Engaging and Supporting Early Career Researchers in TEL

Research Capacity Building in TEL

It is possible to define 'Research Capacity' in terms of individuals, groups or systems: and also in terms both of *existing* capacity to undertake research, and potential, but as yet *unrealised,* capacity.

Building research capacity therefore involves not only assessing the current state of affairs but also potential enablers, drivers and barriers to increased capacity to engage both in and with research. Work by the ESRC Teaching and Learning Research Programme has informed a model of capacity building in which formal training in research methods (provided as part of students; research methods training and under initiatives like the ESRC National Centre for Research Methods) is complemented by an 'embedded practices' model in which researcher capacity is seen as particular kind of participatory learning.

In Technology Enhanced Learning (TEL), there are new challenges – it is an emerging area drawing on multiple disciplinary perspectives, each with their own historical bases, research training cultures and characteristic practices and discourses. What, then, are capacities that need to be developed, and what are the practices that can usefully be supported, shared and embedded in TEL? And how can early career researchers in TEL develop their personal capacities and shape their professional identities?

Early Career Researchers in Technology Enhanced Learning (TEL) is a strand of:

The Technology Enhanced Learning (TEL) programme

- We aim to understand and develop the roles of digital technologies in improving the quality of learning and teaching.
- £12m in funding from ESRC/EPSRC
- Runs from 2007 to 2012
- 8 major projects, 7 development projects
- Director: Richard Noss
- www.tlrp.org/tel

Early Career Researchers in TEL

The use of the term 'early career researcher' belies the complexities of researchers in TEL, many of whom have wide and varied experience in different fields. As a researcher developing a profile in TEL, they are faced with demands to work across disciplinary boundaries and have to adapt to different working practices, research relationships, publication practices and career trajectories.

Some TEL researchers locate themselves in one main discipline; others describe themselves as 'discipline-hoppers'; and others consider themselves to be 'interdisciplinary'. These decisions raise new opportunities but also challenges both for the researchers themselves and for those supporting their professional development

Research Activities in this Strand

In the course of an ESRC funded project ('A Social and Professional Network for Early Career Researchers in Education') and then subsequently as part of the TEL programme, a series of events and activities aimed at early career researchers have taken place, including:

- Themed seminars
- Work-in-progress presentations
- Opportunities to network, share experiences and plan collaborative activities
- Design workshops
- Online discussions and resource sharing
- 'Masterclass' seminars with experienced TEL researchers and project directors

Workshops focusing on the use of online tools to support researchers have helped in the design and development of virtual environments used by the TLRP, BERA and more widely.

A design workshop in progress

Read and write together

Share work in progress

Work across disciplines

How can researchers develop capacity, address new challenges and collaborate across disciplinary boundaries?

What are the 'embedded practices' that support capacity building in an emerging field like TEL?

We asked research students, research associates and computer officers from across the TEL programme to tell us about the practices that were supporting their professional learning. This is a selection - many of these are generic practices which could be applied in many research settings but working in the emerging and cross-disciplinary environment of TEL makes some of these particularly important.

Working across Disciplines

Rather than simply bringing together individuals with diverse experiences to solve some pre-defined problem, working intensively with researchers and practitioners from other disciplines is a valuable learning experience. As well as understanding how others work and think and enabling collaboration, it can promote reflection on one's own practice.

Exploring "what we mean by …"

Spending time discovering what researchers and practitioners in different disciplines and settings mean when they use particular terms and concepts is important and illuminating. Educational researchers and computer scientists discuss 'learning', for example, while having different understandings of what this means. At the same time there may be concepts which 'do the same work' in different disciplines and identifying these may be a first step to more effective cross-disciplinary working.

Sharing Readings

Identifying key books, articles or reports which frame and inform how different disciplines work allows us to convey 'what matters' in our different disciplines. Shared reading of key work is a good starting point for cross-disciplinary understanding.

Sharing Work in Progress

Cross-disciplinary working and dialogue is difficult if all that is shared across disciplines are final, polished performances and stories of success! Sharing work in progress allows others better to understand how researchers in different disciplinary areas formulate problems, engage with research participants, deal with difficulties, use theory and gauge quality.

Develop and Maintain Networks

Building networks of people, organisations, and sources of information enables researchers to draw on experience and expertise from beyond their immediate locality or community. Cross-disciplinary networking is challenging: finding appropriate 'points of focus' is important: within the TEL programme, these have included *ethics*, *design* and *inclusion*.

Sharing Recommendations

Not just a function of networks but the thing that often 'holds them together', *recommendation* of events, readings, people and practices is key to individual capacity building and the cumulation of collective knowledge.

More Ideas and Information

The TEL Early Career Researchers web site contains many more ideas for capacity building in cross-disciplinary settings.   And we welcome your contributions: accounts, ideas and suggestions!

Website: http://www.tlrp.org/tel/spnecre/
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