing and try out your activity with your group

They've tried much harder and done some good work, but they could really build on this…

4. Study how learners responded to your change

What went well
1.
2.
3.

Even better if:
1.
2.
3.

5. Return any learners' work and ask them for their feedback on the activity

Do you think that some learners need even more encouragement?

6. Seek a colleague's opinion about your activity and the learners' responses

I wonder whether it would help the less confident learners if they worked in pairs

7. Use feedback from learners and your colleague to help you reflect and then plan further changes in the next lesson

The emojis weren't as important as the paired working which I introduced

I'm going to respond to that blogger that said Level 1 learners couldn't do this…

I'm going to share this with the rest of Hair & Beauty…

Can you send me that worksheet you made – I'm going to adapt it for my adults who can't always attend…

I'm going to google "Using emojis in English"

8. Share your findings with colleagues and learners and keep working on the issue

Is this example really 'research'? Isn't it just good teaching?

The example above is a good example of good teaching, and it is also research as it generates a range of evidence of the classroom investigation from a variety of research participants who have different interests in and different viewpoints. This simple example of the action research process builds on existing evidence from reading and discussions to also provide powerful personal evidence to give insights into the teacher's teaching and the learners' progress.

You will notice that there are:

- Three different viewpoints (teacher, learners and colleague)
    taken from
- Three different stages of the researched activity (before, during, after the lesson)
    are illustrated by
- Multiple sources of evidence from the lesson (lesson plan and notes, learners' work, notes from learners' feedback and your colleagues' comments).

The activities above combine (or 'triangulate') to present a credible record of events that help the practitioner action researcher to gain a better understanding of the complex nature of the learner's world – and importantly, they also provide the basis for the teacher to take the next action steps.

Trustworthy Triangulation

Before

Session

During   **After**

Teacher

Viewpoint

Students   **Colleague**

**Revised lesson plans
and new resources**

Evidence

**Learner work
and feedback**   **Your colleague's
comments**
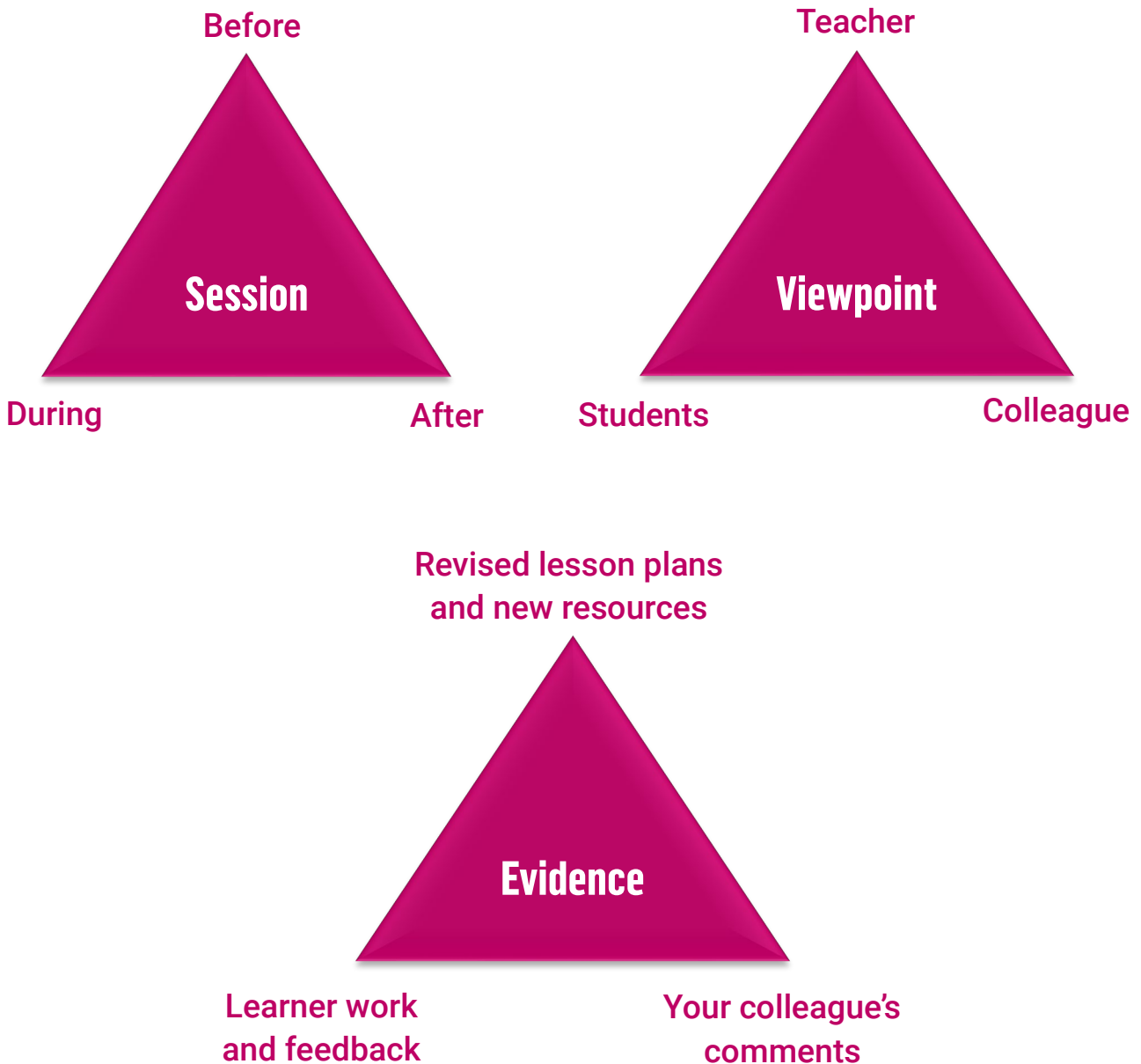
How can practitioners' action research be shared more widely?

The initial aim of practitioner action research is to improve teaching and learning; to understand what is helping learners to make progress, and to use that new understanding to change the way that we teach.

But it is also important to share what you have found with other practitioners, and also to make your findings available to managers and professional researchers. If you can create short accounts of your activities and illustrate your accounts with evidence of teaching activities and learners' responses from your classrooms and workshops, then your fellow practitioners will be more likely to connect with your experiences and be inspired by your research to make changes themselves.

There are many examples of accessible teacher accounts with accompanying materials, resources and teacher commentaries available at **Practitioner Research and Evidence Portal**[8] and **CCC Practitioner Research**[9]

Feel free to add to these accounts, using your own action research experiences, and please don't be discouraged if you feel that your research appears to be relatively small-scale and local; Lawrence Stenhouse, who in the 1980's, popularised teacher action research in the UK, frequently complained that "perhaps too much research is published to the world, too little to the village"[10]. He was frustrated that teachers – who are the very people that can actually make a difference through using their new practice-based knowledge – were not managing to write for each other.

We encourage you to **add your account** and write for both the village and the world!

📝 Recommended Reading

If you are studying for a qualification and would like to know more about some of the founding ideas behind teachers' action research, there's an accessible selection of excerpts in "Research as a Basis for Teaching: Readings from the Work of Lawrence Stenhouse" by Rudduck,J & Hopkins, D. (1985)[11]

(It's quite an old book now, so if you get a copy through inter-library loans, you will probably find that all the important bits have already been highlighted for you by previous readers 😉)

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[8] https://www.excellencegateway.org.uk/prep

[9] https://ccpathways.co.uk/practitioner-research/

[10] This quote is taken from Stenhouse, L (1981) What counts as research? British Journal of Educational Studies: Vol. 29, No. 2, pp. 103-114.

[11] Stenhouse. L., Rudduck, J. and Hopkins, D. (1985) Research as a basis for teaching: readings from the work of Lawrence Stenhouse. London ; Portsmouth, NH : Heinemann Educational Books.

PART 2: PRACTICAL STEPS IN THE ACTION RESEARCH PROCESS

2.1. Settling into the research community and choosing your own direction

In your FE setting, you may have become involved in action research because:

- your institution has decided to embark on an action research project;
- you're following an educational qualification that expects you to undertake an action research project or;
- you've witnessed colleagues discussing and sharing findings from their research, and they are inviting you to try out implementing teaching and strategies that seem to be making a real, tangible difference for learners.

If this is the case, it is likely that you will be supported by either a project team or a mentor or supervisor who will be able to give you some helpful guidance about how to set up your research and pursue your area of interest. As we saw with Jim, Nadia and Amanda, working together as part of a research team can give you the best of both worlds; you'll have the support and interest of your project team, and also the freedom to try out the strategies you feel will work most effectively for the learners that you are teaching.

One of the most rewarding aspects of doing action research is being able to talk honestly about teaching with people who are interested in helping you find solutions to your research challenges. When working on action research projects, teams get the chance to collectively tackle frustrating teaching problems with new energy – what may have been framed in the past as a 'teaching difficulty' can now be reframed as an important area of research enquiry! Although you can't always influence government policy or resolve wider social problems demotivating our learners, you do have the potential through your research to find new and refreshed ways to tackle some of the common challenges that appear in your classrooms.

Working as a team on an action research project should lift and reassure you that you are not alone, and that the teaching challenges you face are shared by others. Working on projects encourages a constructive sharing of ideas, including with colleagues whom you might not normally consult about teaching, such as those colleagues who have a different teaching approach to yourself. By being part of a diverse research team that has representation from different areas of teaching and learning (e.g. a team that might include learning support assistants, colleagues from other subject areas and departments, managers and learners), we open ourselves up to fresh ways of thinking, which in turn can lead to the development of creative and innovative solutions to the educational challenges we face. As you can see from Redcar and Cleveland College's case study below, action research can also give you the joy of belonging to a community, whose potential is often recognised within and beyond your research group.

Feeling part of the community

Redcar's team wanted to find out how to make classroom support by Student Support Assistants (SSAs) more effective. The Project Leader asked teachers and SSAs to separately note what was preventing the SSAs from fulfilling their potential and they all then compared their judgements with the findings of a University team of observers. Building on this combination of practitioners and academic researchers' viewpoints, pairings of teachers and SSAs selected different strategies to experiment with to help their learners benefit more from the SSAs' contributions. Besides improving learners' confidence to work more independently, the team were also able to contribute the nuanced differences experienced by the SSAs working in FE to the educational research community through presentations, reports and academic articles[12].

In their everyday practice, SSAs found that their experience on the project made them feel more valued in their work; one began a teacher training programme at the end of the project.

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[12] https://improving-teaching.excellencegateway.org.uk/content/etf3018

Comments from the SSAs are revealing:

"I feel I'm listened to more"

"Being allowed a voice"

"Building rapport with the tutor, being valued"

"There is much better teamwork between me and the teacher"

"The team's enthusiasm reinvigorated me"

"I understand what lesson aims are now, this helps me support as I can ensure the learner is confident about what they have learned at the end of the session"

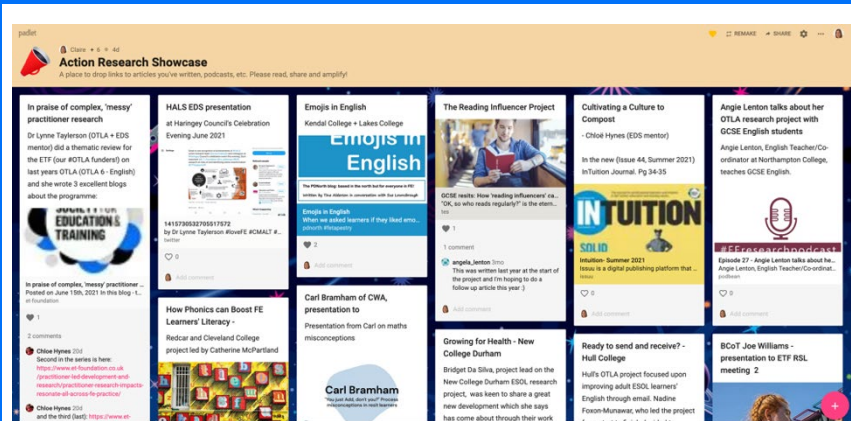## Reading what others in the community have written

The more ideas you have about what other teachers and researchers have already done when setting up your personal investigation, the more that you and your learners will benefit from your ownership of the research. Having some background to your research topic will improve the choices that you make in your teaching and in your research.

You will remember that Jim, Amanda and Nadia were introduced to ideas and approaches from research by project leaders. This introduced them to the wider research community and gave them both permission and encouragement to experiment with the everyday teaching practices which they had inherited. Whereas you don't need to do extensive reading before you begin to investigate your own teaching, you will probably be interested to see how other practitioners have begun investigating similar teaching situations and have overcome barriers that were stopping learners making progress. You can find many such examples of action research resources and strategies used in OTLA 6 projects by clicking on **Practitioner Research and Evidence Portal**[13] and the **CCC Practitioner Research page**[14].

There are practical examples of the activities that practitioners used in their projects in the appendices to these accessible reports. Hopefully, these examples might provide ideas to adapt for your own projects, as the reports can give practitioners ideas about

- how to tackle teaching issues
- how to do research into teaching
- how teachers can share their own action research.

📑 Recommended Reading

The **Action Research Showcase Padlet**[15] contains a vast array of practitioner reflections including blogs, podcasts, articles, presentations and more. Created during OTLA 7 (20-21) to share and amplify additional writing, it will remain open and will grow organically as the programme continues.

[13] https://www.excellencegateway.org.uk/prep

[14] https://ccpathways.co.uk/practitioner-research/otla-6/

[15] https://padlet.com/c_collins2/OTLA_news

Quite often, action researchers read up more about their initial research interest as they get increasingly involved in the research. However, as their research with learners take them in unexpected directions, they might begin to start reading about new topic areas; for example, research into 'flipped learning' might take you from homework, to classwork, to groupwork depending on your learners' responses to your teaching interventions. Although it's good to begin by familiarising yourself with some key ideas about your issue, what you discover as you conduct your research will often redirect you to new, more relevant reading.

Being an action researcher encourages you to 'mix and match' ideas – you can take teaching ideas from one subject area and test it in another. For example, the Education and Training Collective used ideas from Phonics reading programmes and introduced them into their maths teaching to help learners to confidently cope with Maths terminology (see **illustration on p38**) you can also read the full account on the **CCC Practitioner Research page**[16].

Unless you are studying for an educational qualification, you won't be expected to read up on research at length. However, you might well want to dip into existing research accounts that are very accessible by:

→ reading the potted summaries of research e.g. **Education Endowment Foundation**[17]
→ searching on teachers' blogs e.g. **FEtapestry by PDN**[18]
→ listening to podcasts e.g. **FEresearch Podcast**[19] or **Let's Get Digital**[20]

as this might help you and your colleagues to rethink how you view your classrooms. Also, taking part in a regular Twitter chat such as **#UKFEchat**[21] can lead to a wealth of conversations about aspects of FE research and development.

When you start to investigate collections of teacher accounts, you may find there are so many that you aren't quite sure where to begin. We suggest that you begin by choosing those closest to your subject interest, as they usually provide useful reflections on how to investigate your subject area, and quite often they give you insights into new ways to develop your subject specialist teaching.

When reading other teachers' accounts, it may be useful to keep the following questions in mind. By approaching other people's work with a constructively critical mindset, we can become more considerate about what we might like to try out, change or adapt within our own settings, and why:

- How far might this new teaching approach work in my setting: what would I need to adapt to make it work for me?
- What research methods did they use? To what extent might they work with my learners?
- Whose ideas did they build upon? What reading or sources did they find useful?
- From the evidence that they have shared, what seems to be particularly important for me?
- Does anything seem to be missing from their account? What else do I need to know?

Accounts from the OTLA 6 (English) action research projects were collected into an anthology for the **RaPAL (Research and Practice in Adult Literacy) Journal Vol 101**

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[16] https://ccpathways.co.uk/practitioner-research/otla-6/project-10/10a/

[17] https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/evidence-summaries/

[18] https://pdnorth.org.uk/home/pd-north-blog/

[19] https://feresearchpodcast.podbean.com

[20] https://anchor.fm/letsgetdigital

[21] https://twitter.com/hashtag/ukfechat

You'll notice that although the title of this section is *'reading what others in the community have written',* the examples we have shared highlight that there are many different ways to learn from other practitioner-researchers and to share your own research findings too. If you can contribute your action research experiences to educational blogs, podcasts, summaries and so on, you are also adding your voice to the research community, thus making educational literature more grounded and relatable to our sector.

You don't always have to read academic research publications to engage with powerful ideas from literature – the example below shows how the Redcar project leader introduced key ideas from a research paper about providing classroom support. By the end of the project, the team were feeding back their own experiences to the research through their website report, conference presentations and a published article.

How Teaching Support Assistants engaged with the key ideas from current literature in their project about improving Student Support in classrooms.

Project Leader Catherine McPartland summarised the key findings from a research report on cards and asked teachers and support assistants to compare these ideas with their own experiences of providing and managing support. Teachers and support assistants then drew on these ideas at the start of the project as the basis for deciding how they could best work together in the project to challenge learners to work more independently.

Shared key findings from the EEF Report:

'Making Best Use of Teaching Assistants'[22]

(Sharples, Webster and Blatchford, 2015)

…some evidence suggests TA support may encourage dependency.	TAs tend to be more concerned with task completion and less concerned with developing understanding.
Communication between teachers and TAs is largely ad hoc.	Many TAs report feeling unprepared for the tasks they are given.

Links to the full report were made available for any staff who wanted to read further, and following the project, Catherine wrote up the findings in a report on the Excellence Gateway and also in a more detailed account for Teaching in Lifelong Learning[23]. This illustrates how project teams can make use of and contribute to educational research literature.

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[22] https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/tools/guidance-reports/making-best-use-of-teaching-assistants/

[23] https://www.teachinginlifelonglearning.org.uk

2.2. Finding a starting point and making a plan

Here is some advice to help you choose a rewarding action research activity that will help you to improve the quality of your teaching without giving you unnecessary additional work:

1.   Keep it small-scale

We have seen from Jim's, Nadia's and Amanda's stories that, within each overall team project, each teacher chose to investigate a small change to their everyday teaching by working with the same group of learners over a small number of lessons. They encouraged feedback from these learners and adjusted their lessons accordingly. They introduced small changes to their classroom and workshop practices, and this kept their research focused and, importantly, manageable within their teaching.

2.   Choose a topic that feels meaningful for you and your learners

If you have a hunch about how to improve your teaching or have seen, heard or read about a strategy or resource that you might like to try, follow your heart and try it out. Don't choose an initiative just because it's on an organisational improvement plan – choose it because you feel it can help your learners become more confident and successful.

If you are part of a larger project, that involves working with a team, talk to the team about how you can adapt your action research to suit your own way of teaching as well as to contribute to the overall project.

3.   "Push at an open door"

In the beginning, aim to work with the group of learners who you think may be most willing to work with you to make progress with their learning activities. If these learners give you helpful insights about how your strategies and resources can be adapted and refined, then you can roll begin to roll it out to other classes. (Similarly, when working with colleagues; if you wish to extend what you're doing to other areas of the organisation, choose those individuals who are most amenable to change, and hope that their influence spreads.)

4.   Work collaboratively where possible

The opportunity of working alongside colleagues doing action research projects themselves can be both exciting and reassuring (and, as seen in Amanda's and Nadia's stories, the research activities can often lead to better relationships between staff as you motivate each other on this new venture.)

Choosing a manageable project

Here are some practical challenges from earlier FE team projects that practitioners have researched over several focused sessions. In each case they tried to make a change, got feedback from their learners and then incorporated what they had learned from the first session to make further changes as an ongoing process:

→ How can you inform your teaching approach through learners' reflections? (**OTLA 7, NOVUS**[24])
→ How can we empower teaching and learning communities to promote equality and celebrate diversity (**OTLA 3, Darlington Borough Council, Bishop Auckland College and South West Durham Training**[25]).
→ How can I help GCSE English students to be more positive about their resit programme? (**OTLA 6, The Sheffield College**[26]).

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[24] https://ccpathways.co.uk/practitioner-research/otla-7/otla-7-cluster-12/24-novus-hmp-liverpool/

[25] https://www.excellencegateway.org.uk/content/etf2869 (PDF download at foot of page, p.29)

[26] https://ccpathways.co.uk/practitioner-research/otla-6/project4/4d/

→ What reading activities will help my Construction trainees tackle the terminology in Numeracy tasks? (**OTLA 6, Education and Training Collective**[27])

→ How can I help ESOL learners engage more fully in written activities? (**OTLA 6, Newcastle College**[28])

→ How can I promote diversity in my Joinery lessons? (**OTLA 3, Darlington BC**[29])

→ How can I use writing frames to help my Sports students prepare for their assignments? (**OTLA 6, Moulton College**[30])

→ How can I work with my Support Assistant so that we're challenging learners rather than doing the work for them? (**OTLA 3, Redcar and Cleveland College**[31])

In each of the above research projects, individual practitioners introduced a fresh theory of teaching and learning (a new pedagogical approach) by devising or trialling a practical activity. These practical activities were tested in different contexts and were evaluated by learners and practitioners to understand how well they worked and/or whether further changes were required. The fresh teaching approaches that came out of these action research projects didn't need to be ground-breaking or new to the world; the fundamental aim of action research is to improve the teacher's practice. Those involved in the projects above not only improved their own teaching, they also produced their own contextualised, FE-specific contribution to knowledge, by demonstrating how different learning theories and activities can be applied in a range of FE settings.

In the following sections, we will offer further examples of how other practitioner researchers have worked with learners and colleagues and have attempted to engage them in gathering evidence from their research that would excite their colleagues' interest.

Beginning planning your research

To begin planning your own research and arriving at a manageable focus, you might ask yourself the following questions:

> **"What aspect of your teaching would you like to change?"**
>
> **"How do you know that it needs to change?"**
>
> **"How will you know whether the changes have been successful?"**

When you have addressed these focusing questions you can begin to consider some of the operational questions:

What are other teachers doing to try to tackle this issue?
How can I begin to investigate this issue through a practical teaching activity?
How might I get my learners to help in trialling some changes?
Who else might I work with?
What evidence would show that the improvement had been successful?
How could I share what I discover with other practitioners?

You will probably find that you keep returning to refine the earlier questions in your attempts to make your research manageable.

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[27] https://ccpathways.co.uk/practitioner-research/otla-6/project-10/10a/

[28] https://ccpathways.co.uk/practitioner-research/otla-6/project-11/11a/

[29] https://www.excellencegateway.org.uk/content/etf3003

[30] https://ccpathways.co.uk/practitioner-research/otla-6/project-9/9c/

[31] https://improving-teaching.excellencegateway.org.uk/content/etf3018

Caring for research participants

The guidelines for research are based on your everyday caring that is central to your practice – you don't have to change your ethical approach to do action research, you just have to be more aware that you might need extra safeguards when you alter traditional teacher and learner relationships and share your teaching world more openly.

In any project that changes the familiar ways we do things, we risk unintentionally upsetting our colleagues and learners or, even, putting people in danger by letting the world know where they work or study. We all have sensitivities and vulnerabilities, and we must always be aware of learners' and colleagues' underlying concerns and protect their personal interests. The following guidelines might be helpful:

Guidelines for good action research practice

✔ Be open about your research intentions - discuss your plans with your learners, colleagues and management, and anyone else who might benefit.

✔ As far as possible, centre your research around learners with whom you are currently working. This makes it easy to evaluate changes, and to check that they and their information is safeguarded.

✔ Your colleagues outside of your project may feel apprehensive if you try and make improvements to established strategies that are central to their professional practice. Be open to asking colleagues for their advice about your emerging findings – they are more likely to welcome change if they feel they've had some input into the initiative.

(You can read more about **Ethics in Section 3.3**.)

2.3. How (and why) to engage learners in our research

Action Research as an educational opportunity for all participants

Teacher action research is usually more effective if staff are open about how they are investigating better ways of helping learners. When teachers make learners aware they are doing action research, and say that they would like the learners to be actively involved, it can help both teachers and learners in different ways:

- Showing learners that you're really trying to help them to succeed with your subject often helps motivate them – because it offers them the possibility of making a fresh start now they're in FE.
- More importantly, it helps learners recognise that their intelligence isn't 'fixed', and that success is often down to learners recognising the teaching and learning strategies that suit them best. It encourages them to feel ownership over their learning and to take more responsibility for their progress.
- Crucially, getting insights from learners and acting on their feedback can change the way you teach. Most of us have refined our teaching strategies since we first started teaching, and many of our improvements have been in response to what students have said and done. Just like Jim, Nadia and Amanda, when we get insights from learners, it can speed up our appreciation of what learners are capable of doing, and how we can help them do it.

A key principle in action research is that you're researching teaching **with** rather than doing research **on** your learners – teaching and learning is a joint responsibility. The learners aren't research subjects but research participants, with a more equal status. So don't just let your learners know that you're doing

action research – encourage them to contribute as much as possible as 'co-researchers' as you try to help them. When they engage in the action research, they will develop their ideas about what they're learning and how they're learning. Many learners will feel happier and more confident in your lessons – they often develop a greater confidence in who they can be, and what they can achieve.

📝 Recommended Reading

A great deal has been written about engaging learners in the research process. If you wish to read more widely then the 2018 OTLA 3 project reports and materials from Darlington Learning & Skills, **Redcar College and Bishop Auckland College** all provide excellent examples of learner-friendly strategies for discussing learning experiences with students[32]

Also see MacBeath, Rudduck and Myers (2005)[33] in the **Further Reading section of this guide (3.6)** for those who wish to dig deeper into strategies for consulting learners.

Some ways to begin 'learning conversations'

Some learners don't find it easy to talk about 'how they learn best' in answer to questions from teachers. When attempting to start conversations about learning, teachers are often frustrated that when they first ask their learners about their experiences, learners simply tell them what they think they want to hear.

To overcome this difficulty, prompts can be the best way to engage learners and encourage them to reflect upon – and to share – their classroom experiences. The most accessible prompt is often the classwork or activity that the learners have done in the lesson – asking positive questions about the learners' performance can challenge our assumptions about how learners experience our teaching.

Some positive questions that teachers can ask about students' work include:

> **"Why do you think the work was so much better this week?"**
>
> **"Why do you think some people still have problems with….?"**
>
> **"If you were the teacher, how might you teach this topic to another class?"**

If you were to write the three questions above on a piece of paper and ask the learners to write their answers in a 'think/pair/share' activity[34], then all the learners have a chance to contribute their thoughts (rather than just the few who typically contribute to a whole class discussion). In the paired activity, they can also check their ideas with each other, and you also have the chance to encourage the quieter, 'hidden' members of the group to contribute by asking what they've written.

By recording their ideas on the forms, the answers won't get lost when the discussion ends. If learners agree, you can collect the 'prompt sheets' and these will give you a chance to revisit them and study all the group answers so you get a far richer picture of their classroom experiences. This data also makes it easier for you to write up your research experiences at the end of the research.

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[32] https://www.excellencegateway.org.uk/content/etf2869

[33] MacBeath, J., Helen Demetriou, H., Rudduck, J. and Myers, K. (2003) *Consulting Pupils: A Toolkit for Teachers*. Pearson

[34] A "think/pair/share" activity is where the teacher asks individuals to note their ideas, then to share their ideas with another learner, and finally for two pairs to come together to share and explore the different suggestions ready for whole class sharing.)

Some other prompts to get learners talking

Here are examples of prompts from previous projects that you might wish to adapt to encourage learners to talk about what works best for them…

Vicky wanted to support learners to evaluate approaches to promote equality and diversity within their sessions. Initially, she gave out rating scales so learners could indicate how useful the sessions had been. However, most learners just ticked the '5 star' box, which didn't help her decide how to improve the sessions. To help address this issue, Vicky then experimented with her evaluation methods, designing a large prompt sheet for the learners to annotate:

Learners were invited to write on the sheet or on sticky notes. Teachers also scribed.

Vicky and her colleagues encouraged paired and group work, which helped reassure individuals that their ideas were valid.

Because learners were building the page together, this helped them to explore and develop additional ideas that had not previously occurred to Vicky and her colleagues.

The team found that prompt sheets were more meaningful and inspiring to other teachers than statistical data from '5 star' reviews.

From this example, we can see how prompting the learners – based upon the teaching activity – provides much more useful feedback for the teacher, and also helps learners participate and feel part of the research. These approaches may also help build better relationships between learners and teachers. This feels especially important for our work in Further Education, where learners may have had difficult prior educational experiences, and their voices or opinions about teaching and learning seldom sought or heard.

→   You can read more about Vicky's study in **OTLA 3, Bishop Auckland College and Darlington Borough Council's** report[35] (p.29) and she also wrote about it in more detail in an article in **Teaching in Lifelong Learning**, 2018[36]

Another useful prompt came from **Community First North East** (CFNE), who needed to understand how to improve their initial assessment process. Learners were assessed on arrival at the centre, as this was a requirement to trigger learners' funding. However, staff sensed that this immediate assessment on their arrival made many of their vulnerable learners feel very uncomfortable during their first days on programme. This prevented learners responding well to the tests, making the initial assessment process unfit for purpose.

To help staff to design a more user-friendly initial assessment process, learners at the centre were asked to annotate a stick figure on a large sheet of flip paper.

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[35] https://repository.excellencegateway.org.uk/OTLA_NE_and_Cumbria_Project_Summary_Booklet.pdf

[36] https://www.teachinginlifelonglearning.org.uk/article/id/538/

The stick figure process shifted attention away from the self-conscious learners but still helped these learners to express their feelings and concerns.

The shared flip sheet encouraged groups to share their experiences, and teachers and learners began to understand what helped or hindered their performance in tests.

This simple resource generated excellent learner feedback to guide their action research. Working from the learners' feedback, the centre staff then amended the formal assessment process and introduced more learner-friendly activities. They also got permission from their funders to defer the formal initial assessment process.

How might this person feel about being assessed when they first join?

→   You can read more about CFNE's study on the **Excellence Gateway**[37] (p.21) - and also in more detail in an article in **Teaching in Lifelong Learning**, 2018[38].

Helping learners to be open about your teaching

There are several reasons why learners can find it difficult to be openly constructive about the teaching and learning activities:

- Throughout schooling/ earlier life, learners are often expected to follow the teacher's instructions without question, so it may be confusing for learners to be asked what they would find helpful in their classrooms.

- Many learners assume that when the teacher asks a question, the teacher already has a 'right' answer that they expect the learners to provide so they are hesitant to say anything.
- Learners can find it uncomfortable to offer any answers that might call into question a teacher's established patterns of working.
- Learners may not know why they find something problematic, so struggle to give an answer.
- Learners may worry that learning is problematic because they are the problem (too lazy, or stupid, or both).

If you are trying to encourage discussion about what gets in the way of learning, the 'Previous Learners' Statements' activity below can provide a useful prompt to get groups of learners talking. By highlighting statements that you have heard learners make in the past, you are showing them that it's acceptable to express their own opinions.

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[37] https://repository.excellencegateway.org.uk/OTLA_NE_and_Cumbria_Project_Summary_Booklet.pdf

[38] https://www.teachinginlifelonglearning.org.uk/article/id/535/

Previous students' statements

The Maths questions are too complicated quite often, I just don't know what they're looking for.

I just get settled with one topic then we move on to the next thing.

Sometimes I think that the online materials are written for a different course.

I like it when the teacher comes over and checks that I'm on the right lines.

If you provide these statements on cards, individuals or pairs can sort them into 'Agree', 'Disagree', or 'Don't know' piles.

This approach can be adapted when working remotely, by using tools like **Jamboard**, to enable learners to work in groups and do 'haptic' (hands-on)-style tasks.

You can offer learners blank cards to add their own statements.

This activity should provide the structure for a focused discussion. Because you have provided the statements, you should be able to focus the discussion which follows, whilst still providing learners with freedom to express their views.

There are a variety of ways for teachers to stimulate structured discussions about teaching, so feel free to be creative! In addition to the suggestions above, you could use visual prompts (e.g. photos or videos) and you could help learners to make their own visual productions (e.g. photos, videos, drawings and posters). Each can give you insights into the world of the learner. Do encourage learners' creative responses, and if you can give learners a structure or scaffold to guide their creative responses, you're more likely to elicit usable feedback.

💭 Research Tip

Remember – you are not chasing after verifiable numbers of responses for a scientific paper, you're looking for any learner's insights that will help you understand what's getting in the way of their learning. These insights from learners – and your practical changes that you made in response to this information – will be of major interest to your colleagues who are likely to be grappling with similar challenges.

Exit tickets

When talking about 'learning', learners usually need something concrete to discuss, so where possible, get them to talk about the work that they've actually been doing in your class. One way to do this is by using an exit ticket. Here's a simple example that was used by Support Assistants at Redcar College.

Exit ticket

What I learnt from this activity

....

What I did not understand:

....

What I need to know:

....

Here, the exit ticket was handed out to learners at the end of each session so they could briefly record what aspects of the lesson they found useful, and what they wanted more help with.

The team designed A5/6 slips illustrated with coloured images so the learners could see that their views were special and important, but they didn't have to write very much.

You can read more about Redcar's study on the **Excellence Gateway**[39] (p.9) and also in more detail in **this article** in Teaching in Lifelong Learning.[40]

A simpler version of the exit ticket is asking learners to write responses to questions on a 'sticky note' and stick them on the back of the classroom door as they're leaving (when working online, this could be done as an anonymous 'polling' activity, using, e.g., **Mentimeter**.)

By making the slip anonymous, learners don't need to worry that they will be blamed if they didn't enjoy a positive learning experience. Here are three very general questions that you may like to explore with learners/ tailor to your needs:

1. What I learned from this activity
2. What I did not understand
3. What I need to know

Hopefully, learners' responses to these questions will provide an insight into how they are experiencing your session.

By giving the exit slip at the end of the session, you can take these slips away to quietly study what learners have written – the more time you have to make sense of their answers, the better you will get to know your learners. It's often eye-opening to compare their evaluation of the session with their activity in class or any work that they may have produced during the session.

Learners may not always give very full or focused answers, so the first time you use these tickets you might try a pilot, and work through how learners could complete them. They can be reassured that it is helpful to indicate which aspects of the lesson could be clarified or changed. (Do have a pen at hand – you'll begin to get some real insights from this introductory discussion.)

These activities may also help learners realise that it's not their lack of intelligence that's to blame for their lack of progress, but the teaching and learning approaches they've experienced, and, working together, you can change these approaches in this latest stage of their education. By encouraging your learners to help you investigate how to improve their engagement with the subject, you are showing them that you're taking their ideas seriously, which in turn is likely to help learners 'buy in' to any changes you introduce following discussions.

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[39] https://repository.excellencegateway.org.uk/OTLA_NE_and_Cumbria_Project_Summary_Booklet.pdf
[40] https://www.teachinginlifelonglearning.org.uk/article/id/537/https://www.teachinginlifelonglearning.org.uk/article/id/537/

How does engaging learners in your action research make a difference?

In the OTLA 6 action research programme, FE practitioners repeatedly said how working with their learners to improve their learning experience led to much better relationships between them. FE teachers pride themselves on building good relationships with learners, but they were still frequently surprised – and delighted – to be gaining a better working understanding of why individual learners were struggling.

When learners disclosed what was helpful and what was getting in the way for them, they began to trust teachers and to be motivated in their classes. It was often win-win in the classes – teachers had a better idea of how to adapt their practices to help learners, and learners were enjoying being there and being more motivated to try the teacher's new approaches.

> **Although it's always important to get to know your learners, the project has put more emphasis on this, by working with the learners and getting to know them as people, rather than just students.**
>
> *Sheffield College teacher*

> **We needed to get to know our English students better.**
>
> *City Lit teacher*

> **Seeking the support, assistance and engagement in the projects from learners naturally gave rise to very fruitful and rich lessons and powerful feedback. Learners reported that they thoroughly enjoyed being part of a high profile project and began to take on leadership roles in their groups to support the experiments conducting in their classrooms. This boosted their confidence, self belief and encouraged a warm rapport.**
>
> *London South-East Colleges Project Leader*

2.4. Getting going – using an action research planner

Practitioner action research in FE usually follows a process of

- Identifying a teaching, learning or assessment issue to investigate
- Planning how to trial a new approach
- Implementing a change
- Reflecting on the outcomes of the change with participants
- Identifying what further changes are needed to improve provision for learners

… and repeating the process by testing out the further improvements that you have identified. (You can think of it as a 'pilot' and a full trial if that helps.)

These repeated cycles of the action research process are intended to help you refine what you are doing and act as a way of confirming that your plans are working to good effect. Part of this confirmation is checking with learners and colleagues to get their perspective regarding the success of any activity.

To help you do this, we offer you an example of an action research template that previous teachers have found useful. Below is an example of the planner that Amanda might have used:

INITIAL ACTION RESEARCH PLAN

a. *What issue do I want to explore? How do I know change is needed?*

GCSE resit learners seem reluctant to take risks in their writing. They seem to use a good range of vocabulary in class discussions but don't apply this in their written work.

b. *What will be different if the improvement is successful? (i.e. what evidence should I be looking for?)*

If the peer-marking activity is successful, they will build on each other's knowledge and develop the confidence to be more ambitious. The evidence should be in their improved commitment in class and other teachers will recognise it in the learners' written work.

c. *What are other teachers doing to address this issue?*

Our English Manager has shared a range of practical applications on Assessment for Learning in English from Marshall and Wiliam's[41] book. I think that the peer-feedback approach is most likely to engage my learners quickly.

d. *How can I begin to investigate this issue through a practical teaching activity?*

Arrange for pairs of learners to exchange homework and offer advice to their partner about how to improve the spelling, punctuation, and grammar. Collect the work for marking as normal and judge whether the standard of work is rising.

e. *How might I get my learners to help in exploring this improvement?*

Let them know what I'm hoping to achieve through doing this exercise. Discuss it with the group afterwards and ask whether they found it helpful, or if we need to make further improvements.

f. *Who else might I work with (colleagues, support assistants, managers etc)?*

Am working with the English department team to choose different approaches and then meet to review how well different approaches have worked.

g. *How could I share my findings with other practitioners?*

As above, will share with the English team through our meetings.

As we see from her planning sheet, Amanda made a plan, and she altered this plan as a result of the learners' response to the activity as she saw in their written work. This is typical in practitioner action research – her research is not about proving that peer-feedback 'works', but about finding out how to improve her learners' confidence with English practices.

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[41] Marshall, B. and William, D. (2006) English Inside the Black Box, GL Assessment.

With action research, your plans change when you realise that you need to refocus to meet the learners' needs.

Amanda's team followed the English Department action research project schedule that the project leader had designed:

Action Research Project: Using 'Assessment for Learning' strategies to improve English GCSE achievement	
July – CPD week	CPD sessions for English staff on Marshall and William's AfL in English[42]
	CPD – Introduction to practitioner action research.
September	English staff to select AfL activities to trial with learners,
Sep/Oct	Trial activities, record learners' feedback and also evidence of the outcomes from these activities and share with English team in Week 6 meeting. Discuss how activities need to be revised or extended after half term
Nov/Dec	Trial revised approaches and find evidence of outcomes from the revised activities. Share findings with English team Week 12
Jan/Feb	Write up 2 side case study of the research and attach relevant materials and resources to share with staff from across the college.
February	Week 18 Project leader compiles report from staff case studies and arranges for staff to present their research findings at cross college CPD event in Week 20

The examples show one **template** (Appendix 1) and schedule to help plan an action research project. Most plans are variations on this, and we imagine you would tweak it to suit your situation.

What happened next....

We can see from the above how Amanda and her team attempted to plan and schedule their collaborative project.

At this point, it may help us to consider a more detailed account of how Amanda carried out her action research and how it fitted with her teaching. We see how her teaching strategies changed as she became more aware of the effects of her teaching on her learners.

This account shows how and why learners are taking more responsibility for their learning; how Amanda's relationships with learners and other staff are improving; and how Amanda is beginning to get a better understanding of how learners think and, thus, how she might change her teaching approach in future.

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[42] Marshall, B. and William, D. (2006) English Inside the Black Box, GL Assessment.

Using peer feedback to help learners make greater progress in GCSE English resit classes

Amanda's story

Amanda had been invited to join colleagues in her English Department's action research project. The Department wanted to improve the performance of the large numbers of GCSE resit students who previously achieved disappointing results. Amanda was frequently frustrated when teaching these groups who appeared demotivated and disengaged in sessions. The team of English staff agreed to explore Assessment for Learning strategies with learners. Following a CPD session led by the project mentor, Amanda decided to experiment with a "peer-feedback" activity. She hoped that this approach would help her students become more interested in their work and help them improve their performance in English.

When the new term began, Amanda planned a twenty-minute exercise near the end of the last lesson of the week. She arranged for pairs of learners to exchange workbooks and proof-read their partner's homework, offering advice about how the spelling, punctuation and grammar could be improved. The students were a little apprehensive about the activity, but quickly took it on board, attempting to correct their partners' English errors. All of the students engaged with the activity, using the new Papermate pencils which Amanda had handed out for the task. Amanda then gave them ten minutes to exchange and to make any final changes to their own peer-reviewed work, and she collected their workbooks at the end of the session.

There were mixed findings from this experiment. Amanda found that all of the students had offered some feedback, although the least confident students either just ticked or made positive comments about their partner's work. In most pairings, several errors had been missed (and quite frequently, unnecessary punctuation had been suggested as students seemed to overcompensate when they weren't sure). On the positive side, the students had been interested in the activity, and there was a sense of purpose and a positive atmosphere was created. Consequently, she tried the exercise twice more during the following weeks and had similar results.

Although Amanda had completed the activity three times, and the students had enjoyed being more actively involved in the lesson, she couldn't find any real evidence that the students were taking on board the feedback and changing their practices in English. Whilst students appreciated having their spelling mistakes corrected, there were few indications that they had now learned how to spell these words correctly. Amanda did find one unanticipated benefit from her experiments – where she had spotted that peer-markers were giving incorrect advice, she organised a recap session to clarify the misunderstandings, and she found that students were generally more engaged in these recap sessions and contributed more in the class, and were more willing to defend their points of view.

However, on reflection, this peer-feedback activity wasn't being noticeably effective at changing the learners' spelling, punctuation, and grammar.

Amanda shared her experiences when the project team met to review their progress at half term. A colleague described how he had used peer-feedback in creative tasks, so Amanda decided to redirect the peer-feedback activities to focus on descriptive writing. Her colleague was using a writing feedback template which he had designed to ensure that any peer feedback always focused on how learners could improve on what they were already doing well, and Amanda adapted that template to guide the learners as they read their partners' first drafts. When she collected in the templates, she was surprised by the range of expressive vocabulary which had been generated by the activity. Building on this, at the start of their next session, she returned the templates to the students and asked each student to select the word that had been the most useful improvement to their writing and wrote these on the whiteboard. In this short whole class activity, nearly every student made a helpful contribution which

was praised by the teacher, and again this helped establish a positive atmosphere for the subsequent English activities.

Amanda used the peer feedback template twice more that term, once in a session on "Connectives" and once with "Linguistic devices", and each time she collected the completed templates. These helped her to monitor what the students had been doing and also to prepare for a session that built upon (and celebrated) the learners' contributions. At the end of term, she photocopied examples of some completed templates to show the team what her class had been doing. She also shared some examples from submitted assignments where she judged that students had been influenced by the peer-feedback activities.

In Amanda's contribution to the final project reporting, she wrote a short case-study account outlining the development of her peer-feedback activities. She concluded that whilst these activities could only occasionally be directly linked to an improvement in some learners' use of English, she would keep using and developing this approach as the peer-feedback sessions appeared to have had a very positive social effect in improving classroom relationships. In her judgement as a teacher, they had encouraged students' engagement in English lessons and improved their commitment and confidence, leading to fewer late arrivals and slightly better attendance being registered.

To help other English teachers understand her project, Amanda attached an appendix to the case-study. This appendix included an example of a peer-feedback lesson plan; an annotated copy of the peer-feedback template which she had annotated to show where she had made changes; and five anonymised examples of students' peer-feedback showing a range of responses. She also attached a number of comments from a student discussion where she had asked the students for suggestions about what could be done to improve the peer-feedback experience. Some of these suggestions had been adopted.

The English team were asked to present their project experiences with colleagues across the college at the next professional development event. Amanda's Head of English persuaded her to share these experiences on an English teachers' blog, and several teachers responded with 'likes' and some of their own helpful suggestions.

If you would like to read about what other commentators found when they analysed Amanda's story, click on **Annotated Amanda's story** (Appendix 2).

Their analysis looks at:

- How she arrived at an idea.
- What she learned when her plan didn't go as intended.
- How being involved in the research seemed to motivate learners.
- How she learned from and with the team.
- How she selected evidence from the classroom.
- How she shared her learning.
- How what she learned can be useful in other teachers' settings.

2.5. What research methods should you use?

In this section we invite you to adopt, adapt and create methods of capturing information about your teaching situation that will help you take action as a result of your investigations, and to share your findings with other interested teachers.

In Jim, Nadia and Amanda's case studies, and in the examples in this guide from FE practitioner reports, teachers have found ways to gather information from their classrooms and workshops which improve their knowledge of their everyday teaching and lead to more effective practices.

Rather than talk in detail in this guide about 'interview techniques', 'focus group organisation', 'document analysis', 'questionnaire design' or 'observation schedules', we believe that the best way to encourage teachers to select appropriate action research methods is to share examples of how other FE practitioners have devised ways of working with learners and colleagues. Seeing how teachers in similar situations have been able to investigate their teaching often inspires us to adapt their approaches.

🗯 Research Tip

In **section 2.3**. we share methods to engage learners in your research and in **section 2.6**. there are a variety of suggested methods for eliciting fellow teachers' insights. All of these can easily be adapted to your own work.

If your initial searches about your teaching interest lead you to relevant practitioners' studies, the methods that they used to gather information are also useful starting points for you to consider adapting.

In investigating your own classroom, you will often discover that you're creatively customising your own research methods. Just as Jim had to change his checklist as the original was resisted by his learners, you may also have to make your own modifications to adapt other people's research methods to suit your own situation. (This creative tweaking of research methods is a similar process to teachers working on developing a uniquely personal teaching style.)

If you devise simple but learner-friendly ways of generating trustworthy information from learners or colleagues, don't worry if it's not an 'approved' method and therefore isn't acceptable; remember, busy FE practitioner researchers need to develop information-gathering methods that will help them make more informed decisions towards ensuring FE learners get their second chances in education.

📑 Recommended Reading

For those who might want to go deeper into teachers' research methods, a classic introductory text suggesting other techniques and a background rationale into methods for investigating your teaching is David Hopkin's (2014) "A Teacher's Guide to Classroom Research"[43].

Don't feel that some information - such as your scribbled impressions of a learner's responses to an online presentation – can't be used as evidence because it is your personal opinion; if it assists you and your colleagues to gain a better appreciation of the learner's experience, it's valid.

Similarly, if you feel uncomfortable about asking a learner's permission to use a piece of work to share more widely, your anonymised description of the principles underpinning this piece of work will enable

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[43] Hopkins, D. (2014) A Teacher's Guide To Classroom Research. Open University Press; 5th edition

other teachers to identify with the situation that you are describing, and will help you and your colleagues to reflect honestly and to act positively on the insights that you have gained. (You can read more about how we tackle tricky issues like this in **Section 3.3 Ethics**)

☁ Research Tip

Remember, the types of information you are seeking to gather from your personalised research methods are designed to improve your insights into your teaching practices, not to act as objective evidence as if in a court of law. Credibility may well be more persuasive than 'hard copy' evidence; for example, one learner's comments in a tutorial about why they find groupwork difficult may be far more helpful in changing your teaching than twenty students' questionnaire responses all agreeing that they found your lesson to be 'fun'.

In conclusion, it is hoped that adopting and adapting some of the action research methods from this guide will help you:

a)   systematically reflect on what's working in your practice;

b)   gain constructive feedback from learners and trusted colleagues;

c)   engage in collaborative learning with colleagues;

d)   build confidence in your ability to do research and;

e)   rediscover your enjoyment in teaching!

2.6. Gathering shareable evidence that your changes are working

How will I know that what I'm doing is making a difference?

Teachers often tweak their everyday teaching and get a sense from learners' reactions that the changes they have introduced have helped improve learners' skills, knowledge or confidence. However, action research invites you to think more deeply and broadly about the changes you have made.

One difference between 'reviewing' your teaching and 'researching' your teaching is that 'review' involves you reflecting on what you have done, whereas 'research' invites you to capture shareable evidence of how the changes you have made have actually helped your learners. This shareable evidence helps you think more deeply about your teaching and supports you to plan future learning with deeper insight.

If we think of Jim, Nadia and Amanda's research stories, we see how they made plans; collected in learners' work; discussed the activities and the work produced with learners and with colleagues and kept records of these discussions. This process gave them constructive insights about what learners needed and why, which then helped them plan their next sessions.

Jim was able to observe that his planned improvement – his checklist for learners to make notes in relation to their practical work – was not being used in the way he had initially hoped. Instead of discarding it completely, he discussed his checklist with learners and made changes based on their feedback and suggestions so it became more user-friendly and fit for purpose. When he reintroduced his revised checklist, learners engaged much more productively with it than they had before, and Jim noticed how the notes learners made were supporting the quality of their practical work too.

Jim had a range of shareable evidence to show the differences his new intervention was making:

a)   his original (unsuccessful) checklists and the learners' initial work;
b)   his revised and completed checklists and the learners' improved work;
c)   the notes he made whilst talking to learners about the checklist and;
d)   his notes about learner engagement and progress before and after he introduced the revised checklist.

By collecting this shareable evidence, Jim could claim that his revised checklist was making a positive difference for the learners. By sharing his checklist and findings with other vocational teachers, Jim gave them the opportunity to adapt and trial the checklist in different vocational areas.

Nadia had learners' completed check-in tickets, which provided her with some concrete starting point to begin agreeing with learners where they most needed help. She also kept notes during her research project's team meetings, where discussions were had in relation to the effectiveness of the check in tickets in relation to learner progress, their confidence to ask for help and the important role of Nadia and her learning support colleagues in providing a supportive bridge between teachers and learners. This shareable evidence helped Nadia and her research team make a credible knowledge claim in relation to the effectiveness of check in tickets, as well as helping them to dispute findings from previous research that discredited the effectiveness of learning support in relation to improvements in learner progress.
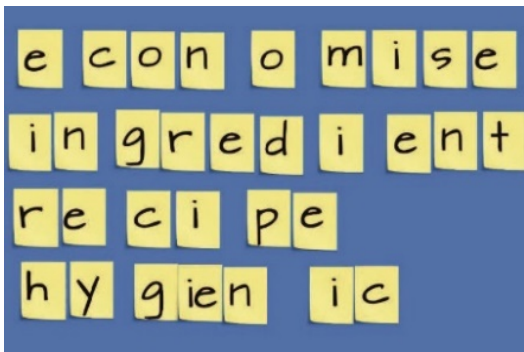
Amanda could see that the first peer-feedback exercise that she devised had very mixed results from the initial work that learners had completed. Having shared these with her English team, she adapted and trialled a colleague's suggested template, with greater success than before. In terms of shareable evidence to show the difference her peer-feedback exercise was making for learners, Amanda had learners' original assignments, the new completed peer-feedback templates and learners' amended assignments. Amanda was then able to focus more deeply on specific areas of learners' writing, to see which aspects seemed to have been specifically improved following the peer-feedback exercise.

In each of the examples described above, practitioners had evidence from their everyday teaching activities to show that what they were doing was making a difference. The shareable evidence Jim, Nadia and Amanda collected also enabled them to discuss their research with others and provide illustrative examples of their accounts.

Most importantly, the shareable evidence from the activities Jim, Nadia and Amanda embedded within their everyday teaching and learning practices helped them to investigate more deeply what was working for learners, which supported them to further improve their approaches and resources. The action research process also helped Jim, Nadia and Amanda to reflect upon and interrogate the effectiveness of their initial ideas with learners and colleagues. This interrogation resulted in improved materials, and a better understanding of how, when and with whom they might be best used.

Some examples of how you might present evidence for discussion.

Here are some examples from previous OTLA projects to illustrate the types of evidence from teaching activities that practitioner researchers have used in previous post-16 projects:

Evidence example 1 – Learners' work or activities

Staff at **Greater Brighton Metropolitan College** share examples which demonstrate how their collaborative booklet resources helped those learners who often had low confidence rather than low ability.

By studying the learners' written response to the resource stimulus, staff were able to gauge the effectiveness of this resource and redesign their future resources.

We're grateful to the project team for sharing learners' actual work (with permission). (Often teachers are reluctant to share completed examples of learners' work, even though we immediately recognise such work as being similar to our own students' efforts.) You can read more about their project, and also read about how they used a paper tablecloth to gather learners' ideas on the **CCC Practitioner Research website**.[44]

Evidence example 2 – Learners' and staff feedback on the changes being researched

Staff at **Redcar College** collected 'Exit tickets' and post-its from learners. Teachers and support staff also worked in pairs and kept diaries recording how learners responded to the changes which they introduced, which helped them plan further improvements.

Read more about this project on the **Excellence Gateway**. [45]

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[44] https://ccpathways.co.uk/practitioner-research/otla-6/project-6/6a/

[45] https://improving-teaching.excellencegateway.org.uk/content/etf3018

Evidence example 3 - Examples of resources that staff have adapted

'Puzzle pieces' - Exemplar material from ETF's post-16 Phonics project (p73)

How the **Education and Training Collective** Team adapted the recommended approach

Sharing examples of resources that have been adapted through different stages enables other staff to appreciate the thinking that underpins changes to teaching and sometimes illustrates how teachers can reflect on published work and create their own original resources. Read more on the **CCC Practitioner Research website**. [46]

As we see from the above examples, most of the evidence has come from practitioners' everyday teaching so doing action research has not really added to their teaching load.

Evidence example 4

As the **Greater Brighton** team developed their booklet they found that encouraging learners and staff to share their experiences of using the booklet helped them refine and improve it. They discovered that shared feedback gave teachers more confidence to respond to their individual learners' needs beyond the booklet.
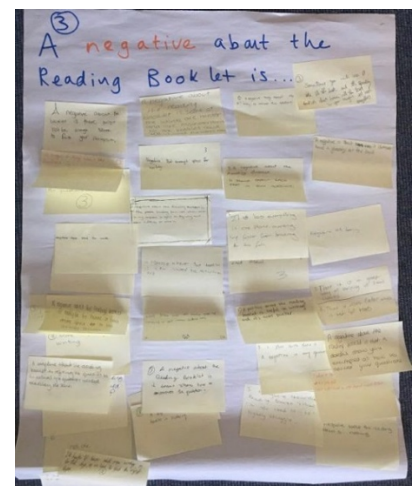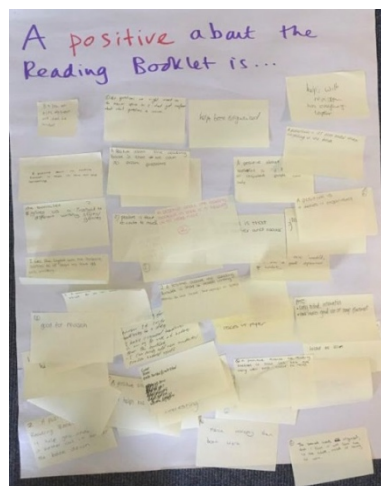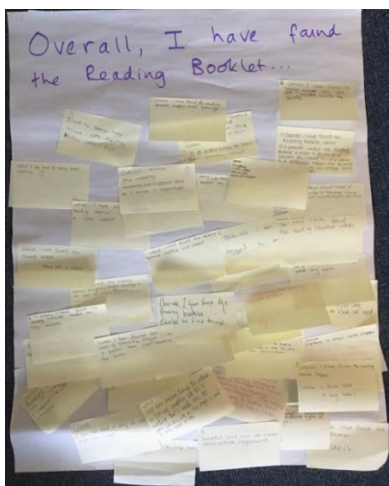
To help understand how the revised booklet of exercises might be helping learners, the **Greater Brighton** team sought learners' feedback from simple sticky note comments, prompting both positive and negative contributions about the booklet.

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[46] https://ccpathways.co.uk/practitioner-research/otla-6/project-10/10a/

Evidence example 5

Greater Brighton teachers were also invited to offer their feedback on a Padlet.

> What about a 'writing' booklet? Key resources in one slimmer booklet to do with writing tasks?

> Booklet is a well-organised and a handy go to resource that is clearly laid out and saves on numerous confusing sheets of paper. Great texts and questions for Language Paper 2. Helpful definition pages for students to refer to and to aid independent study.

> Weak students are more able to complete answers through the very scaffolded tasks. Students that have not accessed GCSE English before are able to learn answer structures through scaffolding of skills. Some students with low confidence, rather than ability, seem to have more success with starting or completing answers using the word banks and scaffolds.

> Tasks are not challenging enough for some learners and many learners are not stretched, where extension are seen as optional. It seems as it we're differentiating tasks rather than allowing for differentiation in outcome. Removing extension tasks and giving more room for higher ability students to write more or in more depth could be an improvement…Could possibly be improved by adding 'pass checklist' earlier/in booklet 1.

(Importantly, this shared feedback helped staff to see how their colleagues were thinking about their teaching, and how to respond to learners working at different levels.)

Since the team have shared their final report on the **CCC Practitioner Research website**[47], other teachers have been able to access their reports, and this combined evidence from the learners' work was important for many readers. Seeing 'real-life' learners' work, teachers' resources, and comments from the staff as they were developing and testing the resource has engaged readers who might identify with the teachers' dilemmas. Hopefully, reflecting on this evidence might have helped other practitioners to evaluate their own provision.

Who else might provide useful information?

There are many other people who could provide useful information and insights for your project, including:

- Support workers
- Managers
- Parents/ Carers
- Employers

There are some important ethical considerations with regards to working with research participants such as these in the 'research tip' below.

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[47] https://ccpathways.co.uk/practitioner-research/otla-6/project-6/6a/

It's helpful to ask yourself when wider research participants' insights might be useful and how you might gather such insights?

Selecting evidence from available data

When researchers talk of 'data' and 'evidence', data can be thought of as all the available pieces of information that is associated with the project activity, and evidence are the selections of this data that you deliberately choose to support your professional judgement about the consequences of your project changes.

Report writers sometimes present a collection of data such as survey responses or teaching materials that have been used in the research activity. Whilst this general data indicates that an activity has actually occurred, the more important data (which provides insights into the value of that particular intervention) should be highlighted with an accompanying commentary explaining why you find this data to provide convincing evidence.

Data usually requires commentary to act as credible evidence; for example, a class set of grades is unlikely to inspire another teacher, but if it has annotations or a commentary indicating how and where disadvantaged students can be seen to be achieving beyond their anticipated potential, this is likely to awaken another teacher's interest and prompt them to seriously consider introducing such an intervention themselves.

To encourage you to plan how you might arrive at convincing evidence that has credibility with fellow practitioners, we offer you the following challenge:

A Hair and Beauty department plan to introduce a learner-led 'problem-setting' approach to encourage greater commitment in maths lessons.

Which of the following sources of evidence might best help other teachers judge the usefulness of the 'problem-setting' practitioner research activity?

1.   A pie-chart showing the proportion of teachers agreeing to take part in the project.

2.   Classroom resources produced by teachers to encourage learners' problem-setting.

3.   Teachers completing a 'What Went Well / Even Better If' worksheet half-way through the project.

4.   Research resources recommended as useful by teachers.

5.   Learner retention data for the year.

6.   Samples of learners' completed assignment tasks

7.   Learners' discussion about their maths assignment tasks.

8.   Bar charts showing results of learner questionnaires.

9.   Pairs of learners completing a 'What Went Well / Even Better If' worksheet half-way through the project.

10. A Learning Support Assistant's notes about a learner's progress.

There is no 'right answer' to this question about best sources of evidence as you will be exercising your judgement in the light of how teachers in your context might respond. However, if you would like to compare your response with another teacher's, go to **Appendix 3.**

How do I know that my interpretation of evidence is fair and trustworthy?

When we review events, we all often have different viewpoints and interpret the same event slightly differently. For example, in the learner's work in the example above from Greater Brighton, one viewer may see limited work with messy crossings out which is careless and effortless; another may see this as being a significant improvement on the learner's previous attempts, with evidence of the learner reflecting on, and improving their work.

No single analysis or interpretation of data can ever be absolutely correct, and the route to getting the most informed judgement is by actively seeking the viewpoints of any learners and staff who are involved in or are close to the action. Some people choose to seek a trusted colleague's judgement, and these constructive helpers can be described as 'critical friends'.

When we open our action research to learners and colleagues to explore how their interpretations confirm or challenge our initial viewpoints, we often get a more informed interpretation of the effects of our actions on learners. this feedback from other participants helps us plan more responsive future learning activities.

Research Tip

Please be aware that even though you are inviting parents/ carers, employers, learners and support assistants to contribute to your research discussions as equals, they may not feel free to be completely open. When seeking their insights, find ways of stimulating responses that enable your respondents to contribute freely – e.g. discussing issues with small groups of learners rather than with individuals, or asking supervisors for general insights about what might help their apprentices (rather than asking supervisors specific questions about the tasks that apprentices are expected to do whilst on site, which might invite a defensive response).

Building on surveys, samples and statistics

Some practitioners are tempted by the security of surveys or questionnaires when they start doing action research because they associate 'research' with numerical data. However, although surveys might give you more confidence that something needs to be changed, you need to find out not just 'what' happened, but 'why' and, also, 'how' you might change things going forwards with your particular learners. For these reasons, survey or questionnaire data on their own are not necessarily that useful for persuading teachers that the changes which you made were worth considering.

However, if you have done a survey, it can be very worthwhile to use your carefully collected survey data to prompt some focused discussions with your group. You can analyse and collate findings from your survey data and present the findings to your group for further discussion.

Example: Think-pair-share discussion

"This is what (XXXX) survey found.

    a) How far do you agree with what these learners said?
    b) Why do you think so many learners find (XXXX) difficult?
    c) If you were the teacher, how might you make (XXXX) easier for learners?"

As you can see in the example above, by probing deeper into research survey responses, you're exploring with your learners why the survey respondents might have answered as they did. You still have the security of your statistical base, and now it's being brought to life by getting learners' explanations that can give you a deeper understanding of exactly what learners need from your teaching. Importantly, it can provide the learners with a non-threatening way to reflect on why they themselves may have difficulties. It

can help learners feel more in control of their learning, and it is likely to inspire their buy-in to any changes you make. The survey should now give you more usable insights.

To summarise, don't think of survey responses as established facts – instead, use the survey to help you to ask better questions about your teaching, and to help your learners start to understand how they might learn more effectively.

Can the findings from my classroom investigations be applied to other teachers' classrooms?

Because each teaching group and situation is individual, it is not reasonable to claim that an action research activity that is successful in one classroom will necessarily 'work' in another teacher's classroom. However, if the description or case study of your action research is shared more widely, other teachers may recognise features of your study that relate closely to what happens in their classroom, and therefore they may well adapt features of your approach to experiment with in their own teaching (i.e., they reflect on what you have done and 'pinch and personalise' your strategies and materials).

Although individual studies are not suggested as authoritative good practice that can be applied to all situations, practitioner action research accounts offer other teachers the prospect of 'relatability'. This means that if another practitioner can identify with the context and integrity of a teacher's account, then the account has a truth of experience that is likely to have practical research value for teachers.

In accounts describing the real world of teaching, practitioners should aim for 'trustworthiness' and authenticity. Where teachers read a convincing account accompanied by credible evidence selected from lessons, this is likely to build their own professional knowledge and encourage them to reflect upon, and possibly change, their own teaching.

📑 Recommended Reading

If you would like to read more about how action research fits alongside other research approaches, Judith Bell's (2018) "Doing Your Research Project: A Guide for First-time Researchers"[48] includes a very accessible background. (See also **section 3.6, Accessible Resources for Hungry Practitioner-Researchers**)

2.7. Sharing practitioner action research – writing for different purposes and different audiences.

The main aim of practitioners doing action research is usually to find out how they might become better teachers. Having achieved some success, for some busy practitioner researchers, there can be an understandable temptation to step back from their research activities at this point. However, it would be a sad loss to practitioners everywhere if they didn't share their original, grounded, 'real world' discoveries which are making a difference for their learners and themselves and that could benefit other teachers and researchers.

In practitioner action research, whilst improving teaching and learning activities are the first concern, the full potential of your research can only be realised by giving others insights into what you have learned about your subject, about your learners and about yourself as a teacher. As we've seen throughout this guide, when practitioners give us glimpses into their classrooms and workshops, and share examples from everyday practice, other teachers often get engaged and begin to reflect again about their own situations.

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[48] Bell, J. and Waters, S. (2018) Doing Your Research Project: A Guide for First-time Researchers. Amacom; 7th edition

Finding a starting point for sharing

The first stage in helping people to share teaching issues is often in staff meetings where teams can discuss the best way to tackle a shared teaching challenge. This is what Nadia, Jim and Amanda did, and so did many of the teams in the OTLA projects[49]

We have often found that if individual practitioners can share their research findings in team meetings at first, this initial experience makes it easier for them to then share across departments, and then possibly to open their teaching world to colleagues from other institutions.

Most practitioners enjoy talking about their teaching informally with friends in staffrooms, but they are often reluctant to share deeper disquiet about their private teaching uncertainties (such as "Why don't learners pay attention in my sessions?" or "Why don't learners prepare properly for my flipped classroom activities?"). However, once practitioners have pooled their experiences and they see how much other practitioners identify with their common concerns, they take great pride in being acknowledged by fellow professionals, and often develop strong bonds with newfound fellow travellers keen on improving their teaching.

When practitioners are open about the challenges they face, they can break out of the stifling culture of defensive individualism and move towards joining a community of progressive collaborators, enjoying the liberating experience of recognising themselves as practitioner researchers who are striving for a higher level of professionalism, and feeling that change is within our hands.

First steps in recording progress

As projects develop, we have seen how teams can make good use of digital noticeboards, such as Padlets, for sharing their practitioner research experiences.

Example of Suffolk New College Padlet[50] with responses

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[49] https://ccpathways.co.uk/practitioner-research/

[50] https://padlet.com/c_collins2/9f3czi457gszlimd

Even short contributions from practitioners in spaces like Padlet or on 'real' sticky notes are very important first steps in encouraging colleagues to acknowledge teaching and learning issues in a purposeful way. Practitioners reading these accounts can quickly get a sense of the life of the project and can immediately reflect on how the teaching changes may (or may not) be relevant to their own classrooms and workshops.

Writing short case studies

Busy FE practitioners can be reluctant to get involved in action research if it is going to result in extra work such as writing reports (and over the years, some practitioners have also shown a reluctance to spend time reading theoretical accounts of what *ought* to happen in classrooms).

However, you don't have to spend ages writing a report to communicate your findings. Some practitioners have begun to provide one page bullet-point accounts of their classroom experiments. These focused reports, like Julie Scorer's below, capture the action research process in an accessible and stimulating invitation to other teachers:

Researching the Use of Mobile Phones to Improve Students' Evaluations in Art

Background

I am an Art teacher whose students are always using their phones in class. I decided to try to use this to my advantage by encouraging them to record the different stages as they produced their artwork. I hoped to give the students ownership of their projects and to show a recorded journey of what they have achieved during the day using Snapchat. This can then be used to help students to evaluate their work in sessions, and hopefully achieve more organised final evaluations of their projects. Some of the students struggle to follow a plan and this might give them the structure they need to reflect. The websites below showed me what had been achieved by other teachers.

What actually happened?

Students responded instantly and they liked the ownership and the trust I had given to them to be responsible in the classroom with their phones. They all worked independently with their projects and they used their chat as a history timeline of the progress they had achieved. They liked the visuals that you could add with the emoji and the Snapchat images. When the students eventually came to evaluate their work, they did use printed Snapchats to help with their evaluation.

Did it have the effect I hoped for?

This was a really good aid for the Level One and Level Two students but on trial with the Level Three students they complained that it didn't have enough space to write the appropriate information so effectively the Snapchat limitations didn't work for them. Their solution for the level three students was to use snap chat for visual reference but they still had to write up the response in their notebooks. It was only partially successful for them.

What did learners think of it?

The learners were happy to talk around the work they had done using Snapchat. Most of the learners used this but there was a problem when a student didn't use social media. This was overcome by using the class iPad with the Snapchat app installed. I was worried this would pinpoint any student who didn't have a mobile phone. However, the student was happy to use the class iPad and this didn't make them feel uncomfortable.

The students loved that they had a simple but effective way of reminding themselves what they had done during the session. This created a discussion which we took further talking about artists using mobiles in their work.

What next? How could I improve upon it in the future?

I will continue to use Snapchat throughout my session with my Level One and Two group with recording evidence and also when we go on trips. I will ensure all photographic paperwork is signed and permission granted by all students to do such activities.

I will talk to my Level 3 students to see how their mobile phones can help their evaluations in other ways.

Useful sources that I drew on for my research:

Getting Started with Snapchat in your Classroom.[51]

Use Snapchat to Engage Students[52]

Julie's account was one of 28 practitioner accounts from across all the departments in Bishop Auckland College where the teachers and support assistants agreed to try an action research approach to improve their teaching. Read more on the **Excellence Gateway**[53] (p.15).

A project leader, Elaine Mattinson, identified a range of benefits from practitioners writing short reports:

- It quickly invites other practitioners to see inside another teacher's classroom or workshop and encourages comparisons to be made.
- It doesn't eat into teachers' precious time, and the writing task isn't too challenging.
- Once the practitioner had listed some bullet points, the pressure of writing began to be relieved, and practitioners started reflecting about what they had written, and how they could make the writing even better.
- Having written something themselves, the teachers became more active readers of what others had written.
- The project leader gave reassurance and encouragement about what they had written and the way that it was written.
- The short accounts often started a deeper discussion between writers and project leaders which prompted taking the research further.
- Some practitioners might want to write at greater length so that they can properly explain all the implications of what they have written.
- When practitioners contributed their short reports, Elaine found it easy to write the longer project report that was expected by the project funders. Importantly, she also compiled the short reports into a booklet which encouraged a subsequent practitioner research project team during the following year.

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[51] https://ww2.kqed.org/education/2017/02/06/getting-started-with-snapchat-in-your-classroom/

[52] https://sfmagazine.com/post-entry/august-2018-use-snapchat-to-engage-students/

[53] https://repository.excellencegateway.org.uk/OTLA_NE_and_Cumbria_Project_Summary_Booklet.pdf

Engaging your audience by weaving evidence from teaching into your writing

Throughout this guide we have looked at how practitioners can gather persuasive evidence from the data they collect about their everyday teaching activities. By using weblinks and adding appendices to reports, writers can furnish readers with an immediate range of examples from their teaching investigations. One good example of this is South Devon College who invested considerable time and effort in capturing and presenting the evidence from their project. Read more on the **CCC Practitioner Research website**[54] Access this interactive **ThingLink**[55] for more examples of multimodal approaches to evidence and reporting.

Writing for a wider audience

The Sheffield College also produced some excellent examples of team plans, resources, and evidence from learners' assessments together with remarkably honest and enlightening **reflections by the teaching team**[56]

However, some of the Sheffield team wanted to share their writing in greater length and to spend more time in exploring the subject of their research, so Charlotte Bowling wrote an illustrated article for the **'Research and Practice in Adult Literacies'**[57] (RaPAL) Journal, which detailed her personal experience of encouraging staff to promote more positive mindsets in GCSE English resit students. In the same issue, the project leader, Emma Ireland, reflected on how the action research project also benefited all the staff working on the programme; in some cases, it revived experienced teachers' enthusiasm for teaching which had become worn down from managing waves of learner negativity towards compulsory resits and repeated failures.

Both accounts can be read in the **special action research edition** of the RaPAL Journal[58].

It is interesting to see how these accounts continue to draw on the evidence from the project which is published in the report and appendices. Other partners in the project were invited to present their accounts of FE practitioner research at the 2020 **Collaborative Action Research Network** (CARN)[59] international conference.

Conference presentations are a useful way to broadcast FE teacher accounts; they appeal to teachers' presentational expertise, and act as a confidence-building halfway house to working up a journal article that can contribute 'insider' practitioners' insights which complement and illuminate research conducted by external researchers. A great way to share your research findings/ journeys is through **FE Research Meets**[60] (#FEResearchmeet). They are democratically run conference events that offer Further Education practitioners the opportunity to share their research or practitioner enquiry.

We can see how, when FE teachers share their experiences in any form and at any stage of their research, it can contribute to building a more accessible resource bank that will lead to teachers taking personal responsibility for their professional growth.

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[54] https://ccpathways.co.uk/practitioner-research/otla-6/project1/1a/

[55] https://www.thinglink.com/card/1432084621192855557

[56] https://ccpathways.co.uk/practitioner-research/otla-6/project4/4d/

[57] https://rapal.org.uk/

[58] https://view.publitas.com/rapal/rapal-journal-101/page/56-57

[59] https://www.carn.org.uk/

[60] https://www.feresearchmeet.org/

As long ago as 1977, John Elliott produced the first 'Bulletin' for the newly formed Classroom Action Research Network (CARN). In the introduction he argued that it was necessary for teachers to produce their own accounts of teaching, or be forced to follow the interests of a research community that might not fully reflect teachers' concerns and learners' interests…

> **"**
> *If teachers want to gain control over what is to count as relevant knowledge of their work in ways which feed their professional responsibility for making informed classroom decisions, they need opportunities to communicate freely with each other about classroom problems, and methods and techniques for collecting and analysing data about them.[61]*

Below are some tips to help you write a report that will excite readers and that will have the potential to challenge and change other teachers' thinking:

Do

- ✔ Be open when describing your situation – FE is a messy territory, and readers will love your honesty
- ✔ Encourage learners to give their opinions in writing, in pictures, on videos or in discussion
- ✔ Share where you got your good ideas from (both your ideas about teaching and about doing research)
- ✔ Explain where you changed direction and deviated from your initial plans when necessary
- ✔ Highlight how you adapted ways of encouraging learners and colleagues to share their insights about your teaching and their learning experiences
- ✔ Share key feedback you got from learners and colleagues – even the unwelcome bits!
- ✔ Celebrate your successes, but also let readers know what didn't work
- ✔ Let the reader know how your research has changed your thinking about "how learners learn" – and give examples of what that means for your practice

Don't

- ✘ Design surveys/questionnaires that lead learners to provide just the answers that you want
- ✘ Ignore evidence that challenges your ideas
- ✘ Stick to initial plans when it's obvious your learners need you to change direction
- ✘ Hide learners for whom your changes haven't worked
- ✘ Provide data without any explanation about how this information has influenced your thinking
- ✘ Present your new teaching activities as representing evidence of success– show how these activities influenced learners' progress.

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[61] Elliott J (1977) *Who Controls Classroom Research* Classroom Action Research Network Bulletin 1 Norwich: UEA at https://library.artstor.org/#/asset/SS7731763_7731763_11960406;prevRouteTS=1625224573567 accessed 21/06/21

Platforms to amplify your work

Below is a graphic that illustrates a sample of the different journals, blogs, podcasts and websites you could choose to submit your work to. Take a look at the **OTLA showcase**[62] mentioned in **Section 2.1** to discover just a few that your peers have chosen to share their work. To help you choose the platform that is right for you, have a look at this **Wakelet**[63] which details brief summaries of each including: subject matter, audience, format, word count and submission details. Please note that opportunities to share your work are increasing all the time and as such, view the collection as a live and growing asset.

Amplify Your Research

Intuition — SOCIETY FOR EDUCATION & TRAINING — journal

More info + opportunities: bit.ly/AmplifyFEres

Language Issues — NATECLA — journal + blog

CARN Collaborative Action Research Network — journal (CARN Praxis) + conference

TES (was Times Educational Supplement) — tes — magazine + website

FEtapestry curated by PDNorth — PDN #FEtapestry — YouTube channel + blog

RAPAL Research and Practice in Adult Literacy — RaPAL — journal

podcast + #Feresearchmeet — #FEresearchpodcast

Photo by Sudhith Xavier via Unsplash – Thanks!

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63 https://wke.lt/w/s/Cui-Fj

PART 3: THINKING MORE DEEPLY ABOUT ACTION RESEARCH IN FE

3.1. Doing action research in the real world of FE

Our writing team have gathered some questions about trying to conduct action research that FE practitioners have raised as we have worked together on various projects.

> ### 📑 Recommended Reading
>
> This section does not attempt to explain in depth how action research relates to other types of research approach (or 'paradigms'). If you would like to explore various philosophical justifications for adopting an action research methodology (especially useful for those writing dissertations) we recommend a range of texts in the further reading **(Section 3.6)**

Can action research be considered as 'real' research?

The idea of doing 'research' can make teachers nervous, as research can sound quite technical and best conducted by outside experts, but we hope to persuade you that we are all researchers, and that practitioner action research has an important role to play in contributing to educational knowledge.

In one of the very first responses to the question of whether action research could be justified as 'research' Michael Bassey (1999)[64] argued that there are two main types of pedagogical research (i.e. research about teaching): One kind searches for 'generalities' and attempts to produce general statements about teaching and learning and they base their conclusions on surveying and observing relatively large numbers of teachers and learners in an attempt to try to draw general conclusions. Bassey suggested that although there may be much of interest to teachers in these generalised studies, he could find little direct assistance in these reports that would help individual teachers integrate such theory into their day-to-day work of the classroom.

He described the other kind of pedagogical research as the search for 'singularities', and this includes teachers' investigations in individual classrooms – what we would describe as practitioner action research. In this type of research, teachers make no attempt to generalise their findings beyond their classrooms, but instead offer descriptive case studies which might interest other teachers to try something similar, where they can recognise aspects of these studies that are relevant to their own teaching situations.

Bassey claims that teacher (or practitioner) research makes an especially important contribution for three reasons:

1. Practitioner action research tests ideas to see how practically useful they are in classroom conditions – to what extent do these ideas work?
2. Practitioner action research investigates those issues that the teachers themselves consider are important;
3. In practitioner research, there is a reasonable expectation that practitioners' investigations will lead to some improvements in classroom practice.

The study of single classes in practitioner action research is obviously different from more large-scale forms of research, and therefore teacher researchers do not have to mimic the research methods appropriate to large-scale objective studies studying large populations of teachers and learners which require representative samples of learners. Action research makes a valuable contribution in the educational research world, and practitioner researchers do not need to justify their studies by attempting to employ research approaches that are normally associated with large-scale research studies.

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[64] Bassey, M. (1999) *Case Study Research in Educational Settings*. McGraw-Hill Education (UK)

Practitioner action research is indeed 'real' research and should be used when it is the most effective way of addressing practical issues in unique teaching situations. To move the teacher, the organisation and the teaching profession forward, insider practitioner action research needs to both draw from, and contribute to, large-scale research conducted by outsiders who can use different approaches.

Working with other research approaches to improve education

We can see that practitioner action research has much to contribute to classroom practice and to the research literatures. Practitioners' action research investigations are conducted by 'insiders' who can offer privileged viewpoints both of the teaching context and also of learners' starting points and progress. By illustrating the usefulness of their insider knowledge with concrete examples from FE classrooms and workshops, the practitioner researchers are often able to communicate very effectively with other teachers. This sharing of ideas and innovations can help to re energise and motivate practitioners to test out similar approaches in their classrooms and with their learners.

> ### 📑 Recommended Reading
>
> In 1998, Black and Wiliam published "Inside the Blackbox"[65], a review of 250 research studies which concluded that 'Assessment for Learning' significantly benefited learners. However, the authors discovered that their evidence lacked the practical details that would enable teachers to apply those ideas in their classrooms. Consequently, over the next six years, Black and Wiliam led a team which encouraged groups of teachers in schools to produce practical examples of how AfL could be put into practice in classrooms. In 2004 Black and Wiliam produced their co-created booklet of practical examples ("Working inside the Black Box"[66]) that was eventually of more practical use to teachers in their practice than their original research had been.

If Black and Wiliam had not decided to work alongside teachers and test out their theory of assessment in real life contexts, their research would have been a far poorer resource for the education sector than it is today. Throughout this guide, we have been encouraging you to investigate and research your own practice, including (potentially) through exploring how published theory or other widely accepted teaching strategies play out within the unique context of your own setting and for FE-based learners. When we do this, we often arrive at new thinking about how the original theory can be more effectively applied across our Further Education sector.

This is important, as much educational theory and many teaching strategies have been developed by people who are working in different parts of the education sector. As FE-based practitioners, we have a responsibility to support learners within our own context, which means applying 'off the shelf' research and interventions with a careful and critical eye. This is not to say that drawing on previous research is not helpful. However, it's best to view this type of research as a useful starting point for your own investigation, rather than as a blanket intervention to be applied without question.

We believe that if FE practitioners engage with key ideas about teaching and learning, and trial them to see how they can be translated into practice, they will make a significant contribution to the wider research community's understanding about the pedagogical approaches that are most effective for the FE community. As Dylan Wiliam says, "Everything works somewhere, and nothing works everywhere"[67]

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[65] Black, P.J. and Wiliam, D. (1998a), Assessment and Classroom Learning, *Assessment in Education*, March, p7-74

[66] Black, P.J. et al (2002), Working inside the Black Box: Assessment for Learning in the Classroom, nferNelson: London

[67] Wiliam, D (2018) Creating the Schools Our Children Need: Why What We are Doing Now Won't Help Much (And What We Can Do Instead) Florida: Learning Sciences International

Testing theory in FE practice and generating theory from practice

Teachers at Petroc College were keen to understand how GCSE resit learners were responding to their recently restructured English curriculum, which drew on ideas from Oakes and Griffin's (2019)[68] work with A Level students around 'mindset' and the development of meta-cognitive skills. Instead of their usual three-hour English lesson, GCSE resit learners were timetabled to attend two hours of subject-specific English learning and one hour of bespoke mindset work with a specialist learning coach. The team had hoped that their new focus on mindset would automatically translate into improved motivation and greater progress for the learners they were working with, as it had seemed to do for Oakes and Griffin's A-Level learners. However, as the team progressed with their research, it became increasingly apparent that they would need to adapt some of the 'off the shelf' mindset strategies to more effectively meet the needs of GCSE English resit learners, many of whom had additional learning needs and/ or had recounted negative experiences of education in the past. By actively seeking learners' views and feedback in relation to their learning, the team at Petroc were able to 'pinch and personalise' the mindset strategies that were helping learners progress and grow in confidence, and make further evidence-based changes to their curriculum.

The teachers at Petroc tested published theory within their own teaching contexts, and generated their own practical theories about how to adapt mindset activities for GCSE resit learners, which they published (**OTLA 6, Petroc**)[69].

"Where will I get the time to do research – I've a full teaching timetable and some challenging students?"

If you've got a full teaching timetable and some challenging students that you're helping prepare for exams, it's likely that you'll appreciate all the help you can get just to keep going! Fortunately, action research involves you looking deeper into your teaching rather than taking on additional study beyond your immediate teaching responsibilities. Action research begins in your own setting with you investigating where learners are struggling and where they're making progress. Although you will be seeking to discover what other teachers are saying about their struggles and successes with similar groups of learners, you remain focused on testing what they have found against its usefulness in your own situation.

At its simplest, action research involves thinking more deeply about a teaching activity, trying out, judging how useful it was, and listening to what learners have to say about how they found the activity. As we can see in the examples from Jim, Nadia and Amanda, when you make the effort to reflect on the materials that you have gathered from your teaching 'experiments', you can get insights into the barriers that are stopping learners make the progress they need.

As you begin to identify barriers and remove obstacles preventing learners making progress, learners are likely to become less defensive and more motivated. Learners' renewed interest eases some of the tensions that can make teaching so exhausting at times. In our experience, learners respond very well to being listened to and to having their insight and their ideas valued and respected.

Action research acts not only improves practice but also improves relationships between teachers and learners, so the time you invested in setting up the research activity and listening to learners is likely to pay dividends. Sessions become less challenging as your action research translates into designing more effective teaching and learning strategies with more motivated and amenable learners. Time after time, we have heard teachers who join projects say, *"I'm actually enjoying my teaching again."*

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[68] Oakes, S. and Griffin, M. (2019) The VESPA Mindset Workbook: 40 activities for FE students that transform commitment, motivation and productivity Camarthen; Crown House Publishing

[69] https://ccpathways.co.uk/practitioner-research/otla-6/project-5/5b

"Many of the challenges learners face, such as their home circumstances, are beyond my control. Is it worth me doing action research if my findings are just going to highlight things I can't change?"

Action research is about investigating how you can improve what you're doing in the moment. Your research may well indicate some of the wider social and personal reasons relating to learner progression, but essentially you are investigating how you can adapt your practice to improve how you work with learners, which is definitely within your control. There are probably a variety of reasons why Jim's Level 1 learners had been put off writing over the years, but Jim's practical challenge was to solve the problem there and then. His responsibility was to get them writing and recording information, rather than to uncover all the external factors that contributed to their reluctance to put pen to paper.

For example, Jim's attempts to get Level 1 learners to record their workshop progress might have revealed that several learners had inhibitions in writing arising from being embarrassed at school. Jim can't change what happened at school, but he did listen to the learners and amended their checklist activities to encourage them to commit to the task and restore their confidence in literacy activities. All the time, Jim's action research is concerned with improving these learners' life chances, whilst producing an interesting research account that will interest, inspire and influence other hard-working practitioners.

The OTLA Post-16 Phonics projects led by **Tricia Millar** from 'That Reading Thing' (read more on the **CCC Practitioner research website**[70]) led to significant progress in reading and spelling being made with adults and young adults who needed a great deal of help to make breakthroughs in their reading/ spelling confidence. These action research projects were based on helping learners to read/ spell more confidently, regardless of the reasons why they hadn't made progress in these areas… yet!

Caution – avoid 'control groups'!

Some practitioners plan to try out a particular approach with one group and to monitor a 'parallel' group who aren't being included in the research to compare the effectiveness of the strategy. There are a number of problems with this approach:

1. All groups of learners are different – even within the same organisation – and can rarely be meaningfully compared.
2. As you are researching with your learners, they are likely to improve their performance as they become more motivated and involved. And, as these more interested learners will also be giving you constructive feedback about how to make further changes, they are likely to become even more successful.

There is a very simple way to capture the relative progress that your group have made. Before you begin, state the issue you are attempting to address, the approach that you are going to introduce, and state what differences you hope to see in your learners if the approach is successful. You can then look at the outcomes from your research activity and record how far you fulfilled your aims. Other teachers will very probably relate strongly to your informed commentary.

Our general advice is to follow Jim, Nadia and Amanda's examples, and to try out your ideas with one willing group at first. If you find that learners are benefitting from the changes, then try out your initiative as soon as possible with your other groups.

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[70] https://ccpathways.co.uk/practitioner-research/otla-6/project-10

But what if my research goes wrong?

When we begin to investigate an issue in our teaching and begin to look more closely into what is really happening in our classrooms, we often become aware that the situation is 'messier' than we first thought. We make assumptions about our teaching effectiveness and have expectations about our learners that are often confounded when we study more closely and listen to learners' opinions. Here is an example:

Anton's Action Research

A Media Studies teacher, Anton, began to research why his learners weren't getting involved in discussing and analysing the video clips that he had prepared to illustrate key themes. Through his research, Anton hoped to find out "What are the best video resources to use for discussion purposes?"

After talking to the learners about why various clips had not prompted the discussions that he had planned for, Anton found that they did find the clips interesting, but the learners were hesitant about joining in whole class discussions in case they embarrassed themselves with their limited knowledge.

Anton talked to his mentor, who suggested organising the class into small groups to discuss the clips and giving them worksheets to guide them through the video analysis task.

This proved to be successful as learners could check ideas out and build new understandings in the comfort of their friendship groups. The learners were then more willing to join in Anton's whole class discussion at the end as they felt more confident about their answers and had already begun to build an understanding about the themes in the clips from discussing with their friends.

From this experience, Anton began to understand that it was not choosing the right resources (i.e., better video clips) that was the issue, but it was recognising that learners were inhibited by peer pressures in the classroom, and that they benefited from being encouraged to work constructively in small groups.

Following his action research, Anton increased his use of structured small group work across more of his lessons. Through his research he had begun listening to his learners talk about their experience of the classroom and he had learned that rather than being taught information, they needed to be more actively involved in building their understandings in more comfortable settings helped by focused task sheets.

From the example above, it could be seen that Anton's research 'went wrong' as he failed to answer the question, "What are the best video resources to use for discussion purposes?". However, in terms of understanding – and changing – his teaching and learning approach, the action research process was highly successful:

- ✓ He changed his teaching methods *(using small groupwork; giving learners focused task sheets)*
- ✓ He updated his thinking (theory) about how learners learn *(learners need more active engagement in lessons, rather than being shown things)*
- ✓ He became aware of how his learners' feelings could inhibit their progress *(he began to understand what gets in the way of learners' learning)*
- ✓ He got a better understanding of himself as a teacher, *(he realised that he didn't have to control and deliver all the content of a session)*
- ✓ He could identify as a teacher-researcher *(being confident to explore, rather than to defend his teaching)*

When you are conducting action research into an issue in your teaching, your research cannot really fail; you may encounter some unexpected (and even unwelcome) findings and there may be things that are out

of your control to change, but you will always be improving your understanding of your teaching, your classroom, your situation – and most importantly – yourself.

3.2. Leading an action research team

You may have begun leading a collaborative action research project because there is an issue that you and your colleagues feel passionate about, or you may have been encouraged by others to engage in action research with the team for whom you have responsibility. Whatever your situation as a project leader, we hope our experience in helping action research teams gives you some useful pointers which you can adapt.

As you've probably found, all project teams evolve and develop from different starting points, and there is no one single way to get a research team working together. Much of team building is intuitive, and as a project leader you will need to make professional judgements as unique challenges and opportunities present themselves in your particular setting.

Towards a Rhythm of CPD

In our work supporting teams, we have found that the Teacher Development Trust's "**Developing Great Teaching**"[71] guidance has helped project leaders to steer the more successful action research projects; their principles seem particularly well-aligned to practitioner action research initiatives:

- One-off CPD events are rarely effective. Where possible, it's important to organise a *rhythm* of CPD support and follow-up. Practitioners are more likely to commit to changes in their teaching when they can meet regularly with other practitioners to consider planned changes and then review together how they worked in practice.

- Practitioners are inevitably busy, so benefit from having deadlines. Part of creating the 'collaborative rhythm' is ensuring that practitioners can attend all project meetings. Where project leaders schedule regular meetings at teacher-friendly times, and when they can make meetings into welcome events by organising catering (even coffees are a start!) team attendance and motivation improves.

- In these meetings, practitioners need time to explore the viability of new practices with other practitioners – i.e., they need time to discuss how initiatives will work in practice. If practitioners are to take on board new approaches, they will need to critically examine their existing assumptions about how their students learn. They are more likely to engage with new ideas if these are approved by other practitioners.

- Successful changes in practice often incorporate formative assessment activities which enable practitioner action researchers to see the immediate impact of any changes which they have introduced.

- Published research can give practitioners permission to challenge the status quo and change their practice. Research findings are best promoted when they are illustrated by concrete examples of the research applied to practice (which can then be evaluated by groups of FE practitioners). (Some mentors introduce new ideas about teaching approaches in 'coffee-time reads'.)

- External specialists can provide motivation and direction for change. However, because one-off events rarely have lasting influence, externals prove most effective when they act as regular coaches and mentors for practitioners to help them sustain that rhythm of professional

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[71] https://tdtrust.org/about/dgt/

development which is fundamental to the cyclical action research pattern of 'plan – implement – evaluate – redesign' that is central to practitioner action research.

Helping teams to plan productive projects

The collaborative action research process typically involves teams reaching a shared understanding of the project aims and then agreeing changes to improve current practices. Whilst these changes may address a common theme or focus, all teachers should be encouraged to design their own best route to introducing a change that will contribute to improved understanding of the group focus.

When Redcar College teachers and support assistants investigated how to improve the effectiveness of support workers in classrooms, pairs of teachers chose different strategies to investigate – some chose exit tickets, others developed learning mats, and others chose starter activities. All shared their experiences at regular meetings and a resource bank of useful materials was gathered to help all support workers and teachers.

There is a planning framework in **Appendix 4** to help project leaders think about how to choose and encourage a team of practitioners to begin the process. This 'needs analysis' template is intended to act as an initial working document to focus discussion and identify opportunities for development.

From activity to gathering evidence to sharing findings

In everyday teaching, practitioners rarely plan to gather evidence of the success of their teaching. Classrooms and workshops are usually incredibly busy, and practitioners necessarily make immediate working judgements about the progress of their learners. However, in conducting practitioner action research, teams need to purposefully search for evidence that learners have made progress as a result of the teachers' action research activities in order to justify their claims that the changes that they have made were worthwhile. A major part of your team leadership will involve encouraging practitioners on your team to gather concrete and credible evidence from their practice. Too often, teachers simply offer evidence that teaching activities have taken place without seeking evidence about the relative success of the teaching initiative. There can also be a temptation to stop searching when some evidence of success has been revealed, without searching for insights as to why other learners did not benefit from the experience. So, an important strand to your role will be to encourage team members to gather evidence that evaluates their activities, and reassure them that even highlighting unwelcome data is important because

   a) it informs fellow teachers about the consequences of particular courses of action;
   b) it testifies to their status as a researcher.

There is also a vital stage in the process of writing up (or recording) the findings from action research. When practitioner-researchers begin drafting reports of their research, this reflective writing process often prompts them towards trying further interventions at this late stage. The project leader's job is both to value what has been achieved and also to encourage any further interventions. Both strands are central to practitioners developing a more enduring stance towards practice improvement. This is because it signifies the extended professional who views their professional development as an ongoing personal process, rather than as a single project.

As the project schedule draws to a close, your role will then be to encourage the team to share their experiences – and their learning – within the team, then within the institution and, hopefully, beyond the institution. Teachers can be hesitant to open their practice to criticism (both in FE and beyond) so your task will be to celebrate all participants' contributions - even to the smallest audiences at first - and then build opportunities for them to carry their messages to wider audiences. This sharing might be in staff meetings, network meetings, or conferences and it may be written or broadcast in blogs, reports, articles, etc. to local, national and international audiences.

Project leading and organisational development

Project leaders (often with the help and support of other organisational change-makers such as advanced practitioners, learning coaches or HR specialists) play a pivotal role in whether practitioner research proves effective across organisations. This is through helping to ensure that individuals' classroom changes become adopted more widely in the institution, so that CPD plans, staffing, scheduling and resourcing responds to findings from teachers' research.

In the OTLA 3 and 6 collaborative projects (see below), the evaluators noted that successful project leaders drew on their pragmatic awareness of how organisations actually operate to very good effect. For example, experienced project leaders sensitively used their knowledge of individual participants; acknowledging that some participants were ready to make more significant changes to their practice than others. This differentiated approach to participants' 'research readiness' enabled more individuals to make good personal progress.

Project leaders called upon their working knowledge of organisational culture to promote good practice. The most effective project leaders drew on the organisational structure – CPD leads and teacher education teams to introduce pedagogical theory in bite-size chunks – introducing key ideas with practical applications that teachers would find manageable. Where teacher education staff contributed a wider range of strategies and resources, this gave staff permission to change the custom and practice that was not proving effective. Project leaders could also appeal to CPD managers to help clear schedules and prioritise team meetings.

It was also noticeable that project leaders needed to draw upon their experience of 'upwardly managing' at times. For example, senior management could be very nervous about action research teams reporting on progress in tackling problematic issues, if these reports drew attention to issues they would prefer were not associated with the institution. Project leaders often needed to reassure senior managers by emphasising in their reports the outstanding progress that their institution had made, and by clearly acknowledging the management's timely commitment in supporting valuable practitioner action research.

The OTLA 3 evaluation identified how projects were successful when they were guided by the "Developing Great Teaching" principles listed above.

Excerpt from OTLA3 Evaluation commenting on the role of project leads in supporting practitioners to conduct action research:

The most effective projects were supported by project leads organising a complementary rhythm for in-house practice development:

- ✓ Creating time and space for regular institutional meetings;
- ✓ Valuing practitioners' participation at meetings, through arranging attractive venues, speakers and refreshments;
- ✓ Introducing research-informed strategies through examples of concrete resources that make it easier for all participants to integrate published theory into practical activities;
- ✓ Ensuring practitioners work towards a manageable and measurable focus for their research;
- ✓ Demonstrating a timely interest following up practitioners' change activities;
- ✓ Acting as an interested audience to encourage reflective writing-up of the research;
- ✓ Providing constructive feedback on the writing and the further direction of the research;
- ✓ Using practitioners' reports to stimulate further activities and to ensure that the change in practice becomes sustained into fulfilling its potential.

Supporting a culture of collaboration through action research teams

Collaboration can provide an invaluable emotional function. Because researching one's practice often highlights a 'performance gap' between a session plan and what actually happens in the session, practitioners can feel professionally vulnerable. Therefore, it can help to have the supportive feedback of a mentor or team leader to protect practitioners from being either too self-critical or from hiding from the problem. Sensitive team leadership will provide an emotional foundation which can enables constructive insights to be accepted and translated into improved action.

We have found that participants really enjoy being part of an action research project team that has status in their organisation and also in the research world. Teachers embrace new identities as researchers and as teaching pioneers. Several participants have testified to recovering their passion for teaching, and many welcome reviving their intellectual interests which get neglected when their attention gets diverted onto full-time classroom firefighting activities. One of the huge satisfactions of being a project leader is that you will also rediscover that primary drive that underpins our teaching identities – you will have made a significant difference in many people's lives.

3.3. Ethics - caring for your learners, your colleagues and yourself.

"Do I have to get permission to do research with my students?"

In formal "outsider" educational research, professional researchers need ethical approval before beginning their research. However, when practitioners reflect upon their everyday teaching activities, they don't need formal ethical approval. Practitioners who are trying to help students by introducing new teaching and learning strategies will normally be proceeding within their everyday duty of care and safeguarding principles. This is made explicit in the **2018 BERA Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research**[72],

> "
> …in a teacher or lecturer's research into their own professional practice, students or colleagues will be part of the context, but will not themselves be the focus of that research.
> "

However, when we engage in practitioner action research projects, we do change your normal teaching practices and relationships, and it's helpful to be aware of these differences, which for some practitioners are significant:

A.   We work in a different way with learners and colleagues
B.   We share what happens in our classrooms and staffrooms with a wider audience
C.   We sometimes get drawn into adopting scientific approaches that may not prove helpful

A.   Working in a different way with learners and colleagues.

When we begin action research, we often talk openly to our learners about our teaching and ask them to comment on how we might improve their classroom experiences. Such discussion about teachers' practices can create shifts in power relationships between teachers and learners that might cause concern for colleagues as we are inviting learners to question how teachers practise.

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[72] https://www.bera.ac.uk/publication/ethical-guidelines-for-educational-research-2018-online

Making colleagues feel comfortable

When we invite students to discuss their learning experiences, we have to reassure our colleagues that we're seeking feedback specifically on our new teaching strategies, and that we are not seeking feedback about them. Be sure to set ground rules with learners when discussing their teaching and learning experiences – make it clear you want to discuss different teaching strategies, but they must avoid talking about other teachers. (This will reassure colleagues, and it will also make sure that your attempts at encouraging whole-organisation approaches are not counter-productive.)

Helping learners to feel comfortable

Try to make sure that learners don't feel uncomfortable in contributing their ideas. For example, it might be awkward for a learner to admit publicly that they don't like working with other students, so do find ways that learners can freely contribute their ideas (e.g., sticky-notes placed on the back of the door as the learners leave the classroom is a simple and effective method, as is using an anonymous online tool such as **Mentimeter**).

It is important to arrange feedback sessions which maximise opportunities for all individuals to contribute – an important part of the research is encouraging every participant to discover their potential as responsive and independent learners as they work with you to improve their FE experience. Your encouragement through this research process is important in helping learners build an identity that feels valued in educational settings.

Helping support workers to feel comfortable

Support workers are often in a rich research context, as they enjoy a privileged view of the learning process and have huge potential to contribute meaningfully to action research. However, support teams also have to occupy the sometimes challenging and complex spaces that lie between teachers and learners, which can require careful negotiation to manage and maintain relationships. One effective way of showing respect for support teams' roles and potential is by encouraging them to conduct their own action research activities. This can be incredibly liberating for support workers, who may sometimes feel undervalued by their teaching teams. Not only this, the unique perspectives, creative approaches to research and (often) relational research findings that support teams can share through their own autonomous research activities will inevitably help teaching teams further reflect upon, and develop, their practice for learners.

B.   Sharing our findings with a wider audience

When we share our findings, we must be very aware that everyone involved in our research has the degree of confidentiality and anonymity that they wish for. **If we identify individuals – teachers or learners – we have to make sure that they give their informed consent to our sharing of their experience.**

Ethical challenges: An example

Here we have an example of someone who risks compromising learners' confidentiality, possibly with very damaging results.

How might you achieve Mika's aims of sharing positive strategies with interested practitioners and researchers without risking learners' potential embarrassment?

Mika collects examples of learners' work and asks them to record short videos of themselves reflecting on the new initiative he has been trialling during their classes. Unbeknown to the learners, Mika uses their work and shows their videos at a local conference. Mika provides the conference delegates with some context, explaining that these learners have 'exceptionally poor literacy skills'.

C.   Adopting inappropriate scientific approaches

Many of us arrive at action research with impressions about good research being objective and factual, where scientists freeze variables by acting in pristine laboratory conditions, and are focused on measuring the effectiveness of their hypotheses by organising control groups. However, when adopting an action research approach, we're working **with** our learners to improve their learning experience (rather than doing research **on** them) so we obviously can't hide information from them. Furthermore, our teaching and research activities are changed by their ongoing feedback as we openly experiment.

If practitioners become attracted to the idea of distancing their learners in an attempt to make their research more scientifically objective, it can cause ethical problems as the learners may become secondary to the research, and research can take the form of being done **on** learners rather than **with** learners.

Here are three scenarios indicating where learners can be disadvantaged due to teachers' adopting inappropriate research methods. In each case, can you suggest:

   a)   What the teacher is trying to achieve?
   b)   What might be a better way of achieving it so learners are not disadvantaged?

Three Example Scenarios

Scenario 1

Jamie's project focuses on helping learners develop their grammar skills. In order to ensure that she can understand the impact of her new initiative, she makes a change in one class only. The class make excellent progress and become excited about their work. When learners from her other class ask whether they can do the same activities, Jamie explains that they must stick to the old ways, or it will ruin the experiment.

Scenario 2

Tunji explains to his class that he is going to do some research into best ways of teaching quadratic equations. He asks for anyone who does not want to take part in the research to raise their hand. One student raises their hand so Tunji asks them to work in the library so they don't have to take part.

Scenario 3

Helen's project team decide not to tell learners that they are part of a research project, as they are worried that if the learners know that research is taking place, they will question their teachers' ability and will not engage with their learning. After all, it is important that learners understand that they are there to learn from their teachers and learning support team.

Where ethics meets politics....

Please also make sure that the Senior Management team have approved your research focus. Getting this agreement not only avoids derailing your research, it may also improve your career prospects. Some organisations also have their own ethics boards or committees; sharing your research ideas with others may help you spot any unintentional ethical issues and support you to put safeguards in place.

If you are still unsure whether your research would require your participants to give consent, please raise this concern with your project leader, mentor, supervisor or manager who will advise. As a simple guideline, your learners should always come before your interests as a researcher. Should you need to gain informed consent, consent forms are available which can be easily adapted (see **Appendix 5**).

Guidelines for good action research practice

In any project which changes the familiar ways we do things, we risk unintentionally upsetting our colleagues and learners. We all have sensitivities and vulnerabilities, and we must be sensitive to individuals' concerns and possible danger that research could place them in. The following guidelines should be helpful:

1. Be open about your research intentions - discuss your plans with your learners, colleagues and management, and anyone else who might benefit. (This is of course good action research practice; the more we discuss the aims and activities in our research, the better insights we gain and the better decisions we make in our research.)

2. As far as possible, centre your research around your own classes. This can make it easy to manage and evaluate changes, and to check that their information is safely stored.

3. Don't make your research more important than your learners. Collect the data that is in your teaching, rather than significantly reorganise your teaching to generate data. Do invest class time in evaluating your attempts to improve teaching and learning activities with your learners – this often helps their motivation, as well as generating new insights for both teacher and learners – but avoid manipulating learners just to gather data. (Again, if you're concerned about this, check with your project leader, mentor or research supervisor.)

4. When you do choose to share your findings about your research, make sure that you treat learners and colleagues as you would want to be treated. Protect them and their work from being identified. (Sometimes unnamed individuals may be identifiable from a setting – e.g. a hearing-impaired Level 3 learner studying Art at a named college may be recognisable to other staff and students.)

5. Just as you will want your research contributions to be recognised, there may be occasions that you offer participants the opportunity to be identified appropriately. Do make sure that, whilst their role in the research is being celebrated, they are giving 'informed consent'. Help them to consider all the consequences and implications of having agreed to take part and to be identifiable in your research. (For example, a successful Literacy student in a prison setting might regret still being identifiable once they have left prison and become established in a job).

6. Your colleagues may be concerned that you are asking learners for advice about teaching methods. They may feel challenged if you try and make improvements to established strategies which they regard as central to their professional practice. To reduce tensions, avoid discussing colleagues' practices with learners, and do be open to asking for colleagues' advice about your emerging findings – you're more likely to encourage wider change if they feel that they have some investment in the initiative.

7. Above all, be honest about your findings. Most of our research benefits some learners to some extent. If we make authentic claims about our partial improvements, our research will have greater credibility with other teachers, who know that no strategy works perfectly in every situation. Most of us (teachers and researchers) have a huge enthusiasm for any improvements that we have initiated, but if we overclaim the value of what we have done, this can have negative effects on other teachers who have been influenced by our passion and then feel inadequate when the strategy doesn't work as effectively in their own practice. Our colleagues in FE need our full support – please ensure we never mislead them!

3.4. Practitioner action research is professional development

If you were in any doubt as to how much difference your practitioner action research will make to your teaching, a study of the **FE Professional Standards**[73] (see **Appendix 6**) reveals how investigating your teaching can generate clear evidence of you meeting every standard as you continue developing your knowledge, skills and values as a teacher.

One of the characteristics of the extended professional[74] is that you are responsible for your own development – engage in practitioner action research and you can now make that claim!

If I join an action research project, will I get a better job?

Definitely. (Doing action research won't necessarily get you higher-paid employment but we can promise that doing action research will make the job that you've already got much better….).

> ### 📑 Recommended Reading
>
> If you are interested in discovering more about how action research can help you structure your professional development, we recommend you explore "Action Research for Professional Development: Concise advice for new and experienced researchers" by Jean McNiff. Readers might find this particularly helpful if they are going to undertake action research at a Masters or higher level.

3.5. Doing action research independently towards a qualification

Action research has become increasingly recognised as a powerful driver of practitioners' professional development, and now many educational awards (including Cert Eds, diplomas, degrees, masters and taught doctorate programmes) include an action research assignment aimed at improving practitioners' professional practice.

Hopefully, this section will prove useful to those seeking a qualification by helping you meet formal assessment requirements whilst you conduct rewarding and meaningful research that gives you confidence and pride in your new professional qualification.

Developing your own research community

Your academic tutor and supervisor will doubtless help you connect with the wider action research literature, and you will also be encouraged to draw upon literature to justify your choice of subject-related topic area. Within your programme, you will usually benefit from discussions with your new peer group of teachers studying for the qualification– it's a wonderful opportunity to get fresh ideas from different teaching situations both within and beyond our sector. You can trade experiences and test out your ideas, reflecting on how your peers are adopting different approaches in similar or different contexts.

However, University staff are unlikely to have a close understanding of the key challenges and opportunities within your workplace, so it is important that you do build your own informal research connections within your own institution.

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[73] https://www.et-foundation.co.uk/supporting/professional-standards/

[74] The idea of the "extended professional" in teaching came from Eric Hoyle and is explored in his (2008) paper "Changing Conceptions of Teaching as a Profession: Personal Reflections" available at http://www.teacherleadership.org.uk/uploads/2/5/4/7/25475274/hoyle_changing_conceptions_of_teaching_as_a_profession-1.pdf accessed 4/7/2021

This is especially important in helping you settle on a focus for your research (see also **section 2.2**). Here are some possible sources of useful support:

Colleagues Do draw upon any staff who share your interest in improving teaching. These colleagues can act as 'critical friends[75]' who are willing to discuss your research and teaching activities. From these conversations, colleagues often develop into co-researchers, as they consider what they are learning from your discussions, and they then try these new approaches in their own practice.

Your critical friend might be a subject specialist colleague or a staff-member from a different department or institution. They don't need to know everything about your subject area and your group, but it helps if they have a working understanding of FE.

CPD Leaders Even in the smallest institution, there will be individuals with some formal responsibility for practitioners' professional development. These include CPD managers, HR staff and Advanced Practitioners, and there may also be a teacher education department. If you share your initial research intentions with these individuals, they are usually eager to direct you to useful resources and strategies, and often to introduce you to like-minded colleagues.

Managers Most managers are themselves experienced teachers and they will be heartened that they have been consulted about a colleague's research project, and excited that they can connect better with real classroom teaching concerns. If elements of the project are successful, they will be keen to see your research embedded in institutional practice, and they can work to remove practical constraints (e.g., staffing, rooming and timetabling) restraining the implementation of a successful teaching initiative which you have (collaboratively) researched.

☁ Research Tip

Ask your tutor/supervisor to point you towards good examples of practitioners' action research assignments from previous cohorts – these are incredibly useful in giving you a working understanding of what examiners expect from assignments, and they also signal which texts previous practitioners have found useful.

Reading previous assignments or theses written by practising teachers introduce research activities that you might choose to adapt yourself. They also highlight setbacks that practitioners might encounter and the pragmatic responses that practitioners select. They can offer teaching and learning insights that could be directly relevant to your own situation as a teacher and researcher.

Most importantly, they will also model how sharing accounts that honestly highlight classroom uncertainties and dilemmas – which all teachers face – is valued as high-quality research.

Finding a starting point rather than predicting a conclusion

As mentioned throughout this guide, the challenge for action researchers is finding an area of your teaching that feels worthwhile to you – *for example, helping GCSE students to write more confidently* – and then focusing this topic down into manageable activities capable of being researched within a limited time-frame – *for example, investigating strategies to help one group of learners whom you teach to plan their opening paragraphs with confidence.*

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[75] Sometimes teachers can be suspicious of the term 'critical friend', believing it invites a colleague to behave judgementally. If you are concerned, why not invite a colleague to act as a 'constructive friend', using their judgement and professional wisdom to suggest pragmatic solutions where they recognise problematic issues. You don't have to take their advice – it's your research – but it may encourage you to think more openly.

Finding the starting point for an accredited research project is often most difficult for beginning action researchers:

- On the one hand, action researchers are encouraged to investigate real-world issues within their 'messy' classrooms which can obviously lead to a host of unpredictable outcomes;
- On the other hand, they have to feel confident that this unpredictable research that might expose their personal teaching difficulties will culminate in a polished final report that neatly addresses all the awarding body's academic criteria.

There is a temptation for teachers facing this dilemma to be understandably strategic and to prioritise focusing the module outcomes. For those who have been conditioned to accept that successful research finds 'the answer' to a given research question, it can be difficult to appreciate that in an action research assignment the examiners are hoping to see evidence of an intelligent developmental research process, with investigations extending into unforeseen areas, often leading to the teacher making practice-changing discoveries that were never anticipated when the research began.

💭 Research Tip

In accredited action research, it's the personal research process (*how you go about the research*) rather than the research findings (*what you discover*) that examiners are interested in.

To help you through this initial challenge and to get the best out of this action research opportunity, do consult with your tutor to get guidance – and reassurance – on your choice of a manageable focus and a pragmatic starting point. Don't feel that as an independent researcher you need to be completely self-sufficient; successful action research dissertations are the result of teachers combining regular guidance from academic tutors with supportive insights from colleagues and learners in their own workplace community.

Insights from an examiner

It may be useful to share the perspectives of an experienced examiner of action research assignments to help you take greater control of your own action research design.

> *I was introducing 'action research' to a group of teachers who had just enrolled upon a Master's qualification. To help them grasp the nature of action research, I shared a previous student's assignment as an example of good practice.*
>
> *One student asked what grade that assignment had achieved. I replied, "About 70% – a very good pass.,*
>
> *"In that case", said the strategic student, "Could you possibly show us one that just passed – a 40%?"*

It might be helpful to compare the characteristics of a very worthwhile piece of action research (a 70%!) with a 40% that addresses criteria, yet fails to inspire the teacher and learners – or the readers.

Characteristics of successful and limited action research studies – an examiner reflects…

In the more successful studies:	In the more limited studies:
Openness	
The teacher opens their practice to readers in an effort to discover how to bring about improvements. The teacher is open to feedback and suggestions from colleagues, learners or critical friends.	The teacher uses the research opportunity to justify a specific teaching approach they wish to promote. The teacher only invites viewpoints from those who will corroborate their beliefs.
Engagement with learners	
There is a genuine attempt to involve learners and discover learners' needs, and these needs are seen as guiding the teacher's subsequent activities.	Learners' responses are guided towards providing evidence that will validate the predicted outcome. The teacher discounts any evidence from the learners which might challenge the teacher's pre-existing beliefs.
Development of the research	
The study develops in unexpected ways as the teacher responds to learners' and colleagues' feedback.	The study moves in a rigid linear fashion towards a planned and predictable conclusion.
Use of research methods	
'Evidence falls out of the teaching' – the teacher adapts methods to gather the most appropriate information from the learners in a specific classroom context.	The teacher follows a scientific survey approach based upon participants' perceptions rather than examination of concrete classroom experience. A qualitative rationale justifies the selection of survey quotes chosen to support the writers' viewpoint
Use of literature	
Literature is used as a reference point to help the teacher try out new ideas with confidence. The teacher tests and challenges assumptions in the literature. (A limited number of texts may be thoroughly tested in practice.)	Only those selections from literature which agree with the teacher's argument are acknowledged. (A large number of references may be name-checked in support of the teacher's viewpoint.)
Development of theory	
The teacher rethinks and re-theorises their practice as they become aware of the gap between their intentions and their actual practice.	The research account endorses the teacher researcher's unchanged thinking about practice.

Producing high quality action research

The binary table above is not intended to criticise any FE teacher who needs to make a pragmatic judgement about how to design their action research project; rather, it is encouragement to draw on the support available, and to trust that being committed to honestly investigating a teacher's classroom practices is more important than searching for an issue to write about that will have a plausible conclusion but won't engage your professional intellect or excite your passion for teaching.

When conducting accredited action research, every awarding body will have its own unique assessment principles, but there are two overriding criteria which are evident in high quality teacher action research as suggested on the previous page:

1. **Criticality** is key to high quality academic work at all levels. Universities are looking for candidates' capacity to be analytical and to make evaluative judgements, and this is doubly evident in action research accounts where practitioners not only evaluate literature, but also draw in the literature into self-critical accounts which offer the teacher's practice and thinking to wider scrutiny.
2. This criticality is complemented by **surprise** which Gorard[76] (2002:5) claims is the hallmark of good research. When teachers show how they respond to unanticipated findings that become apparent within their personal practice, they share insights that inspire readers. These individual acts of discovery enjoy a resonance and relatability that can inform and influence practice for readers everywhere, creating a research impact far beyond the singular study.

Remember: although you may be doing this research independently, you are not alone!

3.6. Accessible resources for hungry practitioner-researchers

Some teachers will begin their research guided and motivated by their research team. However, as practitioner action research is responsively developmental and opens up new avenues as the team's understanding develops, the portals and texts referenced below can be valuable introductions to worthwhile discussions about action research, teaching and learning.

🖥 Portals and websites

The following websites may be of interest to new practitioner-researchers exploring action research (including guidance on "How to Do It"!) They may help you focus on your teaching interest and encounter practitioners who share your interests (as well as your challenges and opportunities….)

The **Education and Training Foundation site**[77] is an excellent starting point. Together with **the Excellence Gateway**[78] Website, they also provide useful links to sector research into emerging priorities such as T-levels and previous OTLA projects.

The **Education Endowment Foundation**[79] has a toolkit which collates useful summaries of research from 'meta-reviews' on a range of teaching methods. Much of their info draws on studies from different sectors and countries, so post-16 practitioner-researchers can usefully reflect upon how their advice can be adapted.

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[76] Gorard, S. (2002) The way forward for educational research? Occasional Paper Series Paper 42 ESRC Teaching and Learning Research Programme Cardiff

[77] http://www.et-foundation.co.uk/research/practitioner-research-support/

[78] https://www.excellencegateway.org.uk/prep

[79] https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/resources/teaching-learning-toolkit/

Many practitioner-researchers find Geoff Petty's work to be practically accessible. His "Evidence-Based Teaching: A Practical Approach" is helpful – much of the content can also be found on **www.geoffpetty.com**. He also has some excellent guidance about 'Supported Experiments' on the homepage.

Books

Health warning – over the past 30 years, hundreds of books have been written about action research, many of which cover similar ground in slightly different contexts. You certainly don't have to read any particular book on this booklist to do worthwhile action research. If you have found other texts which help you tackle classroom research in your FE setting, please share that with us and say why, so we can pass on your recommendations.

Some of these texts might be particularly useful to those who are doing action research towards a qualification:

- Jean McNiff's practitioner site has a free downloadable **introductory booklet**[80] and this supplements her 2017 text "**Action Research for Professional development**"[81] published by September Books.

- David Hopkins (2015) **A Teacher's Guide To Classroom Research**[82] is very helpful and teacher-friendly, especially chapters on 'Why Classroom Research', 'Developing A Focus', 'Observation' and 'Data Gathering'. A good introductory text that can provide a starting point for those wishing to study Action Research in more depth.

- Judith Bell's 2015 "**Doing Your Research Project: A Guide for First-time Researchers**"[83] has a wonderfully short and reassuring explanation of action research near the beginning of the book and puts it in the context of different research approaches. (Judith was an FE teacher and principal)

- The **SAGE Encyclopaedia of Action Research** (2014)[84] has hundreds of short entries about how action research touches on every subject from 'Academic Discourse' to 'Zone of Proximal Development'. This may be particularly helpful should you be studying for a higher qualification. There's a short background account of 'Classroom-based action research' which gives readers an academic grounding about what it is, where it comes from and how it can be justified. University libraries will give access to this e-text.

- John Elliott's (1991) "**Action Research for Educational Change**"[85] provides the fundamentals of why teachers should conduct action research as the answer to all our educational problems. Every University Library has multiple copies.

- MacBeath, Rudduck and Myers (2005) "**Consulting Pupils: A Toolkit for Teachers"**[86] provides an excellent resource pack that is based around schools, but all resources are easily adaptable to post-16.

[80] McNiff, J. (online booklet) *Action Research for Professional Development* Available at: http://www.jeanmcniff.com/ar-booklet.asp

[81] McNiff, J. (2010) Action Research for Professional Development. September Books

[82] Hopkins, D. (2015) *A Teacher's Guide to Classroom Research.* 5th Ed, Berks: Open University Press

[83] Bell, J. (2015) Doing Your Research Project: A Guide for First-time Researchers. Berks: OU Press

[84] Coghlan, D. and Brydon-Miller, M. eds (2014) *The SAGE Encyclopaedia of Action Research*. London: Sage

[85] Elliott, J. (1991) *Action Research for Educational Change*. Open University Press

[86] MacBeath, J., Helen Demetriou, H., Rudduck, J. and Myers, K. (2003) *Consulting Pupils: A Toolkit for Teachers*. Pearson

- Helen Kara's (2020) "**Creative Research Methods: A Practical Guide**"[87] offers a host of ways to adapt research methods to suit the groups that you work with.

- Atkins & Wallace (2012) "**Qualitative Research in Education**"[88] is also really useful.

Networks

There are multiple networks, membership bodies and collectives you can join which will enable you to:

- keep you up to date on research being done in the sector. Some may be subject specific e.g. **RaPAL**[89] and **NATECLA**[90].
- read and contribute to journals and blogs that often include practitioner research findings e.g. **CARN**[91], **SET's InTuition**[92], **Research Colleges Group**[93] and **PDN's FEtapestry** [94]
- attend and present at events and conferences e.g. **#FEresearchmeet**[95], **BERA**[96] and **LSRN**[97]
- be part of an active community of researchers

Bear in mind that this list is not exhaustive, and you may find other reasons (and indeed other networks not mentioned here) that you find of value. In addition to this, if you are active on Twitter, there are FE research communities springing up all the time e.g. **#FEspeaks**, **#OTLA**, **#CuriousFE**, **#FEresearchmeet**, **#CfEM**. These constellations of practice change and adapt with the need of the sector and as such, they grow organically. Indeed, you may even set up your own!

Don't forget to dip into many of the FE websites that are mentioned in **section 2.1**, read the reflections on the OTLA Showcase Padlet in **section 2.1** and check out the platforms to amplify your work from **section 2.6**. It's important that as you read, you feel part of the action research community – and hopefully, you will begin to start writing yourself for our community.

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[87] Kara, H. (2020) Creative Research Methods: A Practical Guide. Bristol: Policy Press

[88] Atkins, L. and Wallace, S. (2012) *Qualitative Research in Education*. Sage Publications Ltd.

[89] https://rapal.org.uk/

[90] https://www.natecla.org.uk/

[91] https://www.carn.org.uk/

[92] https://set.et-foundation.co.uk/

[93] https://www.researchcollegegroup.co.uk/

[94] https://pdnorth.org.uk/

[95] https://www.feresearchmeet.org/

[96] https://www.bera.ac.uk/

[97] https://lsrn.wordpress.com/

APPENDICES

APPENDIX 1: TEMPLATE TO SUPPORT INITIAL ACTION RESEARCH PLANNING

Return to

INITIAL ACTION RESEARCH PLAN

a. *What issue do I want to explore? How do I know change is needed?*

b. *What will be different if the improvement is successful? (i.e. what evidence should I be looking for?)*

c. *What are other teachers doing to try to address this issue?*

d. *How can I begin to investigate this issue through a practical teaching activity?*

e. *How might I get my learners to help in exploring this improvement?*

f. *Who else might I work with (colleagues, support assistants, managers etc)?*

g. *How could I share my findings with other practitioners?*

APPENDIX 2: AMANDA'S STORY

Amanda had been invited to join colleagues in her English Department's action research project. The Department wanted to improve the performance of the large numbers of GCSE resit students who previously achieved disappointing results.

Amanda was frequently frustrated when teaching these groups who appeared demotivated and disengaged in sessions. The team of English staff agreed to explore Assessment for Learning strategies with learners. Following a CPD session led by the project mentor, Amanda decided to experiment with a "peer-feedback" activity. She hoped that this approach would help her students become more interested in their work and help them improve their performance in English.

When the new term began, Amanda planned a twenty-minute exercise near the end of the last lesson of the week. She arranged for pairs of learners to exchange workbooks and proof-read their partner's homework, offering advice about how the spelling, punctuation and grammar could be improved. The students were a little apprehensive about the activity, but quickly took it on board, attempting to correct their partners' English errors. All of the students engaged with the activity, using the new Papermate pencils which Amanda had handed out for the task. Amanda then gave

Teachers' notes – these embody our learning about what a successful project participant looks like

To get all the team motivated, it's helpful to agree on a general direction, and to encourage individual teachers to use their judgement about which strategies are worth exploring with different classes. These often start with a teacher's hunch about what might work.

It's useful for staff to test established approaches to see how well they can be adapted to their individual teaching setting.

Amanda didn't need to conduct detailed research into the theories underpinning Assessment for Learning (AfL) – but it was important that she had access to new ideas that other teachers and educationalists had found useful. Amanda's research task was to apply and test AfL approaches in her own practical setting to see how well they worked for her learners

The best action research experiments fit easily into teaching. Amanda has a short and simple end of session activity. If the exercise doesn't work as planned, it won't cause significant disruption to the progress of the class.

Students often resist change to established teaching approaches. Even though they might not have been successful in their approach to learning English in the past, learners are often nervous about stepping out of their comfort zones.

(Sometimes staff need encouragement and support from the team to persist in the face of students' resistance.)

It often gets students on board if you can invest in some little touches to show that you're serious about helping them improve.

Inviting the learners to commit to the action research activity usually gets them more interested in the lesson, and flags up that you believe that they can and will improve their performance.

them ten minutes to exchange and to make any final changes to their own peer-reviewed work, and she collected their workbooks at the end of the session.

This is good evidence in action research. It is meaningful to the teacher and will help her plan future lessons, it engages other teachers, and can be used as the basis for focused discussion with learners about next steps.

There were mixed findings from this experiment. Amanda found that all of the students had offered some feedback, although the least confident students either just ticked or made positive comments about their partner's work. In most pairings, several errors had been missed (and quite frequently, unnecessary punctuation had been suggested as students seemed to overcompensate when they weren't sure). On the positive side, the students had been interested in the activity, and there was a sense of purpose and a positive atmosphere was created. Consequently, she tried the exercise twice more during the following weeks and had similar results.

This is typical in action research – a strategy makes some difference but needs further tweaking. (That's why it's called action research – you investigate and keep taking action till you've made more significant improvements.)

With these limited and manageable experiments, Amanda was discovering which approaches didn't work as planned and where there was some sign of progress. This is good action research, as it shows how AfL approaches need changing in her setting.

Although Amanda had completed the activity three times, and the students had enjoyed being more actively involved in the lesson, she couldn't find any real evidence that the students were taking on board the feedback and changing their practices in English. Whilst students appreciated having their spelling mistakes corrected, there were few indications that they had now learned how to spell these words correctly. Amanda did find one unanticipated benefit from her experiments – where she had spotted that peer-markers were giving incorrect advice, she organised a recap session to clarify the misunderstandings, and she found that students were generally more engaged in these recap sessions and contributed more in the class, and were more willing to defend their points of view.

Action research activities usually lead to improved student engagement – and motivation.

Even when things don't go as planned, teachers usually benefit from fresh insight into how students can be helped.

However, on reflection, this peer-feedback activity wasn't being noticeably effective at changing the learners' spelling, punctuation, and grammar.

Amanda shared her experiences when the project team met to review their progress at half term. A colleague described how he had used peer-feedback in creative tasks, so Amanda decided to redirect the peer-feedback activities to focus on descriptive writing. Her colleague was using a writing feedback template which he had designed to ensure that any peer feedback always focused on how learners could improve on what they were already doing well, and Amanda adapted that template to guide the learners as they read their partners' first drafts. When she collected in the templates, she was surprised by the range of expressive vocabulary which had been generated by the activity. Building on this, at the start of their next session, she returned the templates to the students and asked each student to select the word that had been the most useful improvement to their writing and wrote these on the whiteboard. In this short whole class activity, nearly every student made a helpful contribution which was praised by the teacher, and again this helped establish a positive atmosphere for the subsequent English activities.

Amanda used the peer feedback template twice more that term, once in a session on "Connectives" and once with "Linguistic devices", and each time she collected the completed templates. These helped her to monitor what the students had been doing and also to prepare for a session that built upon (and celebrated) the learners' contributions. At the end of term, she photocopied examples of

Teachers working on a project really benefit from being able to listen to colleagues' stories of progress and difficulties – it always gives reassurance, insight and energy to make important next steps

All of teacher development and action research is about changing the things that need to change.

Adapted resources also make excellent evidence about how teachers make good learning decisions.

This is a high spot for teachers' action research – when teachers can begin to see how approaches are helping students, and there is an energy to keep building on these successful insights.

Students can also sense that they're making progress – this motivates them and improves classroom relationships.

Because they're experiencing some success, , the classroom is somewhere they want to be (for a change!).

This is how classroom changes can be evidenced. It is meaningful to other teachers, who can further adapt templates or other resources to suit their situation. and can influence (but not dictate, what they might do in their settings

some completed templates to show the team what her class had been doing. She also shared some examples from submitted assignments where she judged that students had been influenced by the peer-feedback activities.

In Amanda's contribution to the final project reporting, she wrote a short case-study account outlining the development of her peer-feedback activities. She concluded that whilst these activities could only occasionally be directly linked to an improvement in some learners' use of English, she would keep using and developing this approach as the peer-feedback sessions appeared to have had a very positive social effect in improving classroom relationships. In her judgement as a teacher, they had encouraged students' engagement in English lessons and improved their commitment and confidence, leading to fewer late arrivals and slightly better attendance being registered.

To help other English teachers understand her project, Amanda attached an appendix to the case-study. This appendix included an example of a peer-feedback lesson plan; an annotated copy of the peer-feedback template which she had annotated to show where she had made changes; and five anonymised examples of students' peer-feedback showing a range of responses. She also attached a number of comments from a student discussion where she had asked the students for suggestions about what could be done to improve the peer-feedback experience. Some of these suggestions had been adopted.

Where teachers are willing to produce short case-studies like this one, they usually have a powerful effect on other teachers.

These teachers' accounts are a vital part of the wider research evidence that other teacher action researchers can draw from when planning their own experiments

This is an important reason for engaging in action research – to improve all teachers' professional judgement.

These everyday examples from everyday practice gives other teachers both a credible evidence-base for their own research, and a relatable resource-base to adapt for their own teaching.

Throughout the research, students had been actively involved. The teacher told them about why she was exploring ways to improve their performance and she responded to what they did and what they said.

This helped her understand the students' points of view, and also improved classroom relationships

The English team were asked to present their project experiences with colleagues across the college at the next professional development event. Amanda's Head of English persuaded her to share these experiences on an English teachers' blog, and several teachers responded with 'likes' and some of their own helpful suggestions.

It's important to publicise teachers' research findings because teachers test theories in practice – showing when and where they work best.

Teachers also produce their own theories – ideas about how practices can best be adapted.

APPENDIX 3: EVIDENCE SOURCES CHALLENGE

Here is one teacher's response to the 'evidence challenge' from **Section 2.6:**

Which of the following sources of evidence might help other teachers?

1. **A pie-chart showing the proportion of teachers agreeing to take part in the project.** *1/10*

   Don't like this one – might be useful for CPD managers to know, but it doesn't tell me anything about whether the activity was useful.

2. **Classroom resources produced by teachers to encourage learners' problem-setting.** *7/10*

   I like these – I can get my teeth into them and think how I could use them in my own classroom.

3. **Teachers completing a 'What Went Well / Even Better If' worksheet.** *10/10*

   Should be really useful to see what's working or not working

4. **Research resources recommended as useful by teachers.** *6/10*

   I would rather have teacher-recommendations than a typical list of academic articles.

5. **Learner retention data for the year.** *4/10*

   Doesn't tell me much as many different factors can affect retention.

6. **Samples of learners' completed assignment tasks**. *8/10*

   Always useful to see other learners' work – shows you what the teacher is doing. (However, only 8/10 if it's a representative sample of learners, not just the really good ones). Would also benefit from some teacher's comments about the different learners to be really useful.

7. **Learners' discussion about their maths assignment tasks.** *8/10*

   Again, good to see their responses. (Could be 10/10 if the discussion was linked to their actual work.)

8. **Bar charts showing results of learner questionnaires.** *3/10*

   Easy to gather, but not much use in seeing what's really going on. Learners' wary of responding honestly to teachers' questions, and there is usually some leading questioning!

9. **Pairs of learners completing a 'What Went Well / Even Better If' worksheet**. *10/10*

   Pairs give each other confidence, and usually give more honest responses, and pairs involve the quieter learners more. Learners will also be focused on what they actually did in the activities.

10. **A Learning Support Assistant's notes about a learner's progress.** *10/10*

    There can be a lot of incidental detail about what's happening in the classroom that would be helpful... (Need to be careful about protecting the confidentiality of the learners, teacher and the support worker.)

APPENDIX 4: NEEDS ANALYSIS PLANNING SHEET FOR PROJECT LEADERS

Return to **Section 3.2**

NEEDS ANALYSIS PLANNING SHEET

1. *What initiatives do we want to develop? (What is already happening?)*

2. *What evidence would indicate the success of the initiative?*

3. *Which staff may be willing to be involved?*

4. *What are the best ways to fully involve learners?*

5. *Besides teachers and learners, who else might help?*

6. *How can we create a "rhythm" of activities to support teachers' commitment?*

7. *What specialist help might be useful? For leaders or team-members?*

8. *What accessible literature or resources might help the team?*

APPENDIX 5: CONSENT FORMS

Return to **Section 3.3**. Please also see the **BERA Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research**

SAMPLE ETHICS FORM

Name of Project:

Researcher(s):

Dear *(name of participant),*

I would like to invite you to take part in an action research project, which I am doing with (name of group/ organisation/ people involved). I want to explain why I am (/ we are) doing this research and what it would involve for you. Please ask me if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information.

What is the purpose of the project?

Brief sentence about the purpose/ summary of your action research project.

Why are you asking me to take part?

Brief sentence about why you want this person to participate

Do I have to take part?

Explain that participation is voluntary

What will taking part involve for me?

Outline:

How information will be collected

What participants need to do

How long it will take to take part

What access will the participant have to the data

Who else will have access to the data

How will the participants' anonymity be protected

What will I have to do?

Signing of consent form, turning up to the session etc.

What are the possible benefits of taking part?

Outline the possible benefits. Do not make unrealistic claims.

Thank you for reading this information sheet.

(Your Name)

SAMPLE CONSENT FORM

Title of Project:

Name of Researcher(s):

Please initial box:

1. I confirm that I have read and I understand the action research information sheet	
2. I understand that my participation is voluntary	
3. I consent to the interview/ session being audio/ video recorded	
4. I agree to take part in the action research project	

Name of Participant:

Date:

Signature:

APPENDIX 6: PROFESSIONAL STANDARDS FOR TEACHERS AND TRAINERS IN EDUCATION AND TRAINING

Professional values and attributes

Develop your own judgement of what works and does not work in your teaching and training

1. Reflect on what works best in your teaching and learning to meet the diverse needs of learners
2. Evaluate and challenge your practice, values and beliefs
3. Inspire, motivate and raise aspirations of learners through your enthusiasm and knowledge
4. Be creative and innovative in selecting and adapting strategies to help learners to learn
5. Value and promote social and cultural diversity, equality of opportunity and inclusion
6. Build positive and collaborative relationships with colleagues and learners

Professional knowledge and understanding

Develop deep and critically informed knowledge and understanding in theory and practice

7. Maintain and update knowledge of your subject and/or vocational area
8. Maintain and update your knowledge of educational research to develop evidence-based practice
9. Apply theoretical understanding of effective practice in teaching, learning and assessment, drawing on research and other evidence
10. Evaluate your practice with others and assess its impact on learning
11. Manage and promote positive learner behaviour
12. Understand the teaching and professional role and your responsibilities

Professional skills

Develop your expertise and skills to ensure the best outcomes for learners

13. Motivate and inspire learners to promote achievement and develop their skills to enable progression
14. Plan and deliver effective learning programmes for diverse groups or individuals in a safe and inclusive environment
15. Promote the benefits of technology and support learners in its use
16. Address the mathematics and English needs of learners and work creatively to overcome individual barriers to learning
17. Enable learners to share responsibility for their own learning and assessment, setting goals that stretch and challenge
18. Apply appropriate and fair methods of assessment and provide constructive and timely feedback to support progression and achievement
19. Maintain and update your teaching and training expertise and vocational skills through collaboration with employers
20. Contribute to organisational development and quality improvement through collaboration with others

EDUCATION & TRAINING FOUNDATION

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