

# Journey with hope

For too long most of the large-scale research carried out in the college sector has been done on Scotland's colleges by outside bodies: HE or management consultants, rather than with or by the college sector.

Learning as a journey is perhaps overused as a metaphor but I intend to exploit it again in this article. The furthest, scariest and most challenging journey I have recently taken was from being a permanent lecturer at Glenrothes College to becoming a contract Researcher at the University of Stirling. This is not because of the move from the college sector to HE or the loss of security in moving from permanent to temporary employment, but rather it was the transition from belonging to a community of practice to one of research. This journey has taken nearly two years, a lot of soul searching and some interesting twists and turns. However bumpy the journey has been it has been exciting and illuminating. Full-time research may not be everybody's idea of fun or even a sensible way for a grown-up to earn her living, but after years of scepticism about the value of research, I now wish I had been involved in it more systematically from the outset. I think it would have helped my day-to-day contact with students, my understanding of management (heaven forefend) and my professional development. Why is educational research so divorced from practice? Why are teachers so sceptical about its value? Is it possible to develop shared understandings, language and agendas?

These are some of the challenges facing us



By June Smith (pictured left), contract Researcher, University of Stirling (with Roy Anderson (centre) and Danny McDougall (right)).

on the TLRP<sup>1</sup> funded project 'Literacies for Learning in Further Education'<sup>2</sup> which is based upon a partnership between two universities and four further education colleges: two in England and two in Scotland. One of the key aims of the project is to work with practitioner-based researchers. To this end, 16 college staff – four from each college – will work as part of the research team throughout the study. In Scotland, Roy Anderson from Perth College and Danny McDougall<sup>3</sup> from Anniesland College have both been seconded as college-based researchers for two days per week over the next two years. The other six staff will be curriculum-based researchers and will be seconded for three hours per week from August 2004.

In addition to working on the project as practitioner researchers Danny, Roy and I thought it would be interesting and valuable to record this experience to see what we learn about being a practitioner researcher. We want to break down the barrier between 'researchers as knowledge generators' and 'practitioners as knowledge translators' (Olivero, John and Sutherland, 2004). Our first meeting in which 'becoming a researcher' was discussed was video recorded and we will keep this to use as a comparison with later discussions around how the experience unfolds. This discussion was planned around four main themes: why we wanted to be a practitioner researcher; our expectations; our fears and our training needs. There is not room here to discuss all the issues raised but I will outline one of the expectations.

Danny, Roy and I hoped that involvement in this project would provide us with opportunities to influence both policy and practice. We feel the voices of college sector

practitioners must be heard because for too long most of the large-scale research carried out in the sector has been done on Scotland's colleges by outside bodies: HE or management consultants, rather than with or by the college sector. Dissemination of what we find, the methods we are using and discussions with colleagues across sectors becomes crucial and this article is part of that process. Another way for us to disseminate is through conferences and Roy and I will be attending the SERA conference in Perth on 25-27 September 2004.

In the winter 2004 edition of *Broadcast* (due out in December) we will describe our journey in more detail.

## Footnotes

1. TLRP is a co-ordinated research initiative. Its overarching purpose is to support and develop educational research leading to improvements in outcomes for learners of all ages, in all sectors and contexts of education, training and lifelong learning throughout the UK.
2. You can read more about this project in the spring 2004 edition of *Broadcast*, pp. 33-35.
3. Danny applied for, and was successful in securing the post of Staff Development Officer at Anniesland College and as a result has left the project. Jim Carmichael has replaced him.

<http://www.anniesland.ac.uk>

<http://www.esrc.ac.uk>

<http://www.external.stir.ac.uk>

<http://www.glenrothes-college.ac.uk>

<http://www.perth.ac.uk>

<http://www.sera.ac.uk>

<http://www.sfeu.ac.uk>