# Linking e-learning research and teaching practice – lessons from PREEL

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## ABSTRACT

After an e-learning benchmarking exercise carried out during the summer of 2006, the Institute of Education set up its Pathfinder Project – PREEL – with the aim of connecting the Institute's e-learning research with its e-learning practice. The project implemented three strategies to support academic staff in the redesign of their courses: a scoping review of e-learning research being carried out in the IoE and its local partner institutions, staff development activities and the provision of personalised support to course teams. Based on interviews with participants, this article reports on the evaluation of the PREEL project, paying specific regard to the link between research and practice and the ways that practitioners accounted for this relationship, and discusses the implications of the project for research-based practice. The results indicate that the research-practice link was not always established in the ways planned, but that links were established, sometimes in ways not foreseen by the project team.

## INTRODUCTION

One of the aims of the PREEL project was to establish closer links between e-learning research and teaching practice. Among the different strategies used by higher education institutions to link teaching and research (Jenkins and Healey, 2005), in the design of this project, it was planned that this link would be established in a number of ways: through staff development sessions led by e-learning researchers; through the production of a research report describing e-learning research at the IoE; through interaction between e-learning researchers and teaching practitioners, as well as through the generation of research ideas from a discussion of practice. However, this project design did not generate the results anticipated. Interviews carried out by the evaluator (Caroline Pelletier) with the teaching practitioners involved in the project suggested that the research presented in the staff development workshops and the research report had little impact on the re-design process to embed e-learning in modules – although there were some variations across different modules. Reasons given were varied, and included the difficulty of applying 'generalisable' research to practitioners' specific circumstances, and the formulation of research in terms of problematics rather than solutions. However, analysis of the interview transcripts also suggests other reasons why research might not appear relevant, relating to the professional and institutional hierarchies between research and teaching practice – hierarchies made explicit by the formulation of the problem in terms of 'putting' research 'into' practice. This is not to deny the significance of research for the integration of e-learning in the PREEL project. Indeed, the interviews provide accounts of research shaping the re-design process in two ways: (1) practitioners reflecting as researchers on their own modules, and (2) practitioners interacting with the research officer (Magdalena Jara) – in individualised sessions, with such sessions providing the occasion for the mediation or

translation of e-learning research (Elton, 2001). These two ways are linked in that Jara was not perceived to have 'conveyed' her knowledge, but rather facilitated a process of reflection and exploration informed by research.

In this article, we report on the evaluation findings with respect to the link between research and practice in the PREEL project. The evaluation, it should be emphasised, focused on practitioners' accounts, with such accounts made at a specific point in time (usually before the re-design process was completed). The evaluation was also based on the evaluator's own observations of the PREEL project's events and activities.

The purpose of this article is to explore how practitioners accounted for the relationship between research and practice in the PREEL project, and draw out the implications of these accounts for considering the ways in which e-learning practice can be research-based. We start by describing how the project was designed to facilitate the link between research and practice. We then go on to present findings from the evaluation interviews, and conclude with a discussion of the significance of the evaluation for understanding the relationship between research and practice.


## THE DESIGN OF THE PREEL PROJECT – ESTABLISHING A LINK BETWEEN RESEARCH AND PRACTICE, RESEARCHERS AND PRACTITIONERS

During the summer of 2006, a benchmarking exercise focusing on the integration and development of e-learning was carried out at the IoE. This revealed the existence of several e-learning research communities as well as pockets of outstanding practice in e-learning. However it was found that these groups were only minimally coordinated, limiting the deployment of this research and practice more widely across the IoE, with potential impact on the e-learning experiences of IoE students. Following this benchmarking exercise, PREEL was set up with the aim of connecting e-learning research with e-learning practice at the IoE.

The project included three main strands of activities, to link research with practice in e-learning:

1. A scoping study to identify research carried out at the IoE most likely to impact on e-learning teaching practice in higher education. The study identified more than 24 researchers working in areas related to e-learning and 43 research projects that presented findings, approaches and issues that could support and improve the work of HE practitioners when designing, delivering, assessing and evaluating their courses. The scoping study was written up as a report describing the research.

2. A staff development programme, consisting of sessions during which e-learning researchers and e-learning practitioners met to discuss the research carried out and its implications for practice. The core programme included six workshops during which a selection of the projects and initiatives identified in the research report (see 1 above) were presented and discussed by their primary investigators. Attendance at the

workshops was not compulsory, as academic staff participating in the project were of diverse levels of e-learning expertise.

3. The re-design of modules to embed e-learning. Module leaders were invited to submit proposals, and 11 academic teams – re-designing 14 modules between them – were finally selected. The modules to be re-designed consisted of: 4 modules in the PGCE programme, 4 modules on research methods, and 6 subject specific modules (including Music, Science and Development Education). The process of re-design was carried out by each team individually, with the individual support of the project research officer.

Alongside these activities, an evaluation process was carried out. One of the aims of the evaluation was to clarify the extent to which attempts to link research and practice had been successful. To compile an evaluation report, one-hour interviews were carried out with each of the module leaders. These took place in July and August 2007. As stated above, the re-design continued beyond this period.

In the next section, practitioners' statements about the three main project activities are described. These statements were made during the evaluation interviews, during which practitioners were asked for their views on such activities. Our focus is on what practitioners' accounts might tell us about the link between research and practice.


## PRACTITIONERS' ACCOUNTS OF THE LINK BETWEEN RESEARCH AND PRACTICE

During interview, practitioners gave generally positive feedback about the staff development workshops, indicating that they found the sessions enjoyable and useful for generating ideas. However, most also stated that the sessions did not significantly impact on the re-design process. The reasons given by practitioners for this included: the research did not match the realities of practitioners' own approach to teaching; the research was too basic and/or too advanced with respect to practitioners' understanding of e-learning; the research was conceptualised in terms of problematics rather than solutions or 'how-to' formulae; the research was too specialised, covering a relatively marginal aspect of practice.

The quotes below give an indication of how some of these difficulties were expressed:

> I'd seen [X's] stuff before […] which I thought was really interesting, but then when I tried to sit down and tried to do it… [we decided that] this didn't really work for us. It didn't really work for the modules we were trying to develop. I could see the use and I could see where it was going, but I wasn't convinced it would be useful to actually implement [the research] with what we're doing.

> I was hoping [that this session] was going to give me some practical hints that I could take away, and then actually use, so that when I'm choosing a VLE, I would have some tips as to what was good and what was bad. There were some examples that we went through, but I wanted some concrete things to take away at the end, to actually use in the design of what we're doing. I just wanted people to tell me what to do…

A number of practitioners indicated that the workshops established a field of possibilities, which might inform *future* practice. However, the workshops were generally felt to have

had little immediate impact. This was sometimes because the research topics covered were not a priority in practitioners' modules at the moment of the session, or could not be implemented within the module's constraints:

> [During the sessions, I thought] this is very interesting but that's not going to help us at the moment… It was building up our own font of knowledge, but there was nothing that we could apply.

Practitioners' comments suggest a number of impediments or problematic issues in establishing links between research and practice through a staff development programme: the timing of the staff development sessions with respect to practitioners' own development/the development of their module; the level at which content is pitched (too high/low for a variable audience); the way in which research should/could be presented to make it applicable; the relevance of generalisable research to practitioners' particular needs; and the difference in genre, expectations and quality standards between research and applicable teaching guidance.

Many of the points which practitioners made about the staff development workshops were repeated with respect to the research report. Practitioners focused in particular on the difficulty of making a connection between research outputs and their particular situation, and of understanding how research with generalisable, cutting-edge outcomes could be applied in a specific and everyday context.

As with the staff development sessions, it was noted that the usefulness of the research might become apparent in the future, as practitioners became more experienced. A couple of practitioners described the report as a kind of encyclopaedia, which they expected to return to in order to address specific issues in the future.

> I don't think people use it like a textbook to work through and educate themselves... I think it will be most useful when people get stuck and don't know what to do. Then, if they remember, [they will] flick through and look for inspiration…

For a number of practitioners, the report was made redundant (to a large extent) by the comparative facility with which its author could be questioned directly, in a way which generated useful and precise answers more quickly:

> Instead of going and doing all the reading ourselves we just went and asked Magdalena…it sort of absolves you a bit of the responsibility of finding out about e-learning because you know you've got these people there, you can go and ask them, and I'd much rather go and ask someone with a concrete problem than trail through a list of journals.

## THE 'POWER' OF RESEARCH

From the above comments, it would appear that the strategies planned to link research and practice were not as successful as expected. Although practitioners were often supportive in the feedback they gave, indicating 'interest' in the research presented, they also stated that it had had little impact on the re-design process.

However, the interviews provided some evidence that research did have powerful effects in the PREEL project – although not in the way explicitly designed for. According to practitioners' accounts, one 'effect' of linking research and practice in the project was the consequent level of esteem granted to project participants and their re-designed modules. A number of practitioners noted that their participation in the project granted their teaching, and their re-designed modules, a certain level of credibility, increasing status in their department as well as their own confidence in the module's future delivery. The link with research was consequently said to have made the implementation of the re-designed modules easier, by helping to convince other staff of its validity. This was because the re-design process was perceived to have been undertaken in a considered, reflective way, informed by expertise, and consequently based on tried and tested approaches. This in turn gave practitioners themselves greater confidence in their ability to teach the module successfully.

> [The link with research] will give us some weight when we present [the re-designed module] to other staff. [It's not] just something we've sat down and come up with together…There's been a process we've gone through…it's almost like getting in a consultancy, like management consultants … It connects research to your practice.  It gives it some sort of gravitas, some sort of respect that may otherwise not be there. And being the Institute, unless you delve into research here, then you're not visible. …Although we haven't used what we've heard or what we've learned in practical ways, it has made us feel more confident in the way we talk to people or the examples we can give to back up what we're trying to do.

The comparison with recruiting management consultants suggests that one of the 'effects' of research was to grant credibility and validity to practitioners' own practice. Research could be said to have served a legitimising function. This effect was produced, according to interviewees' accounts, as a consequence of the esteem granted to research in a research-intensive institution. In other words, research was not perceived to have 'informed' practice but to have vouchsafed for it. However, this in turn gave practitioners' greater confidence in their own practice.

In the case of a number of modules, the re-design process was largely delegated to contract or junior staff (compared to more senior staff also involved in teaching the module). In these cases, it appears that research evidence was used as a negotiation tool, to persuade more senior staff to reach some kind of consensus on how the module should be developed, or to ensure their participation in discussions.

In both of these instances, it appears that research was used as a way of managing institutional practices pertaining to the value given to, and organisation of, teaching. Research did indeed have powerful 'effects', although not perhaps in the sense of informing practice – but rather in terms of a tool wielded by practitioners to achieve their own practice-based goals.

On the basis of this argument, it is possible to interpret some of the comments pertaining to the staff development workshops and research report in a somewhat different light. A number of interviewees indicated that the staff development workshops were overly 'didactic'; this was evidenced, in their accounts, in reference to the use of a presentation-type format, the use of power-point slides, the undue emphasis on research findings rather than practitioners' needs, the lack of opportunity for discussion, and so on. In other words,

the workshops were said to be too 'research-oriented'. This account of the workshops contrasts with the aims of the researchers who presented their research. It also contrasts with the evaluator's observations who noted that the workshops often did include time for discussions, and were much less 'presentation' based than is the case, for example, at academic conferences. The question about whether the workshops were 'didactic' is therefore a subjective and comparative one. What is perhaps interesting then, is why the workshops were perceived as didactic: from what perspective could they be interpreted as 'overly didactic'? From what perspective was the time given over to discussion perceived as 'marginal' or 'insufficient', compared to the presentation of research findings?

It would not be unreasonable to argue that the workshops were perceived as didactic not primarily because of how they were structured, but because of their function within the PREEL project: to transmit research to practitioners. Given the status assigned to research with respect to practice in a research-intensive institution, research seems to have been perceived as given precedence over practitioners' own practice. Comments on the 'lack of relevance' of research, the difficulties in 'applying' it, its 'abstract' nature with respect to the concrete problems of practitioners, can consequently be understood as a way of questioning this implied hierarchy between research and practice.

It is perhaps worth noting that the practitioners involved in the PREEL project often carried out research themselves, although not necessarily in the field of e-learning. This tension between practice and research was not therefore one between individual professionals, primarily, but between two areas of academic practice: teaching and research. In the PREEL project, however, the project design had implied a relatively clear distinction between research and teaching, through the establishment of the staff development workshops and the report on research for the benefit of practitioners. This clearly had not been the intention – these activities were intended precisely to 'link' research and teaching. What this implied, however, was that this link did not exist already (whether it did or not is a separate issue, although the benchmarking exercise carried out prior to the PREEL project suggested that such links were weak with respect to e-learning).

It is significant, with respect to the above point, that one aspect of the PREEL project received emphatic praise from nearly all of the interviewees. This was the individualised support they received on a regular basis from the project's research officer. The following comments are not intended to evaluate the research officer's practice – but to explore the context within which research and practice appear, on the basis of the interviews, to have become more closely intertwined.

Meetings with the research officer, and the discussion of e-learning research which such meetings incorporated, were often deemed to be both highly relevant and meaningful to specific instances of practice.

> I can't imagine that we'd have got to where we are without input from the PREEL project, particularly in terms of Magdalena's input, which has been the principal benefit from my perspective…having conversations with colleagues like Magdalena, [saying] 'this is how it happens quite often in e-learning'…it's given us an insight into a different way that things could be done…The sessions with Magdalena have been very much tailored to our needs and creatively

thinking around these, rather than composed of a generic session on something [like the staff development workshops].

Whereas the staff development workshops were described in terms of their didacticism, sessions with the research officer appear, in practitioners' accounts, as the occasion for conversation – in other words, a contrast was often made between *generating* insights in the sessions rather than *receiving* them in the workshops.

The data cannot reveal whether the research officer's role would have been so well received without the workshops, as a point of contrast. There are some grounds for drawing this conclusion. Indeed a number of practitioners used instruments and approaches outlined in the workshops, but stated that the research officer's support nevertheless remained the most relevant. However, clarifying whether the role performed by the research officer was valuable, from practitioners' perspective, comparatively or on a more independent basis would require further research.

One way of understanding the research officer is that she played the role of an 'e-learning therapist': she was often said to have enabled practitioners to 'exteriorise' their own knowledge and assumptions about teaching and learning, a process which pointed to how e-learning should most effectively be introduced or developed. A number of practitioners noted that the process of having to explain to her how their course was structured enabled them to better understand its logic, underpinning assumptions, strengths and weaknesses:

> What was very useful was talking to somebody who doesn't necessarily know what we do - having to analyse and reflect on the course in order to be able to translate and transfer that to somebody who had to get the picture quite quickly. I thought that process itself was probably one of the most important things – being able to look at [the module] critically,…rather than getting involved in it emotionally.…It enabled an externalisation of my thinking and the way I operate. This has been quite useful, for me, personally.

> Magdalena has been good, obviously because she's an external coming in and she was able to provide that direction that we don't always see because we're so overwhelmed with material that sometimes you can't see the wood for the trees.

> She has been superb in helping us to clarify…and reinforce…[our thoughts] and really help us to push things out more than we envisaged.

It is not only the research officer's research knowledge which is emphasised here, but the value of the conversations which meetings with her gave rise to – conversations which led practitioners to make their own assumptions and values with respect to their teaching practice more explicit and systematic.

According to these accounts, it seems to have been the research officer's status as an *outsider* which occasioned the more productive – from practitioners' perspectives – reflections on research and practice. Although e-learning researchers were involved in the PREEL project to facilitate a more direct, unmediated interaction and knowledge exchange between research and practice, it seems that interaction with research was in fact facilitated through its mediation by someone who was felt to be at a distance from practitioners' own practice. It is not unreasonable to argue that this was in part because practitioners felt they retained a greater degree of control/power over their own practice in their interactions with

a project officer, than with researchers; the officer's role was often described in terms of a service to be called upon – in contrast to the perceived 'didacticism' of the workshops. This description could be understood as pertaining to the relative status of research and teaching in higher education.

## CONCLUDING REMARKS

The PREEL project was designed to connect e-learning research and practice more effectively. Practitioners' accounts suggest that this connection did not work in quite the way it had been planned to. Research from the staff development workshops and the research report was used pragmatically, strategically, as a legitimating device, rather than primarily, it seems, to shape the re-design of the modules. The evaluation interviews raise important questions about the distinctions, values and hierarchies implied in the notion of 'connecting research and practice' in higher education, given how research and teaching are organised in relation to each other. This article has explored reluctance, resistance perhaps, towards 'importing' research 'into' teaching practice, and a more favourable perception, in contrast, towards 'researching teaching practice', with such research occasioned in this instance by a specific kind of interaction.

This is one of the positive outcomes of PREEL. Although the connection between research and practice was not made in quite the way it had been planned for, it seems, the project has generated reflection and research on practice, an outcome which is likely to benefit the design as well as the delivery of the new modules. According to the accounts presented in this article, e-learning research shaped the re-design process, including its validation, in significant ways; notably in generating confidence in the re-design process, as well as in facilitating and informing the externalisation, examination and development of practitioners' assumptions and knowledge. A number of additional positive side-effects of the PREEL project were mentioned in interviews too: the staff development workshops, for example, gave practitioners the occasion to meet other, equally anxious colleagues grappling with understanding and using new technology; they gave rise to social occasions at which practitioners from different departments got to know each other, in ways which overcame departmental furrows organised on the basis of disciplines rather than teaching approach. All of these outcomes perhaps suggest a way forward in conceptualising, managing and developing the relationship between e-learning research and teaching practice.

## REFERENCES

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