

Building research capacity in a practitioner community: framing and evaluating the 'National Action Research Network on Researching and Evaluating Personal Development Planning and e-Portfolio Practice'

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Abstract

This paper evaluates key aspects of the National Action Research Network on Researching and Evaluating Personal Development Planning and e-Portfolio Practice (NARN). This was a National Teaching Fellowship Scheme funded project which ran from 2007-1010 and involved sixteen English Higher Education institutions (HEIs). The context, purposes, theoretical underpinnings and framework for the NARN are briefly explained before the experience of members is explored through an analysis of their own accounts. The NARN was proposed in response to widespread calls for more research evidence to underpin our understanding and implementation of Personal Development Planning (PDP) and e-Portfolio practices, taking its lead from Clegg's (2004) invitation to produce more researched examples of situated PDP and e-Portfolio practice. The NARN was primarily a capacity-building project aimed at developing a community of PDP and e-portfolio practitioners into practitioner researchers. Borrowing heavily on ideas of community and participative inquiry as well as concepts about developing communities of practice, the project placed an emphasis on promoting collegiality, a sense of belonging and the establishment of the project as a safe space in which to discuss research work. It is evaluated here through the thematic analysis of a particular data set of twelve anonymous accounts provided by project members. The NARN project's emphasis on process rather than product or output, mark it apart from most Higher Education (HE) learning and teaching funded projects. Its success carries an important lesson for fundholders, educational developers and HE managers about the funding of more process-based learning and teaching development in HE. It also provides a possible framework for similar capacity-building projects across other communities.

Key words: communities of practice; capacity-building; project management; personal development planning; national action research network.

Introduction

The National Action Research Network on Researching and Evaluating Personal Development Planning and e-Portfolio Practice (NARN) was established through funding from the UK Higher Education Academy National Teaching Fellowship Scheme Projects (HEA, 2010). The NARN project was conceived and exists on a number of levels; it is clearly about Personal Development Planning (PDP) and e-Portfolios, it is equally about research practice, but it is also a piece of action research on research capacity-building within a practitioner community. At this overarching level the NARN project is a capacity-building project with a group of educational practitioners. As such it has important lessons for other capacity-building projects and for any change management programme, whether the target community are PDP practitioners, learning developers or any other group and whatever the focus of their work. This paper sets out the context and theoretical basis of the overarching NARN model and explores its value as evidenced through the stories provided by participants.

The context of the NARN

There have been repeated calls for more robust evaluation of PDP in the UK (QAA et al., 2001; Gough et al., 2003; Burgess, 2004; Clegg, 2004). Initial enquiries, from systematic literature review (Gough et al., 2003) through to more practitioner-focused enquiry (Clegg, 2004; Clegg and Bradley, 2006; Peters, 2006), have suggested positive impacts on student learning but also raised issues about the complexities involved in evaluating situated PDP practice. The call by Gough et al. (2003), for more experimental studies in experimenter controlled conditions and/or using control groups, has rightly been criticised as failing to address the complexities of any real-world educational intervention (Clegg, 2005). However, much practitioner evaluation of situated practice has so far lacked the necessary rigour to stand serious scrutiny; being largely descriptive case studies. Nevertheless consultation work by the Centre for Recording Achievement (CRA) for the UK Higher Education Academy served to confirm the importance of developing an

enhanced evidence base for their practice to those charged with promoting PDP and e-Portfolio in Higher Education Institutions (HEIs); the PDP practitioners (Ward et al., 2005).

While the range of purposes and claimed benefits of PDP are clearly defined in policy documents (QAA et al., 2001; QAA, 2009), HEIs have been free to develop their own PDP systems using different models and emphasising varying objectives. The student experience of PDP is therefore very different at different HEIs and in different subjects and settings within those HEIs. While it may be going too far to suggest that PDP is a chaotic collection of concepts (Fry et al., 2002) it is reasonable to suggest that it embraces a multiplicity of approaches and practices which ensure the experience of PDP is diverse and context specific (Clegg, 2005). For the practitioner, then, there is obvious logic and appeal to situated research which aims at revealing a rich picture of the experience of PDP. It might usefully answer questions about effective approaches to implementation within different Higher Education (HE) situations and with different groups of learners. Such rich pictures could also illuminate whether or how engagement with different PDP practices and processes are enhancing the student learning experience.

Framing the NARN project

The NARN project, then, was framed as a way of building the capacity of the PDP and e-Portfolio practitioner community to develop, undertake and share situated, rich, authentic and robust research and evaluation of PDP practice. It was important that members, though they were not necessarily known to each other, were drawn from the pre-existing practitioner community of the CRA. Concepts about the nature and growth of communities of practice greatly influenced the project (Lave and Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998). However, the model used was not one of legitimate peripheral participation in the research community (Lave and Wenger, 1991) but of capacity-building and 'leading-edge learning' from within an existing well-functioning community of practice (Wenger, 1998, p.214). As Wenger puts it: 'the solidity of a shared history of practice is a social resource for further learning that must be put to work rather than dismissed' (Wenger, 1998, p.216).

Capacity-building was defined in this context as 'enhancing people's awareness and capabilities, individually and collectively, to produce results they truly care about' (Senge and Scharmer, 2001, p.240). The combination of individual and collective elements in this

definition was helpful to the community, furthermore its emphasis on affective elements of capacity-building was particularly important to the practitioner group and to the way in which the NARN was designed. It mattered to PDP practitioners that our definition included acknowledgement that they cared about what they do. Considerable time was invested in building an inclusive, mutual community in the early stages of the NARN project which addressed Wenger's 'modes of belonging' (Wenger, 1998, p.173).

The means of achieving capacity-building was participant/community action research at the meta-level of sharing, developing and undertaking research design and outcomes. This is informed by the approaches championed by Reason and Bradbury (2001) and owes much to Senge and Scharmer and their arguments that such an approach operates by, and results in, 'fostering relationships and collaboration amongst diverse organizations...creating settings for collective reflection that enable people...to 'see themselves in another' [and] leveraging progress...through cross institutional links' (Senge and Scharmer, 2001, p.238). Within the overall model for capacity-building the formal action research interventions came in the shape of the project structure itself and the meetings at national and regional level which were built into that structure. These provided the framework for the development of a practitioner-researcher community and for ongoing mutual support in developing and implementing the individual, situated research projects at institutional level.

The NARN project is therefore best understood as operating at three levels each with their own form of intervention, participation and output. At the national, meta-level this was an action research project seeking to implement interventions to build research capacity and evaluate this particular approach. At regional level it was about the development of those practitioner-researcher communities and their sharing of research ideas and practices. At the individual level it was about participants designing and implementing one piece of research on their situated PDP and e-Portfolio practice. We consciously chose to deviate from community action research in one vital regard. While the overall project was conceived as action research the leadership team felt it was too restricting to require the individual participants to limit themselves to an action research approach. Therefore individual members were encouraged to develop research approaches with which they felt comfortable and which best suited the aspect of PDP or e-Portfolio practice they wished to examine. This led some to adopt more exploratory, illuminative approaches (Cousin, 2009) whilst also giving others permission to examine staff and student attitudes to the changes

they were championing. This freedom did cause some uncertainty but ultimately was important to the success of the individual pieces of research and, therefore, the overall project.

Figure 1. National Action Research project structure.

Level	Year One	Year Two	Year Three	Key output
National	Facilitated discussion on project and Research question design	Facilitated discussion on Data collection and analysis	Facilitated discussion on Writing for publication	Evaluation of this capacity-building model
Regional	Community building and sharing ideas	Sharing proposals	Sharing data and drafts	A new research community
Individual	Research question	Data gathering	Reporting	Publishable pieces of research from each participant

The meetings at national level were intentionally more structured than those at regional level. While the national level meetings included inputs on particular aspects of research practice and facilitated discussion around these, the regional meetings merely had a thematic title (see Figure 1) beyond which it was up to the regional lead and group to establish their own agenda and bring their own ideas for discussion. This clearly passed responsibility to the regional groups to design and use these meetings as they saw fit. It also emphasised the important role of individual participants in driving the agenda and discussion at meetings and using the meetings to help them achieve their commitment to produce one piece of publishable research each by the end of the three year project (for further discussion of the project structure see Burkinshaw, 2010).

Evaluating the NARN: the data set

The NARN has produced a huge amount of evaluation data in its three years. The data corpus includes:

- Participant observation notes of the principal investigator at national and regional meetings.
- Extensive formal project documentation:
 - materials from project workshops and meetings.
 - regular reports from individual institutional leads.
 - regular reports from regional leads.
 - formal reports to the fund holders.
- Formal project outputs:
 - publications.
 - presentations.

However, this paper is based on a particular data set which sought to get behind the formal written accounts and materials of the project. The data set in question aimed to provide an indication of the personal stories of participants in the project. It consists of anonymous responses, via survey monkey, of project participants, provided through a single piece of free writing in response to a request for reflection of the journey of their participation in the NARN and requesting feedback on whether they felt the project aim had been addressed. This data was gathered in the final year of the project but before the contributions to this journal had been produced. Of the sixteen participating institutional leads, responses were received from thirteen. Of these, one quickly developed into a fuller piece which is presented as an individual chapter in this special edition (Kumar, 2010). The following analysis is therefore based on the remaining twelve responses.

The twelve responses were subject to thematic analysis using the approaches outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). Braun and Clarke warn that the presentation of analysis should be shaped by the themes rather than being shaped by the question asked. However, in this case, the question clearly did shape the responses and the themes follow the same shape of the life-cycle of the project; from initial expectations, through the experiences of becoming part of the project, the challenges of undertaking the research, learning from the project and hopes for the future. Clearly, as Braun and Clarke suggest, the themes do not

'emerge' from the data but are formed by the researcher's analysis through immersion in the data. To avoid too idiosyncratic an analysis being imposed on the data it is therefore vital that the results are checked by sharing the data with another researcher or presenting the findings back to the respondents. In this case the latter approach was used and the results were shared, discussed and honed with the project participants at the final national meeting of the NARN project held on 14th July 2010 at Goodenough College, London.

Initial hopes, fears and expectations for the project

Most project participants described themselves as neophyte researchers:

At the beginning of this project I felt quite overwhelmed and out of my depth as a researcher.

At the start of the project I felt very apprehensive about the prospect of carrying out research and writing up results. This was an alien concept for me.

This open self-acceptance as novice educational researchers may strike an academic audience as dangerous candour but it should be noted that, while some PDP and e-Portfolio practitioners may have come from academic backgrounds, many others come to the role through support services such as learning development, careers and even administrative functions. There is, therefore, no expectation of a research background or necessarily of research being part of the PDP practitioner's role. Furthermore, those who have come to the role from an academic career might well have research experience in a tradition very different from educational research: 'the methodology was challenging. This was not something I was used to from my tradition (science)'. So feelings of being overwhelmed, apprehensive and anxious, as neophyte educational researchers, were very strong:

I felt under-prepared for what was likely to be involved in 'being a researcher', not helped by the fact that in my institution the principle that I should be personally 'research active' is itself somewhat contentious.

There was a clear sense of boundary between the categories of practitioner and researcher, largely felt personally by practitioners but in this particular case reinforced by his institutional position. This meant joining the project and thus committing to the production of a piece of research, constituted a challenging piece of personal and professional risk-taking. For some it was about moving from one academic territory to another and for others this really was another country (Becher and Trowler, 2001). Furthermore there were hints that this alien research environment may be tough and uncaring when compared to the security and comfort of the practitioner community:

I felt quite overwhelmed and out of my depth as a researcher although I was confident in my role as a practitioner. I was hopeful that I would be able to complete the project and produce a piece of work for publication although I was concerned that this may not be 'good enough' and was worried about criticism and rejection.

A small number of respondents felt more confident than this, they had at least made some small incursions into educational research territory and were noticeably less fearful:

Prior to getting involved in this project I had already started to write and research in this area...I felt that being involved in the NARN project would enable me to build on this.

Given, though, the general level of apprehension it is worth exploring why colleagues were willing to consider stepping across the practitioner/researcher boundary and face the risks it was felt to involve. Three examples illustrate the feeling here:

I had big hopes of great collaborations – something that gets us out of our silos...Big hopes that this collaboration could keep the spirit of many CRA seminars going.

I felt very at home with the goals of the project, both in terms of developing the capacity of researchers, and with its focus on PDP. Both of these issues were things that I was grappling with in my own institution, so I thought I had a lot to draw from the project, and also hopefully something to contribute...I think that being engaged in this project would provide a space to formalise some work around PDP.

My transition into the project was eased by there being some familiar faces. Although I hadn't been involved in the development of the project, I hadn't felt such an outsider. Given the territory we were occupying, this was probably quite important – it made it somewhat easier to talk about your own personal development.

On the basis of these and similar comments it is clear that the NARN was building on a pre-existing community which was felt to be constructive, supportive, collaborative and collegial. The opportunity to work across institutions was greeted positively. The project had clearly chimed with a desire amongst participating practitioners to build upon their evaluation work. Colleagues spoke of the opportunity the project provided to engage in work which would be of institutional, professional and personal value and which provided an opportunity to contribute to the national picture.

There were also, however some statements including implied criticism of the project. Its underlying philosophy of situated research on situated practice clearly had not been grasped by all participants and there is an inference of dashed hopes and implied disappointment that the proposed collaboration over research planning and design did not lead to a big collaborative research project. In this regard the project's research paradigm frustrated a few members by providing what they saw as a golden opportunity for large scale quantitative research yet simultaneously setting its face against such approaches. The project, despite setting out not to limit the approaches adopted by colleagues, was clearly not inclusive of all research cultures. While the project leadership felt this point was clear from the bid document, it proved to be important that the early project meetings included time to [re]present, discuss and debate the nature of the project and individual roles and commitments within it.

Becoming a (regional) practitioner research community

What is clearly conveyed by the participants' stories of the project is the value of the regional groups. The organisation and nature of the regional groups is discussed in more depth elsewhere (Keenan et al., 2010) but they figure so strongly in this data set that it would be unbalanced not to consider them here. The power of these groups in supporting

the forward momentum of the project and the individual's personal and professional development cannot be overstated given the feedback received:

Most importantly I have gained some really good and very valuable colleagues, and I hope very much that our friendships will continue beyond the life of the project. Being able to draw on the knowledge perspectives and experiences of these people has been for me the best thing to have come out of this project, and I know for a fact my research has benefitted and improved as a result. I've learnt so much as a researcher...I think the idea of the regional groups has been the crucial factor with NARN in building those relationships and keeping people linked together.

Collegiality and friendship are sorely underrated both as the helpful requisites for a successful project or as outputs from a project. Yet the message from colleagues in the project was clearly that the communities of practice formed by the project were crucial to its success and that the collegial culture, which the project planning and project leadership put a great deal of effort into fostering, was the vital heart of the project. Serious consideration of the affective domain clearly 'paid-off' across the wider project and Wenger's 'modes of belonging' to a community of practice through engagement, imagination and alignment are apparent (Wenger, 1998, p.173).

Within the regional groups I did get a sense of common purpose, and of the benefits to be gained from peers working through problems together. The environment that we established was the opposite of the traditional academic research seminar – which tend to be competitive and posturing. People were genuinely trying to help each other progress. As the project moved forward, I think the groups have developed more of a critical edge, but that is now based on an atmosphere of trust and therefore is not dealt with defensively.

Again here the practitioner community is described in contrast to a traditional academic culture which is perceived as being more individualistic and aggressive. It is revealing of the practitioner community that this sense of 'the academic' should be present and that there should be such relief that it was possible to become researchers without adopting what were seen to be destructive elements of academic culture. The importance placed in the project planning on building trusting communities in the regional groupings was clearly justified.

Facing challenges

It should not be implied from the highly positive remarks about the researcher-practitioner communities that were growing up within the project that everything went entirely according to plan or that the experience of project members was always positive. The individual institutional project proved challenging in many cases, as one colleague pithily put it: 'within my own institution the initial project has proved to be a disaster'. The problems mentioned include changing roles and shifting relationships within institutions. Also a number of projects formed local research teams, in some cases this was very successful but sometimes this reliance on others meant there were aspects of the research which were beyond the individual control of members and were prone to difficulty in changing circumstances. Some learnt the hard way that institutional colleagues who had seemed supportive proved less reliable when the implications of the research became apparent. This experience can be heard in the following:

One of the learning highlights for me has been the extent to which pedagogic research into the student experience is by its very nature a highly politicised activity.

Such difficulties were perhaps to be expected across sixteen three-year research projects. What is remarkable is that they all came good and produced something. This is testament to the peer support provided on the project and the commitment colleagues developed towards it. Every project member had made a personal and professional commitment to produce a piece of research and the regional groups had committed to supporting project members in achieving this. Rather than giving in when faced with local difficulties, these difficulties were taken to meetings, discussed and either solutions formulated or new plans constructed. The combination of commitment to the project goal and a supportive environment made all the difference.

Finding time to undertake the research, time which was not funded by the project, also proved problematic:

It has been very difficult to find time to spend on the research project.

It was clear from the start that although the NARN project was a three-year initiative, this was not going to be long enough.

Such statements are not just about priorities; members were taking on an additional burden in committing to the project. In some cases it proved possible to negotiate some time to produce the research, being able to argue they were involved in a prestigious national project helped these negotiations in some cases. However, others did face doing the research on top of their existing role and perhaps this provided another hard lesson about the challenges of becoming a researcher.

The value of the NARN approach

Colleagues in the CRA have long believed that there is a great deal of power in networks of practitioners. The NARN project was predicated on that belief. The project does seem to have delivered on its aims of producing not just the pieces of work contained in this journal special edition but also a new community of practitioner-researchers. Individuals in the community clearly feel they have made important personal and professional gains just from being part of it:

On a personal level I have gained a lot from being in a regional group. I have made stronger relationships with colleagues and I feel supported in the PDP work.

Professionally it has helped because I think it has raised my profile nationally. It has also enabled me to network with colleagues nationally that wouldn't have happened any other way.

There have also clearly been shifts and improvements in research confidence and various aspects of research practice. The meetings were variously credited with 'stimulating ideas,' providing 'constructive criticism', 'assisting reflection' and 'helping me recognise I have made progress':

The research process itself is no longer the mystical process I once thought it was.

It has made me consider at a deeper level what the issues with involvement and embedding PDP are. This will prove very useful to the organisation and hopefully to other HEIs across the country.

A particularly useful focus has been to define a methodological research paradigm as the practical project was already in hand when we were invited into the NARN.

Over the last couple of years my research has developed, and become more focused, and all the threads are now coming together. But, more than that, I have gained immeasurable confidence as a PDP researcher, and I feel I have earned authority and a sense of belonging.

Looking forward

For many on the NARN project this first excursion into research territory is just the beginning. With a supportive community in place and confidence growing, more can be expected from this group of practitioner-researchers:

I now care so much more deeply about my 'research question', and have been able to meet with colleagues working in similar areas (which has itself broadened the area of interest) this has been both exciting a[nd] frustrating. I've sometimes felt as though a door in front of me is slightly ajar...Over the past few months, I've been inching forward and I'm now just touching the threshold. With a little more dedicated time, though, I do think I might just be able to push through.

For me it is definitely a start rather than an end to research, which I consider a positive move.

Conclusions

There were a number of key success factors for the NARN project which were based on models of participative inquiry and communities of practice. These models and the NARN experience provide a template for other capacity-building and change management programmes. The project design and leadership offered a structure which provided a trajectory and clear stages but also left plenty of scope for members' creative engagement and for meetings to be built around their concerns. It was a great help that the project built on the existing community of practice provided by the CRA; this meant there was already a

shared outlook and language which could then be extended into new territory. The challenge of moving into research territory for this practitioner community should not be underestimated and comes out strongly from the accounts here. Real anxiety about the dangers was expressed and the project had to establish that it was possible to make this transition without meeting or adopting what were seen to be negative critical, competitive and destructive aspects of traditional academic research culture. Colleagues overcame the challenges they faced because they had made a shared public commitment to the project and through strong peer support.

The NARN project, unlike so many HE funded enhancement projects, placed huge emphasis on the people involved and saw the key output as being the community it developed. This meant a great deal of effort went into establishing a culture of trust, openness, mutuality and respect which then allowed safe space for the operation of colleagues as true critical friends. The mutual commitment and support of the members of this new community of practice made it possible. Fundholders should take note that such projects, which make space for the development of communities of practice, establish a trajectory of capacity-building and involve large numbers from the outset may well prove more cost effective and achieve more lasting impact than those which are designed primarily for small teams to produce outputs and deliverables. Perhaps project proposals which emphasise the learning process, journey and trajectory over the product – and the community over the artefacts – should be encouraged.

Throughout the project, and in this paper, I have been at pains to emphasise that at its top level the NARN project was not about PDP and e-Portfolio. It was about community and capacity-building for researching our practice. However, what have been striking throughout these stories of engagement with the NARN are the ways the project functioned to support the development of research capacity through community building around PDP-type activities. Colleagues went through the processes of **self- assessment** of their research capability, **goal setting** in terms of committing to produce some research, **planning** their engagement and projects, **recording** progress, **reflecting** on that progress and **presenting** what they have learnt. The community of practitioner-researchers grew through mutual engagement in these well-established PDP processes, and engagement in these processes fed into achievement of Wenger's (1998) 'modes of belonging' to a community of practice. So, while the learning was perforce personal (Peters and Tymms, 2010), the social aspects of engaging and committing as part of a community mattered. It

was this combination of PDP approaches and the culture of a collegial learning community that made the difference.

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