Looking for evidence

With public funding in short supply, learning providers are under increasing pressure to demonstrate the effectiveness of their programmes. Practitioner researcher SARAH HOUSDEN considers some of the challenges facing this kind of research.

In a climate of fiscal constraint and cuts to public spending, it is more important than ever to demonstrate the effectiveness of learning programmes. I recently carried out an action research project within Norfolk County Council’s adult community learning service, where I work as a tutor, with the aim of increasing the impact of reminiscence training for care workers. The research threw up a number of challenges, from applying for funding to getting colleagues on board. In this article I want to explore a few of them.

In his 2006 book Evidence-Based Teaching, Geoff Petty encourages his readers to move away from doing things in a certain way because ‘we’ve always done it like that’, and to move instead towards the application of research evidence in our teaching. As a health professional who has moved into teaching in the learning and skills sector over the past 10 years, I was aware of the need for evidence to back up my instinctive feeling that post-course workplace mentoring would boost students’ confidence in putting their new skills into practice. I needed more than instinct to convince our course funders that it was worthwhile paying mentors to support students in the workplace. Thus, with funding from a Research Development Fellowship sponsored by the Learning and Skills Improvement Service (LSIS) and the Institute for Learning (IfL), I embarked upon a research project to explore whether students’ application of skills in the workplace increased when they had four visits from a subject specialist mentor. The courses attended by participants in the study aimed to equip students with the necessary practical skills and theoretical knowledge to run reminiscence groups with older people and people with learning disabilities attending day services or living in care homes.

Within weeks of discussing with my colleagues the need to explore the potential effects of post-course reminiscence mentoring, but facing uncertainty as to how this could be achieved without funding, I became aware of the possibility of applying for an LSIS-IfL Research Development Fellowship grant. The process of submitting a written application was relatively straightforward, but it took several hours to complete the form. Thus, the first challenge for any research project is to find a person willing to devote substantial amounts of time to making applications for funding, including attending any face-to-face interviews associated with the application. Ideally, every organisation providing learning opportunities for adults would recognise the importance of evidence-based practice and, as a result, would have funding set aside to support staff in making such applications – especially where specialist knowledge of the area to be researched is necessary to complete the application, and no general fundraiser could be expected to have such knowledge.

This raises a second challenge – the need for a project leader who has some awareness of research methods and ethics, and who can write a research proposal and carry through the practical research, as well as analyse results and draw sound conclusions. While it is not essential for all these skills to reside in one person, the research team as a whole needs to be made up of people who together combine these skills. In our reminiscence mentoring research, I was fortunate to be supported by a team manager who has a PhD, and was therefore able to understand the role of mentors in this research, and so it was important that they understood the need for an unusual amount of record keeping in the form of mentoring diaries, as well as sharing the vision for what flexible person-centred mentoring could achieve.

Students and mentors were spread throughout the county and this presented a practical challenge in terms of communication and carrying out research interviews. Whereas a mainstream learning provider, such as a further education college, might expect all research participants to have a common base at the college, I needed to stay in touch with people over an area of more than 60 square miles. This was achieved through having mentors and mentees keep research diaries which were sent to me each week by e-mail, and by carrying out final interviews over the telephone. There are arguments for and against using telephone interviews as opposed to meeting participants face-to-face.

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Some people feel inhibited when talking on the phone, while others may find it easier to speak freely. Having only oral contact with participants meant that I was unable to read or respond to any non-verbal signals which might have given clues as to when to ask further questions or back off in my questioning. This means that more in-depth data was potentially lost. At the same time, there was a danger that, being unable to read discomfort in participants’ body language, I may inadvertently have asked questions which were too intrusive. Such issues were borne in mind when analysing the transcripts of the recorded interviews.

Practical difficulty
A further practical difficulty throughout the research was for mentors and mentees to find time to meet. Although mentors were being paid for their input, it was not possible to provide remuneration for students, who were expected to benefit in-kind through gaining in confidence and the practical application of skills. However, this meant that mentees needed to find time in their working week, and to be supported in this time out from their normal working role by their employers, in order to meet with mentors. Generally, employers were supportive in giving students time out for mentoring. This was achieved partly through gaining their consent to their employees’ participation in the research before it began.

Among all these challenges are recurring issues of needing to share the vision of the research with others in order to gain their co-operation and support. Such others range from co-workers and senior managers to student participants and their employers. Nonetheless, for a research project to reach a successful conclusion (whether the findings are those expected or not) there does need to be a lead figure who inspires others and enables them to share in the challenges and understand the purposes of such research. This is where the personal motivation of the lead researcher is an asset – but can also become a challenge. Retaining some objectivity about a project in which a great deal of personal time and energy has been invested is difficult. It is also important to maintain some distance in considering the worth of a research project in the planning stages. For instance, the lead researcher, together with colleagues, needs to weigh up the extent to which the project is of personal interest to them with little value to the organisation for which they work, or to the wider learning and skills sector. Admittedly, reminiscence mentoring is a bit of a niche area, and with a small study involving only nine students, questions are likely to be asked about how the findings might be applied in other areas of teaching and learning. Equally, if the findings are considered of worth to a wider audience, the final challenge facing the researcher is that of dissemination of findings. In this case, detailed searches of the extant research literature on mentoring were used to explore how what we had found fitted in with what others had discovered through research. It was particularly useful and affirming to find that, just as our research established, there is a growing consensus that mentors need to focus on developing a relationship with mentees before responding flexibly to their unique needs by encouraging goal setting, facilitating problem-solving and building their confidence.

Carrying out research in the learning and skills sector presents many challenges which cannot be overcome without the necessary investment by learning providers and government in the research skills and careers of teaching practitioners. Research needs to be carried out by practitioners if it is to be effective in answering practical questions which are of real interest and benefit to students and teachers and can therefore make a significant difference in terms of providing learning opportunities which are both value-for-money and are delivered through the most effective teaching methods.

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Her research on mentoring reminiscence workers in care homes won the top prize at the Learning and Skills Research Network’s 2010 annual conference and is available from: sarah.housden@homecall.co.uk. Sarah’s first book, Reminiscence and Lifelong Learning, is available from NIACE.