

Using educational research to inform practice: a practical guide to practitioner research in universities and colleges

Lorraine Foreman-Peck and Christopher Winch, 2010

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'Research into pedagogical practice in higher education', argue Foreman-Peck and Winch, 'is not in a very advanced state' (p.58). The authors, both former school teachers, are philosophers of education and empirical researchers and target this practical guide ambitiously at a wide constituency ranging from new lecturers in higher and further education, experienced lecturers studying for a Masters or Doctorate and experienced and senior research staff engaged in further professional development. Drawing on the seminal work of Elliott (1991) on action research and Bassegy (1995) on educational research, defined as 'critical enquiry aimed at informing educational judgements and decisions in order to improve educational action' (cited by Foreman-Peck and Winch, 2010, p.8.), practitioner research is understood as small scale, insider research into one's own practice.

The guide is structured in ten chapters which can be read in a linear fashion or selectively. It is framed by an introductory chapter with an affirmative response to the question 'What's the use of practitioner research?' and concludes with critical commentaries on four published practitioner research case studies which draw on key elements discussed in earlier chapters. Each chapter is self-contained with an introduction, conclusion and reference list. Chapters two, four, five and nine focus on debates, controversies and philosophical questions pertaining to practitioner research whilst chapters three, six, seven, eight and nine provide the practical advice promised by the title of the guide to 'get research off the ground'. Readers are guided through the stages of planning, research design, data collection and analysis, together with standards and ethics.

The guide has many strengths including:

- Provision of a useful set of quality criteria for practitioner research (p.42)
- Questions to ask yourself at the planning stage, the answers to which should save time later (p.75)
- Consideration of ethics at the planning stage (p.76)
- Preparation of a timetable (p.76)
- A useful glossary of research terminology (pp. 133 – 138)
- Exercises at the end of a number of chapters which help consolidate reading and provide a framework for personal development as a practitioner researcher.

For practitioners studying for a Postgraduate Certificate or Masters in Academic Practice I would particularly draw attention to chapter five which focuses on reading and evaluating research critically. Three theories widely discussed and with strong support in higher education pedagogy – learning styles, deep and surface learning and dyslexia are critiqued and speculative claims and assumptions are called into question. It is noteworthy, however, that it is Ramsden's *interpretation* of deep and

surface learning which is critiqued rather than the original work of Marton and Saljo itself.

In conclusion, Foreman-Peck and Winch have produced a valuable companion to the established guides on social, education and small scale research projects (Bryman, 2001; Bell, 2005; Cohen et al., 2007). The guide is well written and clearly structured and meets its declared objective of being accessible to selective and linear reading. It is not a comprehensive guide on how to conduct research but does provide philosophical insights into research methodology together with valuable commentaries on practitioner research case studies. Practitioners considering writing up their research are encouraged by Foreman-Peck and Winch to publish in peer reviewed journals which, they argue, provide a warrant for wider applicability, an indication of sustainable innovative practice and a 'gold standard' in all high stakes areas 'which may critically affect the future prospects of students' (p.67). This is an excellent guide which succeeds in presenting clear and scholarly guidance underpinned by a critical exploration of the theoretical foundations of practitioner research. It will foster practitioner research and add strength to its credibility as it seeks to gain academic standing and develop into a more advanced state.

References

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Martin Watson, De Montfort University, UK