Research findings: from implications to implementation?

Elizabeth Haddon

Research Fellow, Department of Music, University of York, UK

This paper discusses the trajectory of institution-specific research with particular reference to the disbursement of findings amongst the institutional community and the issues of implementation and integration. These ideas are explored through a recent study I undertook on the teaching and learning of musical theatre in my department as a practitioner-researcher (piano teacher, research fellow and PhD student in the department). The genre of musical theatre emerged as a subject for study arising from my interest in areas of instrumental and vocal learning that may be described as 'hidden' to teachers and/or staff. In this department, which was not set up to teach musical theatre, work in this area is largely student-led, with very little staff support or input. In fact, the findings show negative attitudes towards the genre which students perceive as impinging on their activities, as well as on provision of facilities and parity of assessment. However, the findings also demonstrate exciting possibilities for collaborative teaching of a kind not yet seen in this department and the potential for the application of musical theatre teaching techniques to classical vocal teaching.

This study raises several issues: how is research valued in the institution; how can findings be disseminated to all; who is responsible for further action, and how credible is the status of a researcher with so many different roles? In attempting to shed light on these questions I draw on the process of my qualitative study of musical theatre, evaluate my approach, consider the dissemination of my findings and response from staff and students, and contemplate the wider picture - contributing towards a transformative culture in which staff and teachers, as well as students, may benefit.

Research Findings: from implications to implementation

Some notes from the presentation at *Stepping out of the Shadows*, 5th April 2011

Involvement at my institution - began as a student many years ago, and continued after a gap, as a piano teacher and Research Fellow. I'm also now in the process of completing a PhD. Since becoming a practitioner-researcher I've been involved with one large scale multi-institutional research project – Investigating Musical Performance – and several smaller ones of my own. My research explores aspects of instrumental and vocal learning within a university music department which may be hidden to students' teachers and staff.

Questions, notes and problems

Issues of loyalty towards institution – can be difficult for the insider-researcher to present a balanced viewpoint; and also to feel free to disseminate findings if they are not always positive. However, the issues that the research raises are probably typical of many music departments in higher education. These involve questions concerning how research is valued in the institution; how can findings be disseminated to all; who is responsible for further action, and how credible is the status of a researcher with so many different roles?

Research project which examined the teaching and learning of musical theatre was used to explore some of these issues. Current status of musical theatre in my department is somewhat uneasy – varying attitudes towards it and some difficulties for those students who wanted to be involved in it.

Research began by emailing all the students (around 65 students in each of the three undergraduate years and over 100 postgraduates) asking those who were interested in musical theatre to contact me. Interested students were then emailed a questionnaire seeking their views on a number of areas of musical theatre, for example, provision, attitudes and reception, involvement pre-university and during their degree course, teaching of musical theatre and learning preferences. This created a mass of data from 19 students, to which were added interviews with a musical theatre vocal teacher and a

professor in the department with a particular interest in the genre. This data was analysed and written up as a paper.

Dissemination of research findings

Within the institution, there may be several ways in which research findings may be presented. These might include:

1. Emailing staff and students
2. Talking individually to interested people
3. Giving a research seminar
4. Focus group/open discussion
5. Posting a report for internal access only on the website or virtual learning environment
6. Emailing links to published articles
7. Producing and displaying posters and leaflets
8. Presentation at a conference taking place in the department/institution
9. Creating an online forum for anyone interested to discuss the research

Dissemination of this project: first, I presented a research seminar to some postgraduates and some members of staff. Secondly, the paper was emailed to all staff and to the student respondents.

Questions raised: does the researcher present the findings and leave it at that – or does giving a presentation set up expectations of change? Perhaps this is a danger of practitioner-research – the instinct to be 'hands-on' and to hope that research findings will lead to implementation which will lead to improvements. At best, a seminar can be a useful tool for developing awareness, but it is unlikely that change might result from it, at least not initially. Important question is therefore raised as to how change occurs in the institution – who instigates it, and why?

Reception of the research findings: issues of awareness and attitude, issues of relevance, and broader themes arising from these areas.

1. Issues of awareness and attitude

Seminars and discussion – may result in improved awareness of the issues surrounding the topic and create a platform for discussion, often for the first time in a context where staff and students are both present.

Difficulties – attendees interested in learning culture etc; non-attendees perhaps more individually domain-specific, but the findings of institutional research nevertheless should concern them.

Issues of attitude – problems raised by occasional unguarded comments – negative impact on students. Also provision of facilities – rehearsal space, library resources, the degree of visibility of student involvement – often concealed from staff for fear of negative judgements etc.

How a department can be proactive in developing itself as a learning community? Consideration of developing a **teaching community** with open discussion of the core aims, values and objectives of the institution, its short- and long-term plans, involving all staff in consideration of issues of learner equality, style and delivery of teaching, ways of collaboration etc.

2. Issues of relevance

Difficulty of perceived validity of research relying on a small sample of students; however, it was suggested that the nature of the project meant that students might not be 'visible', wanting to conceal their interest. But, in a higher education institution we should be taking seriously the aims and interests of all our students, not just the ones whose interests match those of the staff. At the very least – making sure that genres are all treated fairly, with equal facilities etc.

Questioning of status based on the fact that the department 'was never set up to facilitate musical theatre, therefore, why should it now provide for it, particularly as students would not, on the basis of the prospectus information, come with a special interest in it?' But shouldn't a department should be responsive to changing student interests? In this case, a musical theatre singing teacher was recruited after students had asked to have a specialist teacher – could this response be extended?

Research important as a monitoring tool for a department – to consider how well provision, priorities and ethos are communicated and experienced by students

Is there a culture of status quo or one of active change? Change needs an investment of staff time, an open climate for discussion, with reassurance of people's skills and expertise given in an unthreatening environment. In creating a transforming culture it's important to have active leadership, and visible agenda of a culture of change. An institution cannot be passive or merely responding in a partial way to students – it should be actively examining its practice and continually assessing how well that meets student needs. It should further be prepared to implement research findings to meet those needs, if it has not already considered issues before they arrive at the stage of needing 'rescue' treatment.

The practitioner-researcher may be well-placed to develop opportunities for students, but the practitioner-researcher should not be the one person investing energy in changing a culture.

One way in which to circumvent some of these problems may be through what might be called 'research-in-dialogue' - comparison of self-initiated research, and that instigated in a collaborative manner with other staff in the institution.

Difficulties of other staff accepting research that may challenge their beliefs, methods etc; difficulties of administration; perceptions of more senior staff relating to less senior researcher etc.

Conclusion

There are deep issues within institutional culture probably of most university music departments in the UK relating to aspects of tradition, willingness to change, communication, status and impulse for the research, also to financing it.

The focus on practice-lead research bears implicit association with openness to change, and the idea of research findings being applicable, in some form or other, to all within the institution.

University research – often purely academic and may only relate to the specific interest of the individual lecturer undertaking the research which explains why it can perhaps be difficult for some members of staff to engage with dissemination from other research projects which may have an overarching span across staff, students, policy, provision, institutional history and future.

This area of research, focusing on inter-relationships between people and practice in a music department, may expose a lack of alignment within the institution that people might be reluctant to acknowledge. Perhaps working collaboratively with academic colleagues on projects that they would like to be researched will make it easier for findings to be accepted and for changes to be implemented that will benefit the whole community. Perhaps establishing a co-institutional research project may also help to define the status of the project and perhaps the nature of the response.

Difficulty of exploring and exposing elements other than existing good practice: in order for research to make a real contribution to the learning culture, institutions must be prepared to accept that they may have to face truths and realities previously concealed. Only then will a culture begin to move towards a transformative community of teaching and learning, in which students, as well as staff and teachers, may gain full benefit of the opportunities around them.