

# Using ‘teacher talk’ to reimagine FE-based research as a basis for teaching, learning and assessment

## Report from the Research and Scholarly Activity working Group

### Authors:

Sam Jones: [sjones@bedford.ac.uk](mailto:sjones@bedford.ac.uk) / @FE\_Lecturer

David Powell: [d.powell@hud.ac.uk](mailto:d.powell@hud.ac.uk) / @DavidPowellHud

Sam Jones has worked in Further Education (FE) for 17 years. She is an Advanced Practitioner in the Teacher Development and Scholarship department of a large FE college. Sam is also a PhD student at the University of Cambridge and has published and presented at a variety of national and international conferences and journals. Sam co-founded and chairs her college’s research network and edits its blog <https://bcgresearchnetwork.wordpress.com>. She also founded #FEresearchmeet, a democratic space for development and discussion of research from within the sector.

David Powell started his further education (FE) career at Stafford College in 1986 (his father taught Graphic Design there from 1964-1994). David moved from a senior management role, via staff development, into initial teacher education (ITE). He is presently director of the Education and Training Consortium, an ITE partnership between some 20 FE colleges and the University of Huddersfield. His research interests include FE-based teacher educators' use of modelling and how student teachers learn how to teach. David is the editor of *Teaching in Lifelong Learning*, a journal to inform and improve practice aimed at the further education sector.

### **Abstract**

This think-piece paper is an open letter addressed to further education (FE)-based practitioners interested in research, their managers, the sector’s policy makers, and organisations like the Education and Training Foundation, who support the sector and wish to make it ‘research-rich’. Its purpose is to amplify the voices of 22 participants who attended the working group on research and scholarship at Reimagine FE18. Using Hardy’s (2010) concept of ‘*teacher talk*’ as a data collection

method and stimulus for a series of praxis-oriented '*conversations*', the participants identified four principles and four conditions to move forward FE-based research. First, the research needs to be led and done by FE-based practitioners; second, practitioners need to be supported to acquire the confidence to disseminate their research and new avenues identified for publishing it; third, the research needs to be rigorous and critical, and the fourth underpinning these is research, and its researchers need to be valued by the sector and its stakeholders. Conclusions are drawn and praxis, '*morally-committed*', '*history-making*' action in the spirit of Mahon *et al.*, is suggested as a way forward. As such, this paper adds to the debate started 22 years ago by Elliott (1996) about why FE-based research still remains largely invisible within and beyond the sector and offers the sector's latest response to the British Educational Research Association's call for FE to be a 'research-rich' environment. In doing so, it invites managers and policy makers to begin a genuinely sincere, democratic conversation with FE-based practitioners about how to make this happen.

**Key words:** FE-based research, research-rich, teacher-talk, praxis,

### ***Introduction***

Over twenty years ago Elliott (1996) argued that FE-based research is marginalised due to both government and institutional policies such as lack of funding, practitioners' conditions of service, access to staff development for research degrees, and the absence of a research culture. This paper asks to what extent this has changed and what needs to change to support FE-based research. The scope of the paper means that we could not review existing FE-based research, nor could we put FE-based research in an international context as was suggested as part of the validation process. We were also not able to critically evaluate the Education and Training Foundation's initiatives to support research. We intend to address each of these important matters in future papers.

Elliott (1996, p.108) advised that 'If college managers [and policy makers] wish to act wisely in a turbulent environment then they would be wise to privilege qualitative information on what is happening around them.' Sixty attendees at a #FEResearchmeet hosted in Bedford in July 2018 suggests there is an appetite for research amongst the sector's practitioners. This paper urges managers and policy-makers to be wise and listen to the voices of the 22 participants from this workshop,

and then act in ways that are ‘morally-committed’ and ‘history-making,’ (Mahon *et al.*, 2017, p.14) to establish a ‘research-rich’ sector (BERA, 2014, p.4).

### ***Data collection, analysis, and validation***

At the Bedford #FEResearchmeet, Jean McNiff (2018) said ‘there is nothing esoteric about doing *research*’, though there are accepted ways of doing research and these need to be acknowledged if research claims are to be credible. What is meant by research and scholarship? While there are other definitions, for the purposes of this paper we chose to use Participant O’s: ‘...scholarship is keeping up with the literature and research is creating new literature.’

Twenty-two practitioners and the two co-convenors were part of this study; 16 of them were FE-based. Each gave their fully informed consent (BERA, 2018) prior to the research commencing. ‘Teacher talk’ and ‘deliberately developed conversations’ (Hardy, 2010, p.131) around a topic of mutual interest were the study’s primary data collection method, and mapping (a visual data method) was its supplementary method. The questions participants were asked can be found in the Appendix. At key points in the ‘conversations,’ participants fed back to the group and this was captured on an audio recorder and later transcribed for analysis. Participants created maps of the literature they were reading and the research they knew was taking place in the sector. After Braun and Clarke (2006), thematic analysis was used to analyse the data. We followed McNiff’s (2014) advice to validate the findings and claims by sharing an initial draft of the paper with the participants in the study and practitioners who know the sector. We had five responses from our validators, all of which helped us revise the paper. Perhaps the most valuable feedback was: ‘...review the balance between the voices in the room *and* the wider references being made’ (Validator 1, an FE-based teacher educator).

### ***Key messages from the ‘Teacher Talk’***

During the ‘teacher-talk’, participants identified four principles and four conditions for FE-based research. These were:

#### **Principles:**

1. Research must be done and led by FE-based practitioners and include students as research partners,
2. Practitioners need to be supported to disseminate their research and offered different ways of publishing it.

3. Research needs to be useful, critical, and rigorous.
4. The sector and its stakeholders need to value FE research and demonstrate its value.

**Conditions:**

1. Provide free access for all to FE research.
2. Develop ways of funding it – work together.
3. Undertake brave research, for instance, with those with whom we do not normally work, such as outsiders.
4. Create practice conditions that nurture, support, and sustain research, such as creating academic freedom to undertake critical research, dedicating time and money to research, dedicating time to establish research partnerships.

The first four were the group's top priorities and we concentrate on these in the next section of the paper.

***Workshop discussion – ‘teacher talk’***

The purpose of the session was to consider how to use research and scholarship to make FE a ‘*better*’ place to work and ‘*practice (sic) in*’ (Kemmis et al., 2014, p.27) and, specifically, to see teaching learning and assessment as research. Coffield suggests that Joint Practice Development (JPD) is central to ensuring change and based on ‘trusting relationships, a professional exchange of knowledge and skills between equals and new forms of learning for both *parties*’ (Coffield, 2008, p.56). For the purposes of this paper we intend to focus on the relationships and exchange of knowledge element of JPD that Coffield outlined.

Whilst JPD is only one of a range of forms of research that is, or could be practised in FE, the three issues raised by Coffield often weave seamlessly with three of the conclusions of our workshop focusing on research and scholarship. Firstly, involvement of the sector, ensuring that research on the sector is led by or, wherever possible, includes FE staff and students as co-constructors. Secondly, that dissemination of research should not follow the same well-worn tracks, instead creating something that is considered to be more accessible and useful. These led neatly to the third theme: criticality. We discuss each of these three conclusions below.

Involvement by the sector was summarised within the workshop by Participant A:

*It's about giving FE a voice, about representing issues, concerns, successes in FE and it would be nice to see more FE people researching FE as opposed to different sectors or other people coming in to research [it].*

Participant A's words raise some central points in relation to JPD. Importantly, FE teachers see themselves as professionals with the agency to contribute their voices. Their words place a value on these voices and seem to be expressing an intrinsic value of FE staff 'looking at students' and teachers' lived *experiences*' (Participant B). This seems to be pointing towards a confidence and desire to engage with the professional exchange that is required of JPD as equals. Sadly, these words also point to two barriers to research in the sector which came up repeatedly in our session: the lack of a research culture in the sector, and the lack of support. Both are systemic issues first raised by Elliott in 1996.

If this is to change and we are to reimagine FE as being a 'research-rich' environment for teachers (BERA, 2014, p.4), the participants raised valuable points regarding the types of research that were currently sanctioned by managers and the sector's key stakeholders. Participant C commented on the lack of the '*right cultural climate to support and sustain good quality research and as a research-practitioner.*' Participant D felt that '*if someone is doing research, they [managers] would prefer to do a bit of a simple survey from students... they present their results and they are happy with that. If...[it's] anything outside that, the culture is not very strong in supporting them.*' Participant D added that for FE-based researchers there were '*taboo subjects...the bums on seats and the box ticking culture and stuff like that and the college management just wouldn't agree to [researching] it.*' These issues seem to point to restricted ideas of research by some senior managers who appear primarily focused on short term wins rather than what Participant C called 'good quality' research, which researches areas that are sensitive in the sector such as the impact of funding methodologies on pass rates. These concerns may be well-placed at a time of mergers, budget cuts and associated redundancies. Most importantly, the issue of sanctioned research seems to reflect a lack of academic freedom for FE-based researchers (Participant O).

This is not to say these were offered as bleak or hopeless statements. Whilst barriers were acknowledged and discussed, the idea of 'Brave Research' (Swennen, 2018) was introduced as a complement to JPD. Based on Arao and Clemens' (2013, p.135) notion of bravery as moving out of the "safe [research] spaces," Brave Research was framed as practitioner research that provided an insider perspective, seeing FE based researchers and others as equal partners, with both parties accepting each other's contributions as valuable, and with funding bodies taking brave steps by funding research that promotes inclusion. Returning to the idea of sanctioned research, it is clear that FE seems not yet to be a place for brave research; however, it is clear that there is hope. Participant M: *'we sort of took on this notion of brave research and said, actually all of us here are being brave researchers, being that we all came from organisations or cultures that didn't particularly support practitioner research.'* The workshop spotlighted agentic, professional staff, but seemed to indicate that ideas of bravery centred on lecturers' own classrooms and practice, while wider issues in the sector were not considered at this point. This suggests that the current climate in the sector may prefer 'safe', sanctioned research to 'brave' transformative research. This may also reflect the individual FE institutions' focus on their 'village' and its concerns rather more global issues (Stenhouse, 1979).

The emphasis on the individual lecturer or institution [the village] and lack of focus on national issues [the globe] leads neatly to the third issue raised within the workshop; dissemination. This issue was summarised by Participant C: *'It's about accessibility and inclusion... and making research available to the wider FE practitioner population'*. Participant C seems to be suggesting that FE lecturers can feel excluded from reading about and leading research into FE, issues that could become barriers to accessing the global picture. When discussing dissemination concerns were expressed regarding the language: *'How do we demystify all this to make it practical and accessible to our tutors?'* (Participant F), and issues regarding where vocational knowledge sits and *'How is it recognised?'* (Participant G). These issues appeared to predominately stem from the peer reviewed journal method of dissemination which was considered to be a *'closed shop'* (Participant H) in terms of publication, only accessed by and for academics. This seemed to highlight a tension

between the professional, agentic tutors described above, and the concept of an 'academic'. Generally, but not exclusively, the participants identified with the former.

In the plenary, Ali Hadawi, Principal of Central Bedfordshire College, added to the debate saying that making FE-based research accessible was a top priority. There are two points here. First, Coffield (2007, p.1), at his inaugural professorial lecture at the Institute of Education, started by saying: 'The case I present tonight will be made in clear, simple English, which is one of our most potent weapons in the battle of ideas, but one which is, I think, decreasingly used by researchers'. Coffield walks his talk. For example, 'Everything you wanted to know about teaching and learning but were too cool to ask' (Coffield, 2009) provides a model of how to present your research in everyday English. Secondly, it needs to be open access and easy to find.

This tension appears to shape how we reimagine the dissemination of our research; here the emphasis was strongly on usefulness at a '*village*' level. Suggestions ranged from Participant I's suggestion that '*dissemination could be through CPD, with individuals, with groups*'. Where FE-based practitioners publish seemed to range from '*Bellas [sic] of this world*', to blogs, Twitter, TES and FE Week (Participant J), the focus was always that "*people can understand it*" (*ibid*). The priority here could be argued to be telling and informing, rather than creating and developing a debate. Again, the emphasis of personal, '*village*' level concerns was highlighted during the review process by Validator 1 who suggested dissemination is '*about getting ideas and thinking (critically) about what would and wouldn't work in my classrooms*' perhaps reflecting a conflation of the concepts of reflection and critique. This may be understandable in light of the emphasis on reflection in initial teacher education; however, this workshop aimed to break these sector norms, and perhaps limiting practice to simply sharing—without ideas of review and criticality—fails to lead to the types of practice analysis that Stenhouse advocated for teacher development.

Finally, this leads to the issue of criticality in FE-based research. The degree to which work from within FE should be open to scrutiny and criticism, and what was understood by the term criticism, was a subject on which there was little agreement. This lack of agreement may originate in the different understandings of critique between academic and FE circles. It may also reflect the climate of accountability,

managerialism and performativity that has engulfed, characterised and terrorised the FE sector (Kidd, 2013). In academic circles, critique is generally seen as a positive. It is the idea of an experienced and knowledgeable other offering fresh perspectives and an analysis of the arguments presented in order to hone and develop them. Academic critical thinking also engages in thorny questions of professional values and who wields power for which purposes. Compare this to FE, where critique for most lecturers is likely to be about their teaching, making judgements against pre-existing standards which may have implications for their job. The notion of analysis or professional development are at worst missing—or at best subjugated—against the overall judgement and leads to a deficit-model where perceived failings are seen as individual teacher responsibilities rather than attributed to institutional or sector-wide challenges. This emphasis on judgement and closing down, rather than opening up opportunities for critique, analysis and debate, would appear to extend the sector's fundamental understandings of the purpose of research. This is reflected in the concerns raised by Participant D, who suggested that managers are prepared to sanction and support only certain types of research.

This seems to point to two issues regarding criticality. Firstly, the scope of lecturers' research could be restricted to a pre-determined set of the concerns defined by managers, in the same way that we have suggested their teaching practice may be. Secondly, the notion of criticality is missing, resulting in the sector favouring technical, descriptive, and instrumental forms of research over ground-breaking and '*brave*' forms of research which question norms and practices. This means that those lecturers who are more research-engaged, particularly those who are or have followed post-graduate study, may be caught between these competing understandings of the term 'critical' and a culture of safe research. Moreover, those without this wider knowledge or experience of the term, whose experience was mainly informed by judgemental experiences such as lesson observations, may equally have shied away from notions of criticality seeing it as an uncomfortable or potentially damaging experience, as O'Leary (2013) found with lesson observations. This perhaps begins to explain the lack of agreement and perhaps reservations regarding ideas of criticality from within the workshop.

The duality of experience and practice was also evident when discussing Stenhouse's (1981, p.113) definition of research as 'systematic and sustained

inquiry, planned and self-critical, which is subjected to public criticism and to empirical tests where appropriate', Participant C responded: *'there were two different types of research...the rigorous generalisable PhD research and ...supported experiments...but I think in FE you've got to recognise...both have a place, don't they?'* Again, the reduced model of criticality that appeared to be the norm in colleges was impacting the types of research sanctioned within the sector. The more academic research, perhaps undertaken by those who were engaged in narratives from outside the sector either from conference, reading or post-graduate study, needed to be more rigorous and open to criticism, contrasted with the practitioner research, perhaps guided by sector norms, more descriptive, less rigorous and less open to criticism? The normalisation of judgement, giving validation or condemnation rather than provoking development and debate, can be seen in a comment made during the review of this text. Validator 1 asked: *'If a teacher is undertaking practitioner research in their own classroom this is always open to criticism, through colleges' internal quality review (IQR) and observation systems'*. This conflation of instrumental judgement with the more serious analysis of practice and environment suggests that there is a fundamental issue about what constitutes criticism within FE. However, Participant K offered a different perspective on the issue of robust criticism:

*The way you conduct your research would be academic and rigorous, but the way to present and share it can be accessible and it doesn't have to be couched in academic language and I think there's a distinction there...I don't think we should be ashamed of making research rigorous and academic.*

Participant K suggests that rigour does not need to be compromised by accessibility. Perhaps the most interesting word here is the word 'ashamed': why are, or should FE staff be ashamed of being rigorous and academic? Is this why we allude to a possible two-tier system, defer to the judgements of others or are more comfortable with ideas regarding self-reflection? The authors would argue it is vital to consider what impact this lack of public criticism may have on their perception of FE-based research. Are we setting ourselves up to be second best, or suggesting routes that are fit for purpose? Validator 2, a HE-based professional who is researching FE, offered another perspective on the two-tier analogy, asking *'whether college research is a different kind of research from*

*university research, or whether it is just a shorter, lower level and less well-funded version of university research.'* This is a question the sector needs to answer.

Comparing the participants' agreement regarding involvement in research with their disagreements when discussing criticality might suggest this was a new 'conversation' for FE-based researchers and so they gave a less considered response, or of sometimes feeling 'ashamed' of stepping out of sector norms (Lloyd and Jones, 2018). It might also reflect the 'terror' that is associated with being judged, often performatively by managers, in FE (Ball, 2003). Either way, it appears that bringing in ideas of criticality into FE-based research is important and would break new ground for many. This suggested these issues require more considered debate and discussion if we are to successfully create a practitioner-led model for engaging in and disseminating FE-based research.

### ***Towards some conclusions and praxis***

A delegate bag at *The Congress of the Humanities and Social Sciences Conference* held at the University of Regina in May 2018 had the words 'engaged scholarship lies at the heart of any healthy society.' Reimagining that, the authors propose that 'Research and scholarship lies at the heart of a healthy FE sector'. However, 22 years on from Elliott's paper, FE-based research still seems largely small in scale, considering the size of the sector, and largely invisible. The 60 attendees at the #FEResearchmeet and the 22 attendees at this workshop suggest that FE-based practitioners are itching to get on with research that could make the sector 'research-rich', though their enthusiasm is largely stymied by policy makers and managers. The current stasis is unacceptable and needs to be broken; it is simply the right thing to do.

The authors have two invitations to unlock this present situation and make FE 'research-rich'. First, we invite managers and policy makers, as they are the power brokers in the sector, to meet with FE-based practitioners and, in the spirit of Kemmis et al. (2014), to hold genuinely sincere, democratic conversations about how they can respond together to the four principles and four conditions for FE-based research identified by the workshop's participants. The value of such a democratic and participatory approach is that it could create a shared vision of FE-based research and the type of climate that could nurture, cultivate, and sustain diverse '*brave*' forms of research conducted by a diverse range of '*brave*'

researchers. At the conclusions of these conversations, we ask that the outcomes are published in an accessible publication such as the *Times Educational Supplement*.

Second, we invite FE-based practitioner researchers to be brave and, in the spirit of the *12 Dancing Princesses*, dance to a different tune, because 'resistance is *fertile*' (Daley, 2015, p.30). We encourage them when writing to demonstrate what they have learned about their practice and at the same time, and in the spirit of Kemmis *et al.* (2014), question their working conditions which shape both their practice and the hopes of their learners. 'Writing about FE [is an act of resistance]' that maps and documents the sector (Petrie, 2015, p.7). As Orr (2015, p.176) suggests, writing about the sector may give others 'hope...[and] embolden [them] to defy and then encourage them to organize and to dance.'

Elliott (1996, p.110) was puzzled as to why policy makers were reluctant to support FE-based research and wondered whether it was because they saw it as potentially 'dangerous', an agent for social change. Their continuing reluctance to address the concerns of the sector suggests that perhaps he was right, though this paper's invitations to policy makers and managers offer them an opportunity to prove him wrong and at the same time make FE genuinely 'research-rich'.

## **Appendix**

### Questions we asked the workshop attendees

1. What are you reading? (Visual mapping exercise)
2. To what extent do you agree with Stenhouse's definition of research? Can it be applied to FE-based research?
3. How might research be a basis for teaching?
4. What do the terms research-led teaching or teaching-led research mean to you?
5. How might research-led teaching or teaching-led research apply to your practice?
6. How can teaching and learning assessment practice become research?
7. What is the relationship between research and scholarly activity and teaching and learning and assessment?
8. What research is going on in FE? (Visual mapping exercise)
9. What's the value of research to FE? What support and development is required for research 'to flourish' in the sector?
10. What are the methodologies that might support research in the sector?
11. What methods are most useful for the sector?
12. What "supports and suffocates" the research and scholarly practices taking place in our institutions?
13. How can individuals from FE and FE institutions attract funding to support research and scholarly activity on teaching, learning and assessment?
14. What does democratic or 'brave research' (Swennen, 2018) mean to you? Can you identify examples of democratic and "brave research" in FE?
15. What might be "brave" topics be for FE-based practitioners?
16. Who should be involved in 'brave research'?

## **References**

- Arao, B. and Clemens, K., (2013) 'From safe spaces to brave spaces: A new way to frame dialogue around diversity and social justice,' pp. 135–150 in Landreman, L. (ed). *The Art of Effective Facilitation: Reflections from Social Justice Educators*. Sterling: Stylus Publishers.
- Ball, S. (2003) 'The teacher's soul and the terrors of performativity.' *Journal of Educational Policy*, 18 (2), pp.215-228.
- Braun, V., and Clarke, V., (2006) 'Using thematic analysis in psychology,' *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3 (2), pp. 77-101.
- British Education Research Association. (2014) *Research and the teaching profession: Building the capacity for a self-improving education system. Final Report of the BERA-RSA Inquiry into the Role of Research in Teacher Education*. London: BERA.
- British Education Research Association (2018) *Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research* 2<sup>nd</sup> edn. London: BERA.
- Coffield, F., (2007) *Running ever faster down the wrong road: an alternative future for education skills*. A professional lecture by Frank Coffield. London: IOE Press.
- Coffield, F., (2008) *Just suppose teaching and learning became the first priority*. London: LSN
- Coffield, F., (2009) *All you ever wanted to know about teaching and learning but were too cool to ask*. London: LSN
- Daley, M. (2015) 'Why teach? Not afraid to dance,' pp.13-24, in Daley, M., Orr, K., Petrie, J., (eds.) *Further Education and the 12 Dancing Princesses*. London. IOE/Trentham.
- Elliott, G. (1996) 'Why is research invisible in further education?' *British Educational Research Journal*, 22(1), pp.101-111.
- Hardy, I. (2010) 'Teacher talk: flexible delivery and academics' praxis in an Australian university,' *International Journal for Academic Development*, 15, (2) pp.131-142.

Kemmis, S., McTaggart, R., and Nixon, R. (2014) *The action research planner: doing critical participatory action research*. Dordrecht: Springer.

Kidd, W. (2013) 'The times they are a-changing: some thoughts on the historical and contemporary tensions in Initial Teacher Education for the lifelong learning sector in the UK at this pivotal moment in time,' *Research in Teacher Education*, 3 (2), pp.15-21. [Online] Available at <https://www.uel.ac.uk/~media/Main/Images/Cass/RiTE/Article-2.ashx> [Accessed 27 May 2014].

Lloyd, C., & Jones, S. (2018) 'Researching the sector from within: the experience of establishing a research group within an FE college,' *Research in Post-compulsory Education*, 23 (1), pp. 75-93.

Mahon, K., Kemmis, S., Francisco, S., and Lloyd, A., (2017) 'Introduction: Practice Theory and the Theory of Practice Architectures,' pp.1-30, in Mahon, K., Francisco, S., and Kemmis, S., *Exploring Education and Professional Practice through the lens of practice architectures*. Singapore: Springer.

McNiff, J. (2014) *Writing and doing action research*. London: Sage.

McNiff, J., (2018) 'Teachers as researchers and the politics of knowledge, *Keynote Address #FEResearchmeet, 3 July 2018*, Bedford College.

O'Leary, M., (2013) *Developing a National Framework for the Effective Use of Lesson Observation in Further Education*. London: UCU.

Orr, K. (2015) 'Coda: Writing as Resistance,' pp.175-176, in Daley, M., Orr, K., Petrie, J., (eds.) *Further Education and the 12 Dancing Princesses*. London: IOE/Trentham.

Petrie, J. (2015) 'Introduction: How Grimm is FE?' pp 1-12, in Daley, M., Orr, K., Petrie, J., (eds). *Further education and the twelve dancing princesses*. London: IOE/Trentham.

Stenhouse, L., (1979) 'Research as a Basis for Teaching', *Inaugural Lecture by Lawrence Stenhouse*, Norwich: University of East Anglia.

Stenhouse, L. (1981) 'What counts as research?' *British Journal of Educational Studies*, 29(2), pp. 103-114.

Swennen, A. (2018) 'Brave research as more than just professional development,'  
*Professional Development in Education*, 44 (2), pp.141-144.