

ResearchDigest

Practitioner inquiry shapes a course that tackles gang culture

By Colin Isham

Developing a new curriculum can be an exciting process: a chance to be creative, experiment with ideas and explore new avenues of interest. It is also challenging, making demands on teachers' expertise that may need to be acquired at the same time as design and roll out.

This is especially true of the development of Walsall College's new Level Three Community Safety course, part of a wider, trans-European project: EUGangs. The particular challenge of this course is the breadth of expertise it requires in the planning and delivery, spanning as it does policy, psychology, sociology, safe working and interpersonal communication.

In total, eight part-time trainers are working alongside me, as the lead tutor, to develop and deliver content. What might seem like tutor-overkill for a single course, however, proves in this case to be very necessary. Together, the

trainers bring indispensable inside knowledge and skills that come from their youth work, community and project leadership, and first-hand experience of gang crime.

The task for the lead tutor has been how best to bring this to bear on the learning experience of the course participants – mainly professionals and volunteers engaged in community work – and for this a key tool has been practitioner inquiry.

The inquiry can be seen as mini-research projects, producing content for the course, while at the same time honing tutors' skills in searching, note-taking, analysis and writing up, which they in turn will be looking to foster among the students on the course.

The inquiries have also enabled tutors to make links between the lived experience of their work with young people and the theories and wider evidence that are the backbone of the course, and so bring lessons alive for participants. A case in point is the inquiry carried

out by one of our trainers. The focus of this enquiry was a student, George (not his real name), who arrived at school with particular behavioural issues, but who made marked progress over the course of a year.

Our colleague was keen to understand in more detail the school's approach to working with such young people, and so interviewed the deputy head regarding George's case.

The lessons coming out of this inquiry are widely known. They include practical interventions such as undertaking proper diagnostic testing and adjusting the school day to meet George's needs. George has also been given time and space to think about and explain his behaviour, and taken advantage of 'opt-in' opportunities to attend additional lessons.

But what our colleague added as a result of his inquiry were concrete examples of how these interventions and approaches had been implemented and the evidence and conviction that they work. This case study will now form



PHOTOSHOT

the core of our colleague's session on relationship building in which participants will consider his experiences, relate them to their own, and consider the principles emerging out of these.

Other inquiries that trainers have completed include an investigation into the use of stop and search in Wolverhampton, and the availability of youth facilities in the Birchills area of Walsall.

Two of the course trainers also lead community projects in their own time and are using the evidence they collect to engage police and local councillors on issues of importance to the young people they work with.

In conclusion, the inquiries are proving to be a powerful

vehicle for learning: providing credible content for the course, establishing immediate and relevant context for social and psychological theory, as well as providing a framework for learning.

They also, by the way, support and demonstrate the power of agency in the community, at a time when the need for this has never been greater.

You can find out more about the EUGangs project at: www.eugangs.eu

Colin Isham is EUGangs Lead at Walsall College.

For further information or to share ideas and findings please contact Colin at: cisham@walsallcollege.ac.uk

Teaching English at the cutting edge

By Richard Gallen

This article reports on practitioner-led classroom research which took place between February and May last year at Tower Hamlets College in east London. The aim of the project was to use recordings of student-led parts of ESOL classes as a tool to help us recognise and work with emerging language. 'Student-led' refers to the times during lessons where students were pushing themselves to communicate, where the topics were to a great extent driven by their conversations and discussions.

These parts of the class could be the most exciting and involving for students and teachers alike but what learning was taking place?

Sometimes just providing students with a forum for their ideas was enough but we wondered how we could teach more in these parts of the class. Three hours of impromptu student-led discourse were recorded and transcribed with this aim in mind.

Emerging language refers to the language forms that were generated when students were attempting to express ideas and tell stories that were important to them. This was language at the cutting edge of learners' capabilities and, for us, effective teaching meant working at this edge.

Reformulation

A reformulation is when the teacher repeats back what the student has said with improvements. The focus is on

improving the whole message rather than correcting a specific language item.

The following is an extract from a discussion about anti-social behaviour in a student's building. She is telling the teacher that she is intimidated by the youths who hang out by the main entrance.

Student: If afternoon I putting the bin, I didn't go because I am scared

Teacher: Oh you were scared to take the rubbish down?

From this extract we can see the teacher is doing three things:

She is making sure she has understood the student and in doing this she is keeping the rest of the class in the conversational loop. But she has also reformulated the student to a more clear and natural version of events. This upgrading is central in a language teacher's role.

The teacher in the above example said the following about reformulation:

"It comes naturally to me – I probably do it with all my friends. It shows our understanding, it shows our empathy but what I am trying to do here is ensure that I've actually heard what they are saying, and they'll always say 'no' if I'm wrong. It's a form of checking."

It is important to note that the teacher was only able to upgrade the student's language because she was actively listening and responding on an emotional level to what the student was saying.

Perhaps the final part of

the teacher's quote is the most interesting: "They'll always say 'no' if I'm wrong. It's a form of checking."

She has pitched her response just beyond what the student is capable of producing herself, at the cutting edge of her capabilities. The learner is leading and the teacher is following, working at that edge.

We realised how often summarising reformulations were used by teachers as a form of conversational lubricant. One of the major questions that emerged from our research was how teachers can leverage these reformulations for learning, without disrupting the flow of conversations.

Student-led parts of the class can often be the most chaotic. Recording, transcribing and listening back to them slowed down classroom time, giving us a better idea of what to listen for and sharpening our decision-making during the less predictable parts of our own classes. The project is on-going with phase two taking a closer look at interaction patterns during group work.

Richard Gallen is an ESOL lecturer at Tower Hamlets College. His research project was supported by the Education and Skills Foundation's practitioner research programme and the East Midlands Centre for Excellence in Teacher Training (emCETT) For further information on Richard's project and to share ideas and information contact richgallen@hotmail.com

Education and Training Foundation research support

The Foundation is keen to support FE practitioners who wish to undertake research.

- The Foundation's 2014-15 practitioner-led action research projects, run in conjunction with East Midlands Centre for Excellence in Teacher Training (emCETT) and the University of Sunderland Centre for Excellence in Teacher Training (SUNCETT), are already underway.
- Participants received small bursaries from the Foundation to cover their travel and associated costs. Research projects will be written up and disseminated.
- More information on research support for practitioners can be found at: www.et-foundation.co.uk/supporting/research/practitioner-research-support