

WHAT'S INSIDE

- 2 Doing action research: teachers' experiences
- 3 NZARE Conference
- 4 Key dates for 2006
- 4 Research symposium for teachers
- 4 Summary reports from two TLRI projects

ABOUT TLRI

The Teaching & Learning Research Initiative (TLRI) is a Government programme that aims to:

- build knowledge, through partnership research, about teaching and learning
- use this knowledge to create improved outcomes for learners
- create partnerships between practitioners and researchers to maximise the value and usefulness of research.

CONTACT

For more information on TLRI, please contact:

Christina Smits

Phone: (04) 802 1461

Fax: (04) 384 7933

Email: tlri@nzcer.org.nz

Mailing address:

TLRI

C/- NZCER

PO Box 3237

Wellington

Website: www.tlri.org.nz

Completing your one-year research project on time

Susan Sandretto

Congratulations, you have won a research grant! Now you just have to deliver on what you have promised. In this brief article our research team shares some tips for completing a robust research project within its allocated timeframe.

We believe the key variables are space, time, and attention to relationships.

Space

In our one-year project we were able to create separate spaces specifically for data analysis, conference preparation and writing by booking a seminar room adjacent to the university—we also used university classrooms during non-teaching periods. Creating a physical space that was away from the schools taking part in the project allowed the research team to have concentrated, focused days where we were able to work uninterrupted. During these days the teachers were released from their classrooms. We provided food and coffee. While the work was intense, having nice food and a pleasant space to labour in made the process all the more enjoyable.

Time

If at all possible, do not schedule working days or meetings after school. We found that the team was most productive when its members were released from their teaching obligations and could give full attention to the task at hand.

When you are scheduling the fieldwork and data collection, strive to have it all completed

by the end of the third school term. Term 4 is typically a very busy time in schools. Schedule working days early in Term 4 for drafting the final report.

Lastly, with your research team negotiate and set lots of small, manageable deadlines. Then celebrate when you meet them.

Team work

As a research team, have explicit discussions early on about who can/will do what in terms of data gathering, analysis, and the writing of the results. Whenever possible, assign particular sections of the final report to particular team members or sub-groups of the research team in order to share the workload. But be prepared to allow different team members to contribute in different ways.

Finally, a collaborative research grant can be a very pleasant, but also a stressful experience. While staying focused on your research goals, do not forget to build and maintain relationships with the team members. It may seem slightly off on a tangent and time-consuming to have morning tea in the staff room before filming a lesson, but this kind of social time is an important part of building and maintaining links with a team whose members will need to support and sustain each other through the research journey.

Best wishes for a successful project.

Susan Sandretto lectures in education studies at the University of Otago. In 2005 she co-led a pilot TLRI project into the development of critical literacy practices. The research continues into 2006 and 2007, with an expanded research team that will build on the work from 2005 by continuing to explore the development of critical literacy practices for guided reading and examining the integration of guided reading strategies throughout the curriculum.

Change in final reporting date for projects

In light of feedback from leaders of C-level projects, the TLRI Co-ordinators have changed the final reporting date from 31 December to late February in the following year.

Changes to key dates: see page 4



Doing action research: teachers' experiences

In the Great Expectations project, funded by the TLRI in 2003, teachers from six primary schools investigated how teaching and learning could be systematically improved, and how expectations are implicated in this. The participants presented their findings at a symposium on 3 November 2005, and subsequently at the New Zealand Association of Educational Research (NZARE) in Dunedin in December. *Partnership* asked some of the presenters to comment on their experiences of taking part in the project, presenting and disseminating the findings, and what they had gained from the experience.

Not just doing, but sharing

The aim of undertaking action research in teaching is to discover something new, not repeating the work of others but building on it to improve personal efficacy in the classroom and increase understanding and knowledge in a particular area of teaching practice. For this learning to be truly valuable, it needs to be made available to others, enriching their thinking and possibly becoming, in turn, the starting point for someone else. As one presenter said:

[I learned] that improved student outcomes were a collective responsibility and how important it is to articulate and justify practice, which results in developing an inquiry culture.

Another commented:

I have developed a huge respect for the value of action research in empowering teachers and getting them to reflect on their professional practice leading to them making changes. The research [experience] has shown that there is huge value in teachers opening their classroom doors to colleagues.

Beyond the comfort zone

The whole experience of conducting research meant stepping beyond the comfort zone for some:

The idea of being the researchers in our school ([a] highly effective form of

professional development, job-embedded) was daunting at first, but extremely valuable as you learn research skills but need to support this with university study as well.

Several of the presenters found the prospect of discussing their findings to an open audience very daunting. The actual experience, however, proved much better than they expected:

The presenting was nowhere near as intimidating as we thought it would be and the audience was supportive. But of most significance was the interaction on a daily basis for the duration of the conference with the other members of the Great Expectations project and the talk about education that went along with that.

The interest and encouragement of the audience gave the presenters a sense of achievement. It also proved something of a standard to measure the value and impact of their work, and made them feel that they were, indeed, genuinely contributing to research as part of a community:

When you are involved in a project you become so familiar with it that it seems normal ... you end up thinking "I have nothing valuable to say to others." So you go into a presentation with huge doubts about your right to be there. However, it is very encouraging, when you have given your presentation, to realise that it was special and valuable and that other people were very interested in what you have done. The audience reaction adds credibility and validity to your research project.

I think the presenting aspect of the project, though scary, is very important. It helps you to feel like a researcher and it helps you to feel a part of the community of researchers.

This kind of positive experience is empowering through the confidence it builds:

It was very gratifying to know that we had presented something that stirred members of this audience and that they would take away with them. We received very positive feedback about the presentation from a variety of

(unexpected) sources and it led to some interesting/valuable discussions with people ... whom I would have been too intimidated to approach and have educational discussions with. It encouraged me that so-called "experts" felt that I had valuable things to say. This has added to my confidence.

The interest encouraged one team to make presentations to other schools and put their paper on the Internet, which broadened the field of dissemination and aroused even more response:

We have had tremendous feedback and I have two presentations in 2006 to introduce other schools or groups to coaching. I have had a large number of responses to the online paper. I am in contact with some people from the UK too. The responses have been quite beyond what I had expected ... people are looking for ways to develop staff further and improve classroom practice.

Clarifying thinking

One presenter found that the actual process of presenting her findings to an audience made her aware of how she could tailor her presentation more precisely to different audiences (in this case, the NZARE conference):

The outside perspective provided by the audience (even if they hadn't asked any questions or made comments) made me critique the presentation even as I was presenting it.

Another presenter commented:

We consider that presenting to external audiences outside of our school setting is of benefit to us as professionals. It requires us to clarify our own thinking in order to prepare a presentation that is not only informative but also concise. We valued the opportunity to revise the presentation to suit different audiences. This has helped us to develop different perspectives which have been useful in developing our own school strategic plan. We enjoyed being challenged by audience participants and our colleagues from the other schools involved in the project. It helped us deepen our own thinking and, ultimately, understanding of what we are trying to achieve.



Gains from the research experience

The presenters generally felt they had gained a great deal from the whole research experience, growing as professionals, building their own research confidence and expertise, creating and strengthening links with colleagues in their own schools and elsewhere—becoming part of a wider community that included practitioners, researchers and academics in a climate of mutual respect and learning. As one presenter pointed out:

Research undertaken by teachers is a valid form of research ... Research does not just belong to the domain of a university. Teachers and academics can *together* create new knowledge. The development of knowledge that is underpinned by combining research literature and teacher practices should, in my view, be encouraged.

[I have learned] how important it is to develop trust, to reflect, check assumptions and develop robust communication with staff when undergoing in-school-led change.

The value of the experience, however, is directly related to how applicable the research project is to the everyday realities of the classroom:

Research projects need to be a normal part of teachers' work ... In asking teachers to carry out research projects, we need to be very aware of the realities of teachers' work and be realistic in what we expect. Teachers have to see the value in the project—it needs to impact directly and positively on what the teachers do.

The nature and design of the project also need to be considered carefully:

Be aware of the difference between a research project and a professional development project.

Disseminate your findings

Presenters stressed the importance of making sure their findings were disseminated:

Put emphasis on disseminating findings, because the process of trying to articulate the project forces the thinking to be done that actually completes the

project. More resourcing needs to be allocated to this aspect of projects.

Sharing the results of research allows the wider community to become more aware of what is actually happening. As one presenter said:

At the Waikato symposium I was amazed at the range and quality of classroom research that is occurring in New Zealand schools.

And in conclusion...

Clearly, the research teams had their moments of difficulty, but overwhelmingly the experience was positive, in ways beyond what the participants had originally expected:

After our experience at the conference, we now feel that we have a group of supportive colleagues around the country, who will provide us with support, advice, etc., in a way that we never developed through the two years previous ... we found attendance at the sessions at the symposium and the conference hugely valuable. We are

going back and taking more teachers with us.

The research that I was involved in was the most exciting, stimulating and challenging undertaking that I have been involved in during my teaching career. It was great to work with people who have such a passion for coaching and want to see it involve other colleagues.

I would like to acknowledge that in spite of the work involved the project has been a great learning opportunity and has impacted on change in our school (more to come), leading to improved student outcomes. I would urge any school contemplating involvement to do so, as I believe teacher participation in research is vital and central to school improvement.

Partnership thanks Rachel Allan (Vardon School, Hamilton), Therese Bakker (Epsom Normal Primary School, Auckland), Lesley Murrhly (Manunui School, Taumaranui), and Mike Sutton (Newton School, Hamilton for their time and their thoughtful, detailed responses to the questions we asked as the basis of this article.

NZARE Conference

The TLRI had a high profile at the annual New Zealand Association for Research in Education (NZARE) conference in Dunedin in December. Ten project teams reported findings in the three TLRI symposia and seven other sessions were based on projects funded within the TLRI. Collectively they demonstrated the first stages of building a cumulative body of new knowledge about teaching and learning. The NZARE conference is an ideal forum for collective dissemination—the TLRI intends to have an even greater profile at this year's conference in Rotorua on 5–8 December.





Research symposium for teachers

More than 120 teachers from the early childhood, primary and secondary sectors attended a symposium held in Hamilton on 3 November to discuss practitioner research and how it affects teaching practice.

The 25 presentations discussed and reflected upon subjects such as assessment, international students, NCEA, student achievement, digital classrooms, and coaching and mentoring. A highlight was the keynote address, "Teachers as Researchers: Developing an Inquiry Habit of Mind", by internationally recognised researcher Lorna Earl. Workshops covered the TLRI projects generally, and such aspects of research as ethical responsibilities, rigour and credibility, how to gather data effectively from children, and using theory to interpret qualitative data. The day finished with a plenary session during which several of the workshop presenters reported on curriculum themes from the four strands, followed by questions and small-group discussion.

The symposium grew from the TLRI-funded Great Expectations action research project, which aimed to enhance learning and strengthen teaching in six primary schools with diverse student populations.

"The idea for the practitioner research symposium in Hamilton arose when the project team (including the lead researcher from each school) was planning the 2005 year of the project, particularly what the nature of each [project] symposium would be," said Dr Mary Hill, project director. "We decided to open it up to teacher-researchers nationally. We found it an extremely successful way to get teachers to share their findings, skills, and enthusiasm for being involved in research as well as teaching."

The full report of the Great Expectations project will be available on the TLRI website (www.tlri.org.nz) later this year.

KEY DATES FOR 2006

Please note there are some changes to the timeline for 2006. The call for Expressions of Interest begins in March and closes on 16 May. Those shortlisted will be informed on 23 June.

This allows two months for the project teams to prepare their full proposals, as the date for submission of full proposals remains the same. This change is in response to the feedback received and is intended to give the project teams a longer period in which to write their proposals.

9 February	TLRI Board meeting
1 March	EOI documents for 2006 published on website EOI documents mailed out
16 May	EOI applications close
Week of 2 June*	EOI selection panel meets (1 day)
Week of 15 June*	TLRI Board meeting to approve shortlist
23 June	EOI applicants notified about shortlisting
29 August	FP applications close
Week of 11 Sept*	Selection panel meets (1 day)
Week of 18 Sept*	TLRI Board meeting to approve funded projects
4 October*	FP applicants notified about funding decision
24 October*	Announcement of successful 2006 funding round projects
January 2007	Funding commences for 2006 funding recipients
January 2007	Completion of one-year projects from 2006 and two-year projects from 2005

* Dates to be confirmed

Summary reports from two TLRI projects

This issue of *Partnership* includes as inserts the summary reports of two projects completed in 2005: *Improving Tertiary Student Outcomes in Their First Year of Study*, by Nick Zepke, Linda Leach, and Tom Prebble; and *Narratives of Beginning Māori*

Teachers: Identifying Forces that Shape the First Year of Teaching, by Paora Stucki, Areta Kahu, Heeni Jenkins, Pip Bruce-Ferguson, and Ruth Kane. The full text of these reports, as well as the summaries, is available on the TLRI website: www.tlri.org.nz