

IATL Project: “Research Led Teaching; Principles, Perceptions and Practice in WMG” - Interim Report

Introduction

This project seeks to engage with the concept of Research-Led Teaching and Learning (as cited in objective 2.1 in the University Learning and Teaching Strategy). Despite such a high-level commitment to the concept, there seems to be a lack of consistency of understanding of the construct and its implementation both within WMG and across the wider University. By using an inductive methodology (focus groups) to develop inputs from students and staff (both research and teaching) the aim is to develop a shared understanding of the term, its many facets and, crucially, how this might best be operationalized; initially within WMG but with University-wide implications. The project was approved for funding in November 2015 (Co-Investigators: Graeme Knowles and Steve Maggs) with a completion date of end July 2016.

Work Plan

The project plan was in 3 phases, each phase consisted of a data gathering element and analysis element.

Phase 1: Using a focus group approach (one for each of the groups) the researchers would develop initial working definitions and associated ideas and constructs (planned for completion by end February 2016).

Phase 2: Using the outputs of the 3 initial groups a second round of focus groups would be conducted with the aim of integrating working definitions, ideas and constructs (planned for completion by end April 2016).

Phase 3: Using the outputs of Phase 2 develop an integrated engagement with the ‘Research Led Teaching’ agenda focused on student learning and experience (planned for completion by end July 2016).

Observations and Learning

As newcomers to this type of research, it is worth noting that there was initially something of a lack of anticipation of the difficulties and delays that might affect this type of work. Specifically, there have been more problems than anticipated in getting together focus group participants, especially from the research side of the department. This has, however, provided some insight into the issue we are exploring with respect to the relative importance assigned to the issue of research led teaching within different communities within WMG, and will be discussed in the research outputs. The second issue which was more technical in nature was the time and effort involved in the transcription of recorded meetings – this was vastly underestimated and, in the end was contracted out at a cost to the department. This too had an advantage, in that it helped to reduce bias as the transcriber had no subject specific knowledge or agenda about the research so value judgements which may have distorted the transcript were avoided. Finally, even with experienced facilitators keeping focus groups ‘focused’ on the topics as something of a challenge!

These issues were challenging at the time, but have certainly contributed to our understanding – research led learning in action!

Work Completed

Conduct of Focus Groups – Phase 1

The first round of focus groups (one with teaching staff, one with research staff, and one with students) were completed with 6 participants in each of the groups; participants self-selected by responding to an email request which contained a detailed description of the planned research and the commitment involved in terms of time and effort. Each focus group lasted between 1 and 1.5 hours and was facilitated by an experienced external academic in the case of staff sessions and a PhD student familiar with this type of research in the case of the students. Sessions were recorded and transcribed at departmental expense; all participants had signed an ethical consent form prior to the session, which explained exactly what would happen and how the data would be recorded, stored and used to allow for informed consent.

Analysis of Focus Groups – Phase 1

The thematic analysis of the transcripts was conducted by individual focus group (Research, Teaching, and Student) and adapted from Braun and Clarke's (2006) Step-by Step Guide:

- **Step One:** Read the transcript a number of times in order to familiarise the researchers with the contents.
- **Step Two:** Review each text highlighting key comments and ideas in a systematic fashion, developing initial ideas of codes.
- **Step Three:** The reviewers compared their results and agreed a common set of key phrases and ideas.
- **Step Four:** Generate a coherent and systematic thematic 'map' of the analysis.
- **Step Five:** Refine the specifics of each theme and the overall 'story' of the analysis generating clear definitions and names for each theme.
- **Step Six:** Produce a scholarly report of the analysis using a selection of 'vivid, compelling extracts'.

In order to minimise bias three separate researchers coded the data initially and came together in step three to agree a common understanding of the ideas and text elements to be included for further analysis. This reduced the potential for elements to be excluded or interpreted based upon the views or expectations of one researcher. Once a set of elements had been agreed, the researchers conducted an Affinity Diagram analysis for each of the groups on separate occasions. The logic of this was to avoid (or at least minimise) the risk of 'cross contamination' of codes between groups – that is to say, the forcing of codes developed for one group onto another because they were fresh in our minds.

The Affinity Diagram technique was used to develop themes from the raw data; the individual phrases selected from the transcript were placed in random order on desks and the researchers silently grouped and regrouped them into logical sets. The silence means that no one individual can promote their views through argument or force of will; it encourages all to seek to understand why

others group the data differently. When the regrouping peters out, it indicates that a degree of consensus has been gained.

At this point, each group is given a title upon which all agree (discussion is permitted at this stage) and which represents all of the elements within that set without being much broader than the data indicates. The data is then reviewed to check that all elements fit the title given, and whether additional elements should be included from other groups; appropriate refinement/reorganization occurs at this stage. The outputs of this phase are included at Appendix 1 to 3.

Conduct of Focus Groups – Phase 2

The second phase of focus groups was designed to present each group with the broad outcomes of phase 1 and to focus on three key issues:

1. Making sense of the differences in perspectives between the three groups.
2. Postulating what might be a cohesive understanding of the key aspects of Research Led Teaching.
3. Considering concrete actions which might usefully be taken within WMG (and possibly within the wider University) to develop an appropriate response to the Research Led Teaching Agenda.

At the time of writing this interim report, Phase Two has been completed, but not yet analysed. The delay is due to the unexpected complexity of getting groups (particularly the research group) together. In fact the research group was unable to reconvene and ended up being conducted as individual interviews.

Work to be Completed

Analysis of Focus Groups – Phase 2

The data needs to be analysed and key themes drawn out for the objectives of the second phase of focus groups.

Expected Completion: end of June

Develop Proposals and Write Project Report

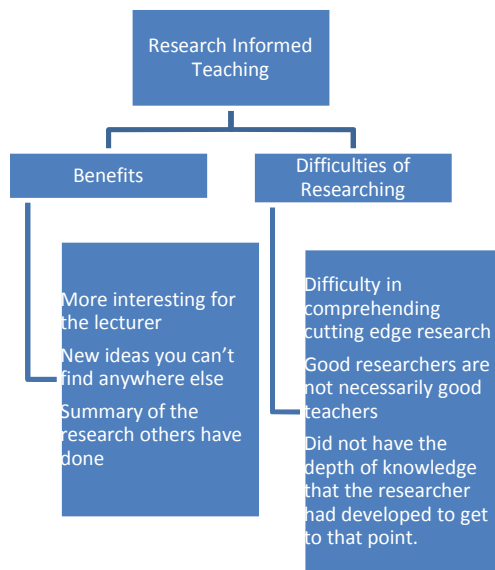
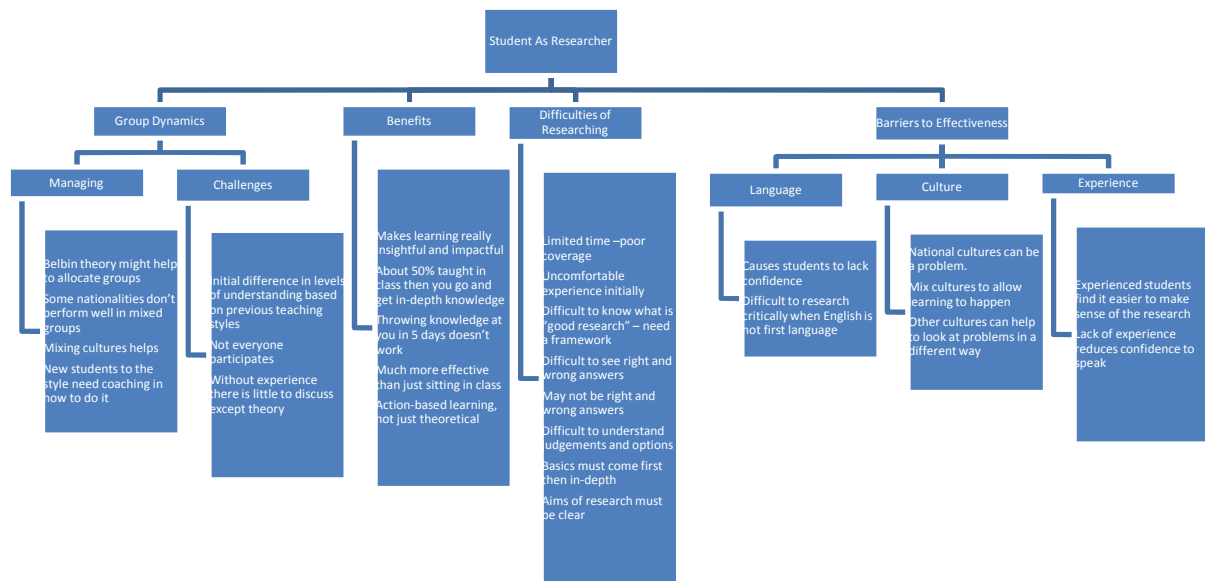
The research team needs to develop a coherent report summarising the research process and outputs and proposals for addressing this area within WMG. The report will include lessons learned during the process and some suggestions with regard to implications for the wider University in this respect.

Expected Completion: end of July

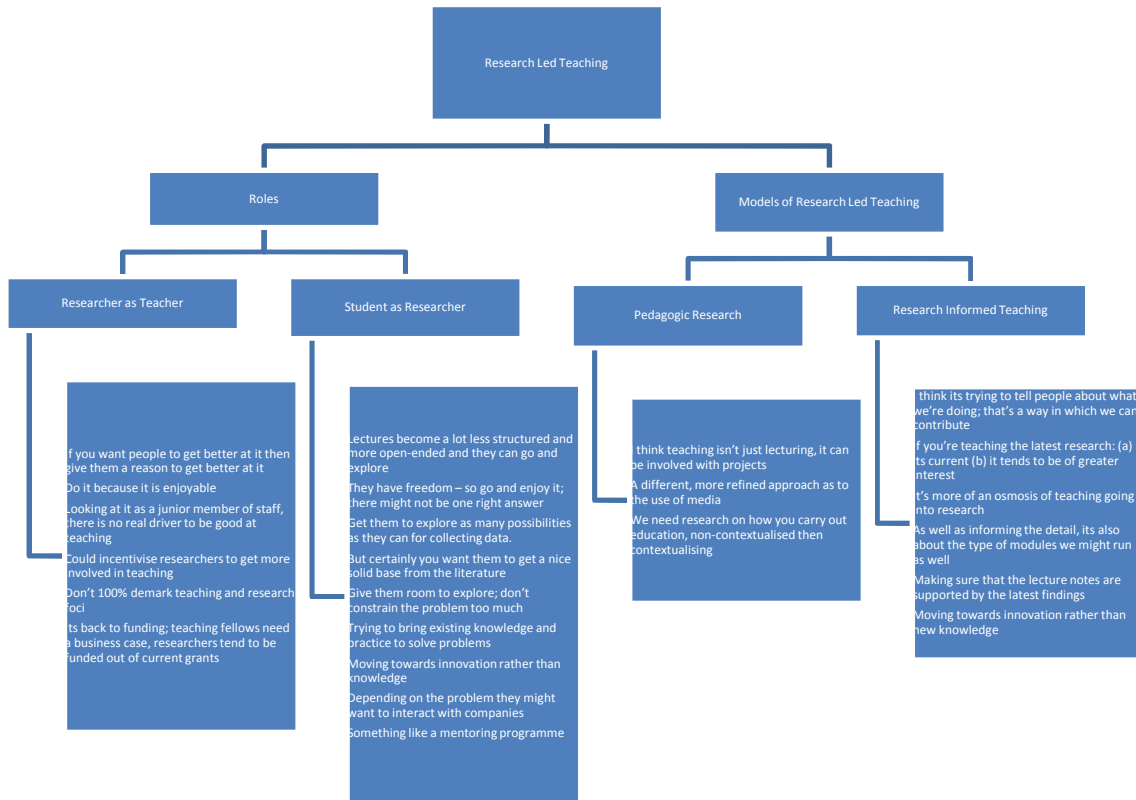
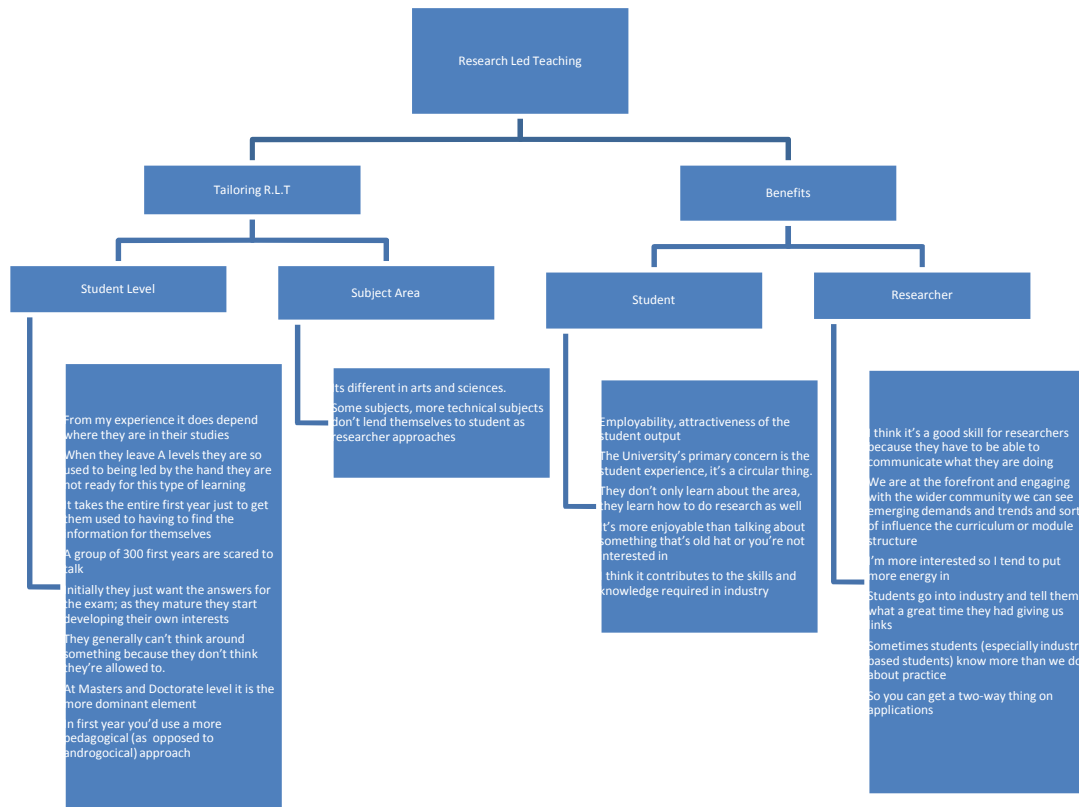
References

Braun, V. & Clarke, V. (2006) Using Thematic Analysis in Psychology, *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, Volume 3, Issue 2

Appendix 1: Affinity Diagrams for Phase 1 Student Focus Group



Appendix 2: Affinity Diagrams for Phase 1 Research Focus Group



Appendix 3: Affinity Diagrams for Phase 1 Teaching Focus Group

