



Dialogue Project Case Study

Reflection

The process described in this case study facilitates a dialogue between Higher Education academics, undergraduate students and professionals in community settings. The intention is to foster a unique collaboration that maintains the links between real -world research and practice in community education. The aim of the research output is to have a direct effect on agencies' practices by scrutinising aspects of their work using social scientific methods. One outcome of this collaboration is improved practice. Another is to develop within students, an understanding of the role of research in producing evidence- based practice. This can be used to both develop existing approaches and also to identify new ways of working with individuals and groups in communities to promote learning opportunities.

The completed dissertations can also be a rich source of data for potential use within classroom teaching and further research in Higher Education.

Case study title

Research and Practice in Community Education: linking the research dissertation to practice in undergraduate study.

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Keywords

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Abstract

This case study describes how the research community in Higher Education can maintain links with practice through the research dissertation and practical placement elements of an undergraduate course in Community Education. The case study shows how Honours Year students are supported to undertake research relevant to the field of practice, while on placement in a range of agencies involved in Community Education work. Through this process undergraduate research can have a real impact on practice.

General background

The Bachelor of Arts (Honours) Community Education prepares students for educational work with individuals and groups in communities. The field of practice is primarily linked to community-based adult learning, community development and youth work, and graduates work in a range of contexts including community arts, health promotion, and community regeneration, as well as social policy and social research.

Through the learning opportunities presented on the course, students are supported to develop their knowledge and skills in relation to reflective practice, working with others, debate and dialogue, self-directed learning and inquiry and research. These principles of course design underpin taught modules including communication, group work, professional ethics, diversity and difference, critical pedagogy and the social context.

A requirement of the BA (Hons) Community Education is that students undertake two periods of full-time practice placement, one in Year 2 and one in Year 4, in order to develop knowledge and understanding related to ethical, intellectual and social aspects of practice. Each practice placement is for 17 weeks. The Year 4 placement is linked to the students' research dissertation in order to make use of the opportunity afforded by working in the field to frame a research question, make contact with potential participants in the project, and collect data. The written dissertation is completed once students return to the University setting, in the period immediately following the placement.

Objectives and Purpose

The practice placement element of the BA (Hons) Community Education in Year 4 aims to socialise students into the profession of Community Education, through working alongside experienced professionals in the field of practice. There are two main objectives. Firstly, to provide an opportunity for students to gain relevant work experience and through this to develop the skills, knowledge, values and attitudes required to work in educational settings with individuals and groups. Secondly, to develop students' understanding of how practice can be improved through research in real-life professional contexts. Through engagement with research, students develop



skills in social scientific inquiry and have the opportunity to see how research can enhance understanding of practice.

The research dissertation is supported by instruction in Year 3 on research methods. As part of this, students are required to begin planning both their research and their placement, and to develop a research proposal outlining their research question and methodology as well as providing details of their proposed placement. At this stage, students seek ethical approval for their study, and are required to meet the same standards as for all University-sponsored research. Once on placement in Year 4, students undertake the data collection element of their Honours research dissertation. While on placement, the students are supported by a qualified and experienced practitioner, who also oversees the fieldwork phase of the research. In addition, the students are supported by a University tutor who supervises the completion of the research dissertation.

Links between Research and Practice

The Honours dissertation process in the BA (Hons) Community Education provides an opportunity for Higher Education staff, community education practitioners and undergraduate students to work together on research that is rooted in professional contexts, and addresses research questions relevant to practice. The outcomes of such research are linked directly to fieldwork agencies and have potential to make an impact on practice.

Research Process (describe the method used to gather information /generate the new learning.)

Data are collected during the period of the practical placement. Access to potential participants in the research is made easier through contact made with individuals and groups in the course of the normal work of the placement. Students are able to make contact with potential participants, explain the aims of their project, and provide information about the research process. Informed consent is sought prior to data collection. Students are encouraged to consider a range of research methods, and to utilise the most appropriate approach for their particular research question. Recently completed projects have made use of questionnaires, focus groups, individual semi-structured interviews and document analysis.

Linking Researchers and Practitioners (or Policy Makers)>

Undergraduate researchers, professional community educators and Higher Education staff are linked directly through this process. While on placement, the students are supervised by experienced, qualified practitioners who support their learning and development in relation to the practice of Community Education. Placement supervisors also oversee the collection of data for students' research dissertations. University staff supervise and support students through the writing-up phase of the research project. On completion, the research is available for use by the placement agency. This might include evaluation reports that can be used in applications for funding, investigations that might shed light on how to increase the numbers of users of a particular service, or research that explores the experiences of learners, leading to improved practice.



Transferability of the Case

Undergraduate research for Honours qualifications in community education or other professions could be linked explicitly to the field of practice in a similar way in other institutions.

Recommendations from the Case Study

Practice in the field of Community Education can be improved through the supervision of undergraduate students undertaking research while on practice placement.

Further Reading

Scottish Executive (2004). *Working and learning together to build stronger communities. Scottish Executive guidance for community learning and development*. Edinburgh: Scottish Executive.

Wallace, D. (2008). *Community education and community learning and development* in T. Bryce and W. Humes (eds). pp 742-51.

Standards Council for Community Learning and development in Scotland:
<http://www.cldstandardscouncil.org.uk/Home>