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National Guidance Research Forum Website: Bringing research and practice closer together

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1. Introduction

An interdisciplinary team of researchers from the University of Warwick (Institute for Employment Research) and the University of Derby (Centre for Guidance Studies) have worked in partnership with professional organisations (including the Institute for Career Guidance) to develop a major new research resource for the guidance community, currently known as the National Guidance Research Forum (Website). This has been being funded by the Department for Education and Skills (Access to Learning for Adults Division) in England and was launched on 8th September, 2004. Its overall purpose is to facilitate knowledge sharing and transformation for those interested in guidance research and practice, including: practitioners, policy makers, researchers, guidance trainees, tutors and trainers

Specifically, the objectives of the website are:
- to develop an imaginative way of linking processes of knowledge acquisition, development, transformation and creation with approaches to tackling the core problems of guidance practice;
- to examine the ways in which learning to practise guidance is created and shared (beliefs, concepts, ideas, theories, actions) in the search for new understandings of effective guidance;
- to broaden and deepen the knowledge base of how to align processes of effective guidance practice with policy requirements across the UK.

The structure of the website comprises three main sections, as follows:

- **LMI Future Trends** – consisting of labour market information focusing on labour market changes and skills needs in the UK.

- A **Database** – linking directly to the National Learning Resource for Guidance, based at the Centre for Guidance Studies at the University of Derby.

- **Making Guidance more Effective** (with the following sub-sections):
  ~ Equal Opportunities;
  ~ Impact Analysis;
  ~ Using Research in Practice;
  ~ Improving Practice;
  ~ Lifelong Learning;
  ~ International Perspectives.

The project extends the use of information and communication technologies, developed during a previous European Social Fund resourced ADAPT project to support the knowledge development of the dispersed community of guidance practice (Brown & Bimrose, 2000). A shared knowledge base has been constructed, not from an a priori comprehensive blueprint, but by being grown more organically from the contextualised problems that policy makers

and practitioners face. For the 'Making Guidance more Effective' section of the website, this initially involved the formation of groups which met to discuss issues of policy and practice, with these discussions being continued on-line. Six work groups were formed (one each for Equal Opportunities, Impact Analysis, Using Research in Practice, Improving Practice, Lifelong Learning and International Perspectives). These groups operated as a centre of expertise for particular topics and had several tasks. Specifically, to:

- Identify gaps and specify key areas or problems related to their expertise;
- Offer a mediated commentary on key documents and research findings;
- Provide support for others with particular interests in this area. For example, these groups provided a focus where people could pose particular questions.

In this way, it proved possible to advance understanding through processes of knowledge combination, where existing available knowledge was combined with new insights to create new forms of contextualised knowledge. Online support for a community of interest that focused on the interweaving of guidance research and practice offers advantages. For example:

- It offered the chance for others to collaborate independent of time and space;
- It made it possible for people to participate in their own time and at their own pace;
- Contributions varied in form (e.g. OHTs, handouts,links to documents, html pages or other notes);
- Participants were able to explore something thoroughly by commenting on material and contributing to discussions, and in so doing elaborate on the knowledge that is already in the website.

An important feature of this development, however, was that opportunities were structured for project participants to meet and talk through issues, engage in development work and link to continuing on-line discussions. It was this combination of activities that facilitated the collaboration necessary for active knowledge creation. The created knowledge can, therefore, be regarded as a social product. It represents not only learning, but creating knowledge collaboratively as a form of knowledge building where individuals (learn to) share their knowledge and create new knowledge together.

2. Background to the Forum

It has previously been argued (Brown, Attwell and Bimrose, 2002) that one way to build a more interactive and collaborative approach to knowledge creation was to utilise the ideas of Nonaka and Takeuchi (1995) and Nonaka and Konno (1998). They stressed it was important to ensure that there was sufficient time and space for face to face interactions to facilitate socialisation, externalisation (or active reflection), combination of new and existing knowledge, and the internalisation of different types of knowledge. We consider that this is important if we are to build up the continuing relationships with members of the learning community. This will enable us to meet our

longer term aims for this research that include the continuing enhancement of the achievement of practitioners, especially of those in training and those engaged in continuous professional development.

Overall, the key to knowledge development to enhance career guidance practice is to set up a genuinely collaborative environment for a wide range of participants. The environment is intended to enable participants to:
- (jointly) develop, edit and modify materials;
- share annotation on material;
- facilitate the sharing of experience;
- promote discussion, sharing and active collaboration;
- offer virtual (and real) spaces for debate and collaboration;
- support action research;
- offer active support and moderation;
- offer support to particular interest groups;
- provide a forum for discussion of attempts to tackle complex problems in careers guidance practice.

2.1 Collaboration

Staff from many organisations involved in guidance have participated in this innovative attempt to establish a learning community to enhance careers guidance practice. These have included careers companies; Information, Advice and Guidance partnerships; Higher Education; Voluntary/Community Sector Organisations; the private sector; various government organisations and employers. Additionally we are actively engaging in continuing dialogue with representatives of those organisations with a strategic interest in the development of career guidance policy and practice, such as the Department for Education and Skills; professional associations for guidance; the Sector Skills Councils and the Learning and Skills Council.

2.2 Drawing on the experience of others

By working together, participants develop greater competence using what group members already know as an important component, and co-constructing plans of action to extend that knowledge (Scardamalia and Bereiter, 1994). To work together online to become used to sharing knowledge, deepening their own and common understanding and creating further insights, de Laat *et al.* (2001) thought it crucial for participants to be able to coordinate, clarify and regulate the discourse themselves. They recommend that in order to support the clarification and direction of the discourse, a model of progressive inquiry should be used. Hakkarainen and Muukonen (1999) believe that progressive inquiry can engage members of a community in a step-by-step process of question and explanation driven inquiry. We adapted this approach to our context as follows:

Creating the context: a context needs to be created in order to clarify why the issues in question are relevant and worthwhile for members of

the group to investigate - this was achieved through our face to face meetings.

Setting up initial lines of investigation: this helped guide the process of inquiry. Again our face-to-face meetings set the parameters for the initial lines of investigation that were subsequently followed up using the website.

Feedback and interpretation: once the initial group received feedback from other participants on the initial lines of investigation, then members of the group (and in our case members of the wider community of interest) were invited to construct their own interpretations. de Laat *et al.* (2001) see the construction of personal working interpretations as guiding the participants to use their background knowledge to offer an explanation for the problem. An attempt is then made to reconcile these interpretations and/or set up new lines of inquiry. A first knowledge base of the group's understanding of how the problem might be tackled is created.

Critical challenge: this developing knowledge base needs to be subject to a wider scrutiny and be open to challenge (and alternative interpretation) - this can occur as more members of the wider community of interest become active participants and start to use the website. Alternatively, if initially as so often happens, there are relatively few active virtual contributors, we could hold further face-to-face meetings in order to generate and respond to critical challenges and changing interpretations. de Laat *et al.* (2001) argue that the wider community can then be asked to assess the strengths and weaknesses of different interpretations and identify any contradictions, gaps in knowledge and so on.

Searching deepening knowledge: further advance in the different lines of inquiry can then be made by obtaining new information and combining this with existing knowledge. New information may help participants reconstruct their understanding of issues, problems and solutions.

Engagement in deepening inquiry: progressive inquiry involves a process of continuing refinement as ideas are revisited, and more searching questions are asked, thereby deepening the enquiry.

Constructing new working theories: by finding answers to subordinate questions, de Laat *et al.* (2001) argue that the members of the community of interest approach step-by-step towards answering the initial question or problem statement.

de Laat *et al.* (2001) consider that by introducing this model of progressive inquiry, you develop scaffolds to structure and regulate the learning activities of the participants. Our approach by making continuing use of face-to-face

sessions adds still greater support to the process of knowledge building relating to the interleaving of research and practice.

3. Key ideas underpinning the development of the new site: lessons learned so far

One intention is *to support processes of reflection, consolidation and community development*. This means encouraging the posting of material is a secondary function - material needs to be related to a specific purpose.

To aid processes of reflection and development we need to be able to represent our resources in ways that are meaningful for the community at a particular time. In order to do this we will need to *'tag' each component of contributions with key words* in a way that would enable members to browse and reflect in a way that was meaningful for them rather than relying on pre-ordained particular topics and structure. (Contributions are being formatted in 'lightweight' HTML for ease of reorganisation.)

Resources have been concentrated on *supporting active discussions*. We supported processes of reflection and consolidation of active discussions, in organising material to support the discussions and establishing links between current or past discussion topics. The discussions themselves crossed topic or subject boundaries and evolved and changed shape over time. We sought to facilitate the 'organic growth' of the discussions.

In particular, this meant we moved away from a pre-ordained subject basis. We previously found that such a subject-based approach encouraged contributors to try and fill the boxes with more and more content, almost irrespective of how that material might be used. Here, someone coming to the Forum for the first time is faced by topics organised around 'what have people been talking about.' [Note it is striking that on the current site there has been lively discussion around some topics that were not part of any individual or collective plan. Other topics that everybody agreed were important have not had a single contribution in practice.]

We have experimented with *organising the site around whether the person's primary orientation is toward practice or research*. It is not our intention to divide the community, but rather attempt to maintain that balance between accessibility and usefulness that a number of existing contributors raised. Everyone will have access to the same material, but what is fore-grounded will depend upon which option is taken. On the other hand, as our intention is to bring research and practice closer together, there is also value in adopting an undifferentiated approach.

If the site is to be useful to both practitioners and researchers then we should encourage *participants to be more explicit about their purposes and desired outcomes.* Initially, we tended to ask people to put up things they believe would be useful to an imagined audience. Subsequently, more effort was put into supporting discussions that 'took off'. It is our hope that when the site is fully implemented, users of the site will play oracle to each other - posing

questions and receiving useful answers**.** This will be central to our future purpose.

3.1   Active moderation:
The idea of supporting active discussions implies a much more active approach to moderation. We have developed a tool to support browsing, reflection and review (for example, this could allow 'highlighting of key words or key points' that could themselves be searched or the links between them be investigated). We have made extensive use of summaries and there has been active editing of material (although copies of the discussion as a whole will be archived). This involved key word headings for each substantive point (paragraph); summary paragraphs for ease of scanning - you can scan all the summaries, rather than the full discussions. The consolidation process applied not only to particular discussions, but also on key issues across discussions in order to give a sense of key components in the discourse of the community. In future, a moderator may wish to branch a discussion or someone may suggest that a number of people hive off to a semi-private 'birds of a feather' discussion area.

A semi-private 'birds of a feather' discussion areas would allow more detailed or specialised discussions (for example, about a particular project). People could be invited (through their regular email) to join a particular discussion. When the semi-private 'birds of a feather' discussion was complete or at regular intervals the main discussion could be summarised and transferred to the public site if appropriate.

3.2   Adding value to key documents through discussions or tutorial support:
We had requests for help in learning how to do research from a number of practitioners. The current site has useful support material on this, but this could be even more useful if we could **add value to documents over time** with examples of how people fared when they tried to put these ideas into practice, plus a record of discussions on this and on-line tutorials at regular intervals.

3.3   Links to the National Learning Resource for Guidance:
The website provides a link to the National Library Resource for Guidance (NLRG) based at the Centre for Guidance Studies at the University of Derby and its development has been closely linked to that of the website. It holds the UK's largest collection of guidance literature, comprising both historical and contemporary work - over 10,000 books, journals, published reports and a variety of unpublished materials on the subject of guidance within the United Kingdom, supplemented with examples of guidance research and practice from around the world. A section of the collection is of historical interest to the guidance community, though the greater part consists of

contemporary material that is continually being developed through new acquisitions.

The NLRG will support the work of the website by providing access to materials to support and facilitate discussion and research and providing archived storage of discussions that have taken place on line.

4.   Discussion and interactivity on the website

A key feature of the website is its potential for interactivity. The approach to its design has been driven by the attempt to build a more interactive and collaborative approach to knowledge creation (Brown, Attwell and Bimrose, 2002). Sufficient time and space for face-to-face interactions to identify an appropriate structure and produce material for the website was built into its development, in line with the ideas of Nonaka and Takeuchi (1995). Over 60 members of the guidance community have been involved either in contributing material directly, helping set up lines of enquiry for the developers to pursue, or in taking part in face-to- face and virtual discussions that generated 'new' forms of knowledge that were much more closely grounded in practice. Summaries of these discussions feature on the website and represent a new form of 'knowledge creation' for the guidance community.. Finally, practitioners and researchers have worked together to edit all the material that has been produced.

Once the website is 'live', *interactive discussions* will be a key feature. These discussions will be actively moderated, with material to support the discussions provided, where appropriate, and links established between current or past discussion topics. Experience indicates that the discussions themselves often cross topic or subject boundaries. They also evolve and change shape over time. Typically one discussion might lead to contributions being placed in two or three different areas.

Discussion themes will be carefully designed to advance understanding through processes of knowledge combination. Existing available knowledge will be combined with new insights to create new forms of contextualised knowledge. We hope when you visit the site you will see we have had considerable success interweaving of insights from guidance research and practice in the past with discussion threads that relate to the present varied contexts in which guidance in delivered.

Overall, a key objective in the development of the website has been to create a structure in which the user can be an active participant. However, to build a genuine on-line community of interest, we are ultimately dependent on members of the guidance community. Your community needs you to log on to www.guidance-research.org, post comments and join a discussion once they get underway.

5.   Conclusion

This initiative represents an exciting opportunity to create an inclusive and dynamic research community for guidance. It will enable us to examine the ways in which learning about guidance is created and shared (beliefs, concepts, ideas, theories, actions) as well as providing a potentially powerful engine to assist with the search for new understandings of effective guidance to benefit all clients.

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