TLRP: academic challenges for moral purposes

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Introduction

TLRP is the largest independent, coordinated research initiative in education that the UK has ever known. The rhetoric is strong, and the Programme's projects and activities are designed: 'to lead to significant improvements in outcomes for learners at all ages and stages in all sectors and contexts of education and training, including informal learning settings, throughout the United Kingdom' (Phase III Specification).

Even with the commitment of some £26m, this is an extremely bold aim. There are also goals concerning multi-disciplinary working, broadening methodologies, deepening research capacity and the transformation and impact of new knowledge.

What chance do academic researchers have of achieving such goals? What is realistic?

In this paper I attempt to answer these questions from my own, personal perspective. I start by considering the contextual origins of the Programme, then move to consider some epistemological, substantive, theoretical, engagement and processual issues.

Where does the Programme come from? Context

A simple, technical answer to this question is that, in 1997, the funding council for English universities decided that a special research programme on teaching and learning in education would be valuable – and after a while commissioned ESRC to manage it. Work began in 1999, and Phase I Networks were funded from 2000. Other funders joined in, and the Programme grew and developed. It now boasts three phases and is resourced until the end of 2008.

A more politically-aware answer would be that TLRP was a follow-through from the enormous changes in public education that characterised the 1980s and 1990s. The development by successive Conservative and New Labour governments in England of national systems for curriculum, assessment, inspection, performance management, teacher training, etc. was researched, analysed and critiqued by an annoyingly independent academic community. And yet this 'irritant' was itself fractured into a multiplicity of groups, tribes and territories and, when it could be understood, was perceived to have an indulgent sense of the relationship between evidence and argument, with value commitments often providing a bridge. A feeling in high places that 'something should be done' was given added impetus by critics such as Hargreaves, Tooley and Hillage. In this climate, TLRP was established. Focused on the practical issue of pedagogy, framed by the structure of a Programme and incorporating a strategy for improving methodological 'rigour', it was seen by some in the academic world as a framework for challenge and control.

Those who subscribe to the 'sociological imagination' might perceive things in yet another way. Social institutions emerge, ebb and flow at the interface of history and biography, and both individual agency and the constraints of social structure are real. We 'make' history, but not in conditions of our own choosing.

The historical moment for UK educational researchers is specific, and those working in the field have certainly been on the back foot. Whilst some recent challenges reflect a lack of understanding, others hit home. Without doubt, there is room for improvement in the rigour, accessibility and relevance of educational research. If we wish to maintain independence and respect, then we have to attend to these issues. If the academy wishes to claim a significant role in contributing to decision-making in our democracy, then the status of our knowledge has to be justified.

In these circumstances, my view is that TLRP should be seen as an incredible *opportunity*, rather than as a threat. In partnership with sympathetic users of educational research, with support from multiple funders, managed by an independent agency and populated by academics from Education and other social sciences, it affords many opportunities for 'active mediation' in which external pressures are adapted and shaped whilst preserving core commitments.

What then are these 'core commitments'? In a recent Newsletter, I offered my own perspective:

> 'Our mission is to conduct research to enhance a broad range of learning outcomes of relevance to individuals, educational institutions, workplaces and our society as a whole. Our work will contribute to individual opportunity, economic productivity and social cohesion, and to the new foundations of evidence-informed policy and practice in education.'

Of course such statements reflect the kind of remorseless optimism from which I am known to suffer, but they also draw on a long-standing and culturally embedded form of Enlightenment commitment. We are, it seems to me, still basically in the business of trying to apply reason to complex social issues in order to 'improve' our society. This is a moral imperative – and is much more important than specific squabbles. There is a bigger job to be attempted. We make our contribution to the future, and we do it in the present. We cannot choose where we start from.

Can our knowledge be relied upon? Epistemological assumptions

This is a vitally important topic, on which I intend to write in more detail in due course. For the present however, I will merely indicate some major elements of my perspective.

Demands that educational research should demonstrate 'What Works?' have been made regularly in recent years, and TLRP is right in the firing line of this expectation. It is, of course, a simplistic and dangerous rhetoric. However, the call cannot be set aside quite that easily, for underlying it, is serious dissatisfaction with the focus, quality and relevance of educational research.

'What Works?' implies a singular focus on practical utility. This is an immediate challenge to the diversity of paradigms and perspectives to be found in the academic field of education. This diversity is maintained by people with highly developed, specialist understandings, skills and commitments, and provides rich insights from different perspectives. There are valuable intellectual resources there, often with long evolutionary histories, which it would be foolish to ignore. Having said that, it is also understandable that those involved in building a national educational system hope that research efforts will engage constructively with it. I see this as an issue of balance and degree – but we must certainly defend diversity, within TLRP and beyond, as a source of challenge, innovation and possible change.

'What Works?' also demands categoric solutions, but the reality is that all knowledge is provisional in any field of science. Indeed, scientific processes are predicated on that assumption. Those who might, even rhetorically, imply that educational research can 'solve' educational problems thus have to be guided to a more realistic position. Education is hugely complex, and the reality is that there are difficulties in identifying, understanding, relating, measuring, analysing, theorising and reporting the multiplicity of variables that affect teaching and learning. This is one of the reasons why diverse perspectives have evolved. What researchers can and should do though, is to work systematically towards reducing that complexity and towards specifying degrees of likelihood in the relationships between variables. This is the attraction of conceptual analyses and of notions such as 'fuzzy generalisation'. In my view, such contributions are as valuable as those of the economist predicting future economic growth, the political scientist anticipating electoral outcomes or even the weather forecaster. In each case, there is no certainty, but they offer expert opinion based on careful examination of available evidence.

On this point, educational researchers do have to be alert. Challenges to demonstrate the 'warrant' of findings are not inappropriate. Colleagues in our Research Capacity Building Network (RCBN) have some important things to say, and we all have a responsibility to understand the strengths of the work of others. A danger of too much insularity within *any* particular academic tribe or territory is that the sub-field becomes self-referential, complacent, closed and defensive. If TLRP is to succeed, then we must support each other in exploring across boundaries and in working towards increasingly sophisticated, and demonstrably accurate, evidence-based, understandings of educational processes.

Whatever educational researchers achieve, my view remains that this knowledge will always be provisional and contextually circumscribed. This is where the relationship with user practitioners and policy-makers comes in. Judgements about the relevance and application of research are matters for these professionals as they confront an inevitable range of contextually-specific dilemmas. A respectful division of labour is necessary - though, of course, there can be very helpful movement between the two roles. In respect of teachers, this posture in relation to research is what I have tried to support in my work on Reflective Teaching (www.RTweb.info).   A key argument is that researchers provide an array of findings and analyses but, however carefully honed such resources are, they require professional judgement about application by those who understand the specifics of context, learner characteristics, educational objectives, etc.

To fulfil our role in this, as educational researchers within TLRP, we have to commit to struggling, openly, to improve the quality of the knowledge we produce, to progressively seek more secure analyses and to work towards evidence-informed policy and practice – even if we know that we will never achieve certainty or 'truth'.

What are we trying to discover? Substantive and thematic issues

The first Programme Newsletter of September 2000 announced 'Research to Raise Achievement'. It declared:

> 'Our objective is to support the teaching and learning community in improving the achievement of learners, across a wide range of contexts, by providing evidence from high quality research and ensuring it has impact on practice.'

The substantive focus was explicitly on *teaching and learning*, and this is important to note, for discussions of methodological and paradigmatic issues sometimes seem to sweep us into much wider concerns.

Writing as I now do, exactly two years after this statement was published, two other subtle developments can be discerned. First, the Programme in Phase III is targeted at broadly defined 'learning outcomes', rather than at 'achievement' per se. In part, this reflects adjustment in relation to Phase III's focus on post-compulsory education, but there is also increasing recognition that narrow forms of attainment, say in basic skills, also require consideration of the more holistic, dispositional issues that are associated with lifelong learning.

Second, the emphasis on 'practice' is now matched by a parallel interest in 'policy'. In part, this comes from the expressed interest of research users within government agencies, from whom support for the Programme is strong. In part, it comes from researchers and practitioners who know that local practices are significantly influenced by policy frameworks, particularly in strongly centralised systems.

The consequences of these two developments subtly re-orientate the Programme. On the one hand, the substantive focus widens, legitimating and requiring appropriate consideration of contextual factors. On the other, the Programme begins to have a role not just in 'taking' policy-determined problems for study, but also in providing evaluation and (possibly) critique of policy. The benefit of increasing levels of partnership with policy-makers is that independent analysis, when evidence-based and constructively presented, may be taken seriously as a contribution, rather than parried or rubbished as a threat.

In due course, once Phase III funding decisions have been made, the Programme is likely to have around 30 large-scale project or network investments, and a number of associated fellowships and other activities. As we know, foci at present include: consulting students; inclusion; science education; literacy and numeracy; thinking skills; learning to learn; classroom group work; home-school learning; learning in further education, in undergraduate courses and in postgraduate employment; problem-based learning; and workplace incentives. To this list we will be able to add another dozen or so further topics in post-compulsory education following Phase III decisions.

Each of these projects has its own substantive focus and involves some of the best UK specialists in the relevant field. Most of the projects are larger than has previously been usual in educational research and many use sophisticated designs. In each substantive field, we thus expect important findings to emerge, with strong warrants, which should justify them being taken very seriously by practitioners, policy-makers and the public generally. There are already signs of this happening with some of the emergent results of Phase I Networks.

The Programme Team will do its utmost to support Project Teams in maximising the quality and impact of their work in its own terms. In this respect, we will be offering various services and forms of support – not least, critical friendship.

Additionally however, the Programme Team is charged with adding value to project investments. A major vehicle for this will be through the establishment of cross-Programme Thematic Groups. Each group will engage with a cluster of themes associated with a particular Programme aim. Thus we expect to have Thematic Groups working in the broad areas of: learning outcomes; life-course; synergy; capacity; transformation and impact, and additionally in relation to ICT.

Thematic Groups will be able to range widely within these areas, and will draw on academics and users from both inside and outside the Programme, as well as welcoming open inputs via web-based discussion facilities. It has been the business of this conference to help to focus and define the nature of these Thematic Groups and, with the benefit of your advice, we will now be moving them forward and making specific proposals.

Of course, projects will always remain the primary 'engine rooms' of the Programme. However, thematic Groups are essential devices for taking stock of cross-Programme achievements, relating ideas and making connections, drawing on other expertise, broadening debate, and building meta-analyses. At this point, we cannot quite predict how such themes will develop, but they do have the potential to be very significant.

Can we influence future thinking? Theoretical goals

As indicated above, the substantive focus of each project is specific and, through Thematic Groups, we will have provision to search across projects. Theoretical development is a very likely outcome in relation to each project, and also as a product of thematic development. We will strongly support such work.

Additionally however, the design of the Programme presents a unique opportunity to attempt to construct a meta-analysis of teaching and learning through the life-course – a challenge which is of particular interest to me. This arises because of the spread of projects which are expected, in due course, to cover most sectors and contexts of formal education and adult learning. In addition to pedagogic issues generally, there are also some recurring foci in terms of the content of learning, with literacy, numeracy and various representations of learning disposition being particularly prominent. The issues of inclusion, exclusion and opportunities to learn are also well represented, and we have some interesting projects on transitions between educational sectors.

It thus becomes possible, conceptually at least, to begin to map the project portfolio as a whole (see the Figure 1 below). All projects, at their heart, are concerned with interaction between some form of teacher and learner. This occurs in particular contexts and has particular outcomes. A variety of factors influence such teachers, learners and contexts.

At this level of simplicity, this model can be applied at successive stages of the life-course, from infancy to childhood, adolescence, youth, adulthood, middle age, retirement and old age. Learning is necessary and takes place, to a greater or lesser extent, at all stages of life. The Programme thus provides a significant opportunity to look developmentally at the ways in which learners adjust to successive contexts.

Contextual factors and levels

CONTEXT

| INTERACTION |

'Teacher' ⟷ 'Learner'

outcomes

TEACHER FACTORS

LEARNER FACTORS

LIFELONG LEARNING

Infancy
Childhood
Adolesence
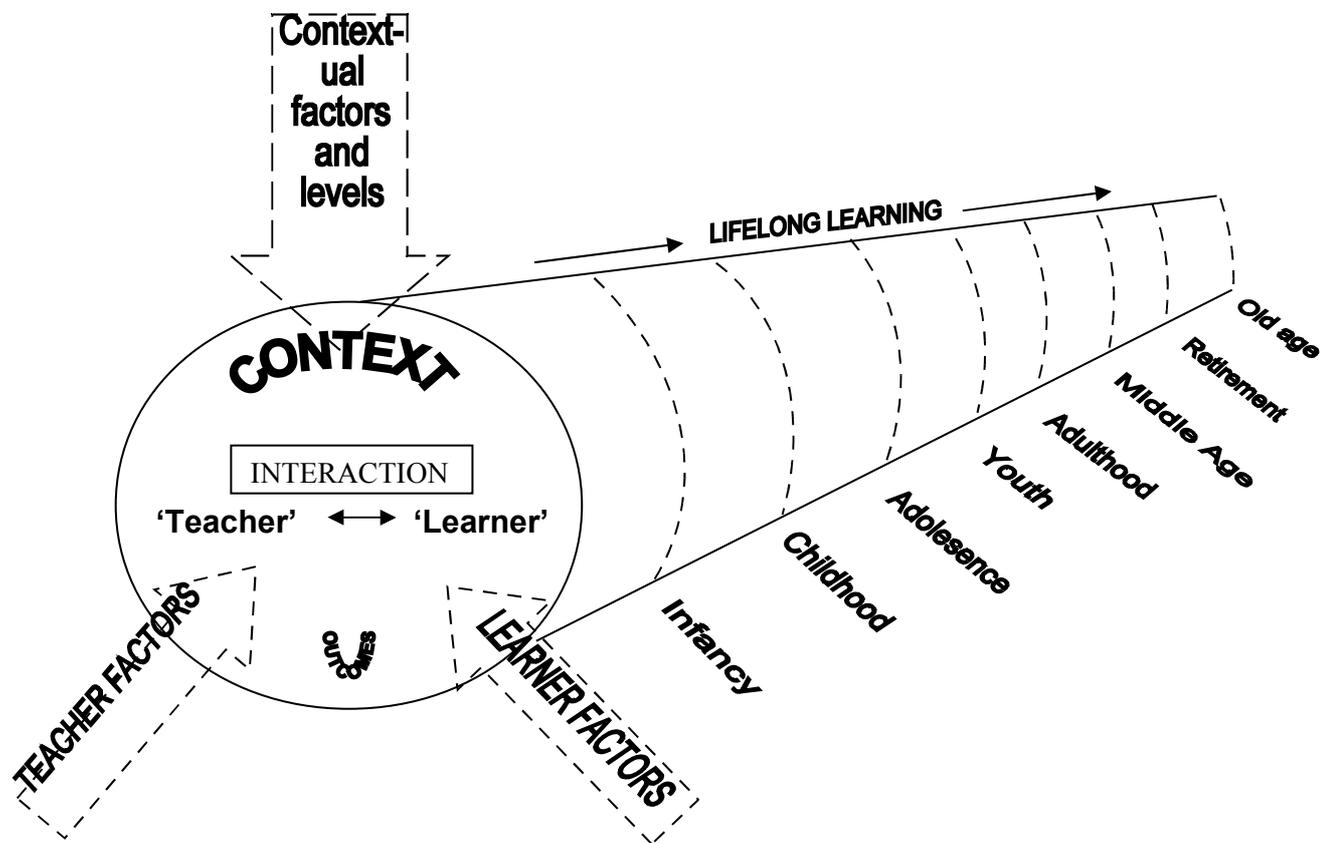Youth
Adulthood
Middle Age
Retirement
Old age

Figure 1: Learning through the life-course

But why might this matter? I offer two arguments here. First, I would suggest that recent UK education policy has been imbalanced. It has been driven by a desire to challenge educational accountabilities and to improve 'standards', but has lacked any really secure appreciation of how learning actually occurs. The result has been a succession of requirements, measurements, targets, inspections and initiatives at each level of the system. Analytically, much provision is underpinned by a 'delivery' model of teaching and learning.

Problems arise if the desire to support lifelong learners, with positive dispositions for the challenges of the 21st century, is taken seriously, for content-crammed, over-assessed youngsters can just as easily be turned off learning for life. We therefore certainly do need ways of thinking about teaching and learning which are more informed by evidence of how people construct their identities as learners and how they create, appropriate, or reject, knowledge. We need, in other words, more attention to the learner passing through successive sectors of system – to the

educational experience as received, and its consequences. Taken as a whole, TLRP may well provide a vehicle for this type of analysis and provide an evidence-base for it. We might eventually, as a result, produce more secure educational policy, more fulfilled, confident and flexible learners (and teachers) and also, higher standards.

Such thinking could, of course, tap the developmental narratives of life which remain strong within popular culture, and thus make possible some exciting engagements with the media. A significant achievement of the Programme would thus be to have contributed to the development of more sophisticated ways of thinking about learning, teaching and the sequence of institutions that support them.

A second reason for suggesting that the Programme should consider a lifecourse meta-analysis relates to other developments. At the time TLRP finally reports, research on the human genome and in the field of neuro-science is likely to be even more prominent than it is today. Irrespective of the qualified findings and analyses that we may expect from researchers in these fields, there is a considerable risk that such work will be interpreted as demonstrating fixed characteristics and abilities. It is therefore extremely important that the work being done in these fields is complemented by clear and accessible accounts of social and educational factors in human development – of agency, adaption and growth.

Will anyone really take any notice? User engagement

Practitioners, policy-makers and the public are quite used to making decisions without significant reference to educational research. In preference, they often draw on folk-theory, hunch or intuition. Indeed, it seems that everyone's personal educational experience, in a sense, warrants their educational opinions in later life.

However, this is clearly a weak position and there is wide-spread acceptance of the idea that policy and practice should be evidence-informed. The modernist rationality of our times thus still holds the door open for educational researchers - but, at the same time, there is a ready relapse to hunch or pragmatism if research findings or recommendations jar.

Researchers thus have a very difficult job in both communicating and disseminating findings to maximise impact. To be convincing, to claim authority, we have to demonstrate both the relevance and quality of our work. As Charles Desforges often argued, we must try to operate in Pasteur's quadrant - to provide use-inspired, basic, high-quality research.

This is the rationale for the authentic engagement of research users at every stage of the research process, from the conceptualisation of key research issues onwards. Relevance and validity should be enhanced thereby, though technical matters of research design, data collection and analysis will of course draw on the unique expertise of research teams. At the point of evaluation of the work and consideration of its application, the goodwill and expertise of user partners is again essential. At best, projects need user 'champions' who, having participated in or advised on the work throughout, can lend credibility to the outcomes and offer promotional infrastructures for dissemination.

One way of expressing this is to say that we should aim to transform research knowledge into accessible forms, to present it in ways that enables users to appropriate it, and then to 'give it away'. We cannot sustain it. It must become

owned by others, promoted by others and, in due course, incorporated into the routine practices and common-sense thinking of others.

For that, we need partnerships and user engagement at every stage. In particular, projects should have strong user engagement in local sites of research to enhance relevance, authenticity and validity, combined with strong links and alliances with national organisations offering high-leverage systems of dissemination and mechanisms for maximising impact. The latter may, in my opinion, helpfully include both governmental *and* more independent agencies.

How might we achieve these things? Processes

If it 'takes a village to raise a child', then it takes an educational community, and more, to create a programme like TLRP and to make it successful. To achieve the goals of TLRP, I believe that we have to work together more effectively and build ever-stronger alliances.

Working together starts with respect. The Programme Team have begun to more strongly affirm the contributions of all the individuals involved in TLRP, without whom nothing will develop at all. For example, the September 2002 Newsletter contains profiles of some colleagues and reports on project activities, and other editions will offer more in due course. We will continue to emphasise the positive, to respect different academic positions and to work to avoid counter-productive confrontations. At the same time, we need, at every level and in every forum, to find ways of managing challenging discussions, for we must not gloss serious issues and points of difference. Rather, we need to face them, analyse them and talk them through.

RCBN is moving into a very constructive phase of its development. Based around a new work plan, it is now offering a range of activities and services to support researchers of teaching and learning. It already has a stimulating journal and a very useful website. However, full participation from the education community as a whole is necessary if RCBN is to develop into an authentic, UK-wide network. I urge you to support, use and build on the work of RCBN.

Working together also requires infrastructures for facilitation and communication. The creation of a five-person (but 2.9 fte), spatially distributed Directors' Team with wide ranging expertise has significantly enhanced the Programme's capacity to engage with researchers and users in different sectors. Acting as 'critical friends' to project colleagues is crucial, as is active liaison with sectoral research users. Additionally, the Programme Office is building a communication infrastructure and integrated data-base which will be robust enough to bear the weight of more inter-Programme, user and media activity and much else. The website is part of this too with its diary, discussion facilities and provision for working papers, etc, clustered around projects, themes and Programme aims. So also are the Bulletins designed to keep project colleagues informed of developments elsewhere in the Programme. In due course, we hope to develop an agreed Publication Strategy for the Programme and we will invite you to contribute your outputs to it. The Programme Office aims to provide an increasing range of services, with badging resources, basic website support, registration of research outputs, impact and media advice, selective event administration, etc.

Synergies within, across and beyond the Programme are also being strongly encouraged. Supplementary funding now exists for both for inter-project meetings and for impact activities with users – you have only to apply! At present we have six

Career Development Associates or Research Training Fellows, with more to follow, enhancing the projects to which they are attached. Thematic Groups are to be established with between 6 to 8 academics and users, drawn from both inside and outside the Programme. WebBoard will open these discussions up to all those who care to log on. We have continuing links to the USA, where we expect to offer two symposia at AERA in Chicago, and within Europe, where we hope to bring new opportunities to the Programme if we are successful with our Framework 6 bids under the Network of Excellence and ERA-NET programme-to-programme schemes.

We have excellent links to a very wide range of user organisations, both at Programme and project levels. However, we need to work more carefully on strategic alliances and on coordinating our activities to maximise this strength. This is something that the Directors' Team aim to work on, with your help, over the next year. We are delighted to have positive support from a number of government agencies, for whom our academic independence is understood and valued. We must protect this, and be mindful too that changes of government (in each part of the UK as well as nationally) are perfectly possible before TLRP ends in 2008. We also have to develop much closer links to the media, and hone our media skills. Again, provision is being made to support both the Directors' Team and project spokes-persons on this.

So what does this add up to? Alongside the imperative of conducting robust research, we have to build social capital. This rests on developing relationships and networks, and on sharing perspectives and building alliances with present and future stake-holders. To do this effectively requires an organisational infrastructure - which we are beginning to construct. More significantly it requires goodwill and commitment from the participants in TLRP as a whole.

Conclusion

So is it realistic to expect that we can achieve TLRP's grandiose goals to enable significant improvements in outcomes for learners across the UK? A realist might say: 'no'. And yet, the world never does stay still and we can be absolutely sure that understandings about teaching and learning in the UK will change over the period of TLRP's existence. In my view, it is our job to make sure that these changes are as evidence-informed and socially constructive as possible. Whilst the main challenges may be academic - the overall purpose remains moral.