

**Diane Holmes** (with contribution from Jude Mackenzie)

## Putting the Pieces Together

How Joint Practitioner Research Improved the Employability of Students by true Negotiation of Learning Goals

### Introduction

This study is based on a Joint Practice Development (JPD) project which we undertook on behalf of our employers the *Workers Educational Association* (WEA) and is funded by the *Learning And Skills Improvement Service* (LSIS) and supported by SUNCETT.

The WEA is the largest voluntary provider of adult education in the UK and one of its main aims is to provide '*education with a social purpose*' (WEA Tutor handbook, 2012, p 3). Within the parameters of this theme, four sub themes have emerged as key to WEA, one of them being a focus on the employability skills of our students. Bearing this in mind, the researchers initial focus was on improving these skills and the development students' Maths and English.

The focus of the project was to change, however, as the researchers realised that the challenge to success lay in the students being able to negotiate and understand their learning goals. They established a method of goal setting using effective Assessment for Learning as they realised that this was a crucial

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element in achieving any course aims including employability and the development of Maths and English skills.

The project aim was to improve the quality of teaching and learning through JPD, by using collaboration between partners, students and tutors and by means of collaborative peer observation.

The setting of learning goals was of great interest to us, particularly within the parameters of teaching employability courses. The project was not just about the setting of learning goals, it was also about the engagement of the learners in the process – the learners must have *ownership* of their individual goals (Hom and Murphy, 1983) and this will encourage personal efficacy *and* autonomous learning. Furthermore, those learners who are empowered by this process show that they **‘achieve at higher levels because of the self – reliant, self – directed nature of their learning.’** (Hom and Murphy, 1983 p.275) .We used a form of Action Research based on *Collaborative Inquiry*, (Heron and Reason, 2001). This method ensured that all participants were actively involved in the process and most of the decisions, researching with the participants rather than on them.

There was a triangulated approach to data collection using, questionnaires, interviews and peer observation, and this is presented both qualitatively and quantitatively to support the findings. Conclusions and recommendations are made later regarding the application of these findings.

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A thorough literature review was undertaken to analyse and synthesise a range of views on the goal setting, assessment for learning (AFL) and collaborative inquiry (CI) research).

In this age of educational accountability, there have been numerous investigations into goal setting and their effect on learner achievement, including Kwang (2003), Pintrich (1999) and Veermans & Jarvela (2003), though few have taken the route of collaborative inquiry.

The various arguments for and against each theme are systematically weighed against each other, in order to provide a balanced yet robust analysis of all literature reviewed, drawing attention to conceptual and methodological issues present within the topic of research.

### **Literature Review**

This review will illustrate how the project has built on the platform of existing knowledge and ideas by identifying seminal work in the areas of research, discussing methods relevant to the project, and opposing ideas. The review will focus on the areas most relevant to the project, following a thematic structure, discussing the themes and interlinking them where they overlap.

This will begin with an analysis of Assessment For Learning (AFL) - Black & Williams (1998) and (Stiggins, 2005). There will also be reference to coaching (Farrell and Little, 2005), and collaborative practice, (Aspland, Macpherson, Proudford & Whitmore, 1996). An analytical discussion on the setting and

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achievement of learning goals will be provided - this section of the review encompassing a wider array of literature (the concept being at the source of the project). This will include Kwang, (2003) who discusses the relationship between learning goals and personality, Pintrich, (1999) on the role of 'inhibition and interference' in the selection of goals and Veermans & Jarvela (2003) who examine the coping strategies of students with different achievement goals.

This research project had a theme running throughout – Collaborative practice between different curriculum areas, tutors, partners and the students. This practice draws upon the concept of AFL, the tutor and students both being decision makers, as Black and Williams (1998, p.2) say AFL:

***'...refers to all those activities undertaken by teachers, and by their students in assessing themselves which provide information to be used as feedback to modify the teaching and learning activities in which they are engaged...'***

Both tutors were focussed on improving goal setting and achievement by involving the learners and embracing the concept of AFL.

Within this project the researchers and students were alternately the 'learners and teachers', and the principles of AFL guided them through the research, assessing and critiquing each stage of the progression. Focussing on these principles, tutors should use a more holistic approach to assessment which ensures all parties are exposed to the strengths of AFL. The learners should be reminded of (and encouraged to decide upon) their learning goals in each

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session ensuring they are aware of the 'how' and the 'what' of their learning, fostering learner autonomy, (Marshall and Drummond, 2006). In AFL environments tutors '**deconstruct standards into...enabling targets students must master...**' (Stiggins & Chappuis, 2005, p.15). This was evidenced by one tutor breaking down achievement targets into more personalised learning goals, engendering confidence and rekindling hope amongst students who were considered to be low – performing (Stiggins et al 2005). However, Marshall and Drummond (2006, p147) cite Kennedy (1999) drawing attention to '**the problem of enactment**', within AFL and suggest that the four original headings of '**questioning, feedback, sharing criteria and self assessment**' need revised to ensure the spirit of AFL is instantiated. Use of AFL illustrated the intention to avoid a 'power' relationship developing, by empowering the students, encouraging their participation in '**continuous access to descriptive (versus evaluative or judgmental) feedback**' so that they could '**watch themselves successfully negotiating the road to competence.**' (Stiggins, 2005, p.1). This was particularly evident when setting learning goals as the learners were encouraged to discuss them to establish links with their learning and achievements..

Eccles (1983) who is cited by Harackiewicz and Linnenbrick (2005) stating that motivation in education had three components: '**...value (including task value and achievement goal orientation), expectancies (including control beliefs, self efficacy beliefs, and expectancy for success), and affect**' - which in this

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project relates to learners' self esteem and ability to self –regulate their own learning. However, Pintrich (1999, p.110), commenting on the work of Dempster and Corkill (1999) on the processes of interference and inhibition on student motivation, seems to contradict previous motivational theories stating that:

**‘... goals and motivational beliefs may be operating simultaneously...relations are reciprocal, rather than motivation and self – regulation coming into play after interference or inhibition processes.’**

Interestingly, some of the facts from the interview transcripts of the students taking part in this CI seem to support Pintrich as they suggest that the goals are their motivation for continued study.

The project's main theme of setting and achievement of learning goals will now be discussed more fully, acknowledging relational links to the other topics.

The learners embraced the concept of owning their learning goals which they understood would propel them to greater achievement. It was crucial that the tutors related the goals to the learner's personal aspirations (within the context of the course) as this would promote coping strategies which are **‘not purely cognitive situations but are also emotionally and motivationally loading.’** (Veermans & Jarvela, 2003, p.271). The tutor not only delivered the learning, they also facilitated the role of coach to the students in **‘providing support, companionship, feedback and assistance.’** (Ladyshefsky, 2006, p.68).

Within this project, learner's goals were made more personal and transferable to 'real life', equipping them with both English and/or Maths skills whilst studying employability skills. Citing Brophy, (1999) Veermans and Jarvela, (2003, p.286) state that:

**'The teacher should... help students to see the value of the learning task from their personal point of view and...in potential applications outside of school context.'**

The tutor's role in goal setting also involves the ability to distinguish between different types of learner. More specifically, whether they are task – involved, with a mastery goal, or ego – involved, with a performance goal. (Nicolls, 1984; Biggs & Moore, 1993; Ryan & Guardia, 1999). Kwang (2003, p.186) comments that:

**'From a phenomenological perspective, task – involved students...are *origins* of action..., whose behaviour is volitional and determined from within...ego– involved students ... behaviour is non – volitional and controlled ...by powerful extraneous forces in the social environment.'**

This knowledge of the student's learning behaviour can be utilised within the framework of AFL as attention to different motivational triggers is given. For example, the task – involved students would respond positively by engaging them in repeated self assessments where they can **'...assess themselves when**

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**they have a sufficiently clear picture of the targets that their learning is meant to attain.'** (Black & Williams, 2001 p7). The ego – involved students would be motivated by **'a clear vision of the learning target...along with samples of strong and weak work so they can see a progression to competence laid out before them.'** (Stiggins, 2005, p.1).

Seijts, Taylor and Latham, (1998) focus more on the specificity of goal setting referring to Locke and Latham's (1990) study which strongly suggests that setting more specific goals results in greater performance, unlike the strategy of encouraging students by use of vague goals like 'do your best'. This belief has relevance to this CI as specific goal setting encouraged very low level ability students to attain recognised qualifications, whereas a similar set of students did not achieve so well, and were set less specific learning goals. Phalet, Andriessen and Lens (2005, p.73) suggest that **'goal striving is by definition future – oriented.'** They claim that focus on immediate goals, rather than delayed goals in the future, results in poorer motivation and less effective learning, citing the work of Nuttin and Lens, (1985) saying that:

**'...formulating motivational goals in the distant future  
creates an extended future time perspective, (FTP) which  
...strengthens the motivation to strive for those goals.'**

This fact seems to support a further elaboration of the FTP concept by Entwistle and Entwistle, (1991) and Nolen, (1988) who distinguished between deep – level and surface – level learning. Phalet et al (2005, p.76) comment that:

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**‘Students who engage in deep – level learning are actively elaborating, structuring and questioning... In contrast students who stick to surface – level learning focus on memorization without understanding.’**

As some students had LD the levels of learning were relative to their cognitive ability, but the principle still applies. When comparing the two, the group with future goals were engaging in deeper learning processes. The second group were initially only challenged with recalling facts previously learned, as the tutor believed this was the most effective way (if not the only way) for them to develop and retain knowledge. This phenomenon was observed in the OTL process, and was a critical point in the project. The observing tutor coached the other into reflecting, both in and on action, (Schon, 1983) upon the different levels of learning and how the learners could achieve their goals more effectively. Then, as Zech, Gause – Vega, Bray, Scules and Goldman (2000, p.211) state:

**‘Teaching becomes a dynamic process of inquiring into student learning and understanding rather than a process of transmitting a body of static facts and procedures.’**

In a keynote speech at the Higher Education Funding Council for England Leadership Conference, Cram, (2008) focuses on the coaching technique of the late UK Athletics Master Coach, Jimmy Hedley, who appears to have exhibited a mix of both models, being described by Dovaston (1992, p31) as using **‘pragmatism, common sense...sagacity, kindness’** whilst **‘dissecting and**

**analysing information in a relentless pursuit of new ideas and methods.'**

This approach would be something the researchers aspired to.

The project methodology will now be discussed in detail, differentiating between research methods, making links between theories, concepts and epistemological structures which will be discussed in relation to the project.

### **Methodology**

The researchers realised that to improve the skills of their students, they needed to establish a course programme which was compatible with the needs of partners working with them (Sunderland Social Services and UNISON).

Interviews were then employed to establish the partner requirements, one remarking that they '*wanted a course which helps students get into employment by developing their workplace skills but also improves their English too!*' The course content was agreed and ten students completed a questionnaire to establish what they knew of and how confident they were in understanding and reaching their learning goals. The questionnaire was repeated after the courses were completed and the results are explained in detail later in the report.

Four students were also interviewed from two different groups to gain insight into the practice of both tutors in goal setting. The tutors were observed and coached as they employed assessment for learning in this process.

The research did not limit itself to individualistic reflective practice, as it is also a hermeneutic activity .It aims to avoid being monological by following a more

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dialogical route encouraging communication amongst *equals*. (Cohen, et al, 2007). This explains ‘... **the richness...of human behaviour by studying it from more than one standpoint.**’ Cohen and Mannion, (1986, p254)

One of the strengths of CI is that the perspective of the individual is highly regarded and it recognises that human behaviour develops gradually, (Oates, 2002) changing through interaction– an optimal scenario for our research based on Joint Practice Development

This project had elements of ‘Apollonian’ and ‘Dionysian’ traits, (Heron, 1996). The methods were rational and systematic (Apollonian), with a tacit approach to the relationship between action and reflection, allowing new knowledge to emerge as the situation developed (Dionysian). For example, students were encouraged to discuss their learning goals.

This research aims to show that establishing successful learning goals follows mutual negotiation between tutor and student, collaboration between all participants being crucial to the success. Brechin (1993, p. 73) states:

**‘Research tends to be owned and controlled by researchers...  
Those who remain powerless to influence the process...  
are usually... those very people whose interests the research  
may purport to serve.’**

In CI the human right to be part of the decision making process is encouraged and the participation takes place in two main areas: ***Political Participation***,

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which focuses on the connection between the people in the research and the decisions that affect them, while ***Epistemic Participation***, is the relation between the 'knower and the known' (Oates, 2002) and as Heron (1996, pp. 20 – 21)) points out:

**'Propositions about human experience are of questionable validity if they are not grounded in the researchers' experience .  
The most rigorous way to do this is for the researchers to ground the statements directly in their own experience as co – subjects.'**

The nature of this project supports Heron's view, as CI employs qualitative, interpretivist methods of research, rather than quantitative, positivist research on people which may deny them their right of political participation, leading to self reflection and emancipation (Habermas, 1968). However, it is important to highlight that although most of the research is qualitative, the project aims for greater validity and reliability in its findings by quantifying some of the results, later in the study.

In some ways the research path followed could be viewed as resembling *Eclecticism* in that it does not rigidly follow a single paradigm. CI does traditionally follow a more interpretive approach, but this research does go some way in to absorbing positivist attributes and uses the powerful technique of Triangulated research methods. These qualitative research methods were Peer Observation, Interviews and Questionnaire's.

## Observation

The constructivist method of ***Moderate participant observation*** was employed, the level of involvement alternating between spectator and participant, (Biocultural Diversity Learning Network 2009). A pair of tutors observed each other, the initial visit to view 'current practice', a second and third observation triggering stages of the AR cycle. On each occasion the researcher would be involved in the session to some extent while collecting the data, allowing them to gain insight into the goal setting process and the learners understanding of it, whilst developing a rapport between all participants. Participants would be observed in their 'natural setting', the researchers blending in to the classroom community, ensuring objectivity, to enable them to analyse and write about the experience (Russell 2002)

One area of disadvantage in the observations was likely to have been the **ethical** considerations (more so because the groups both had learning difficulties). The researchers would need to be explicit in providing the reasons for the observations, ensuring that participants were aware of the researcher's identity and purpose among the group. Participant consent forms were obtained and disseminated, the group being fully informed of the researcher's purpose, why their part is necessary, how it will be used and how and to whom it will be reported' (BERA, 2011).

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## Interview

A qualitative research interviewer attempts to uncover both facts and meaning, (Valenzuela and Pallavi 2009 & Kvale 1996), so the interviews were to be semi - structured with a specific set of questions predetermined by the researcher, with a conversational element to be included. This allowed the participants to talk freely about their experiences in goal setting, with each participant being asked the same questions in the same order. The researchers recognised that the process could be extremely time consuming, so prior attention had been given to the wording of the questions ensuring that answers were full but to the point and all parties were aware that a time limit of thirty minutes per interview was allocated, to ensure there was no 'over run' on interview schedule's.

Four students were chosen to interview, and a *Thematic Analysis* of the data will be tabulated later in the study. The sampling method closely resembled *Stratified Sampling* (Coolican, 1999) in that the population was known to the researchers (tutors) and the sample size was chosen with the confidence that the stratum was representative of the population. Once the research had established some facts from the students about their experience of goal setting in employability (with embedded English and Maths) courses, a questionnaire was given, to a target population of ten students. The group was representative of the students, being an example of *Convenience Sampling* (Coolican, 1999). The

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questions were set to ascertain their understanding of learning goals and their role in setting them.

### Questionnaire

A questionnaire was designed on students' confidence in their learning aims and goals in employability course, both prior and post course, responses being recorded anonymously to encourage honesty from participants, with complete confidentiality. The data was later analysed using a *Wilcoxon Test* for Matched Pairs.

A *Likert Scale* was used, ranging from 1 – 7 in order to facilitate coding and analysis of results. The selection of a Likert scale alerted the researchers to the possibility of distortion of data, but they were confident of the respondent's honesty and openness, avoiding a central tendency or acquiescence bias, especially as participation was anonymous.

### Results and Findings

Following the AR model **Stage 1** of the cycle began with the identification of the main objective of the study: To improve the setting and achievement of learning goals.

**Stages 2 and 3** followed with the identification and collection of data.

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One group of students taking part in this project had both immediate and future goals set (Phalet, et al. 2005), but it was the ‘carrot’ of the future goal which seemed to motivate them more - an Entry Level 3 qualification - rather than success in a stand - alone module. This concept links the project with Petty’s (2004), study on ‘Medals and Missions’ where he points out that setting clear goals and giving continuous feedback and assessment to learners leads to greater motivation and achievement. The focus on, and motivational effect of, the goals, echoes previous links to Pintrich’s study on self regulatory strategies (1989). This group were more successful in achieving their aims than the second so this disparity was investigated with four learners from each group being interviewed, in order to establish the goal setting practice of both tutors, and the understanding of the learners of the process.

Bearing in mind that the participants had LD, some of the answers were unexpectedly astute. This finding highlights the fact that qualitative research is about dissecting ‘taken for granted’ knowledge, and alerted the researchers to the possibility of further ‘hidden’ data within the learners’ responses. A Thematic Analysis of the interviews is shown below:

**Fig1a Thematic Analysis of 8 Learner Interviews (combination of groups A & B)**

Theme	Fully Understood	Partially Understood	Not Understood
Understanding learning aims	4	3	1

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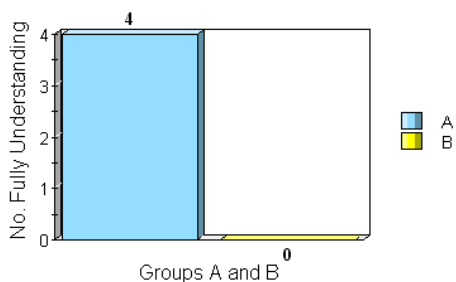
Goals helping with learning	3	4	1
Providing an example of a learning goal	7	1	0
Confirmation of discussion with tutor on learning goals	8	0	0

Although the results appear to be positive, with all of the learners confirming that they discussed their goals, and most providing an example of one, the researchers decided that this measurement exposed a weakness in this purely quantitative method.

It was evident that the data failed to show, at a deeper level, to what extent the learners knew and understood about their goals, and the difference in the quality of the responses between the two groups, which are shown below in graphical form. The title of each graph is taken from the thematic analysis chart. The researchers decided that this quantitative measurement would be a more explicit representation by showing if the learners fully understood, with no ‘middle ground’ recorded.

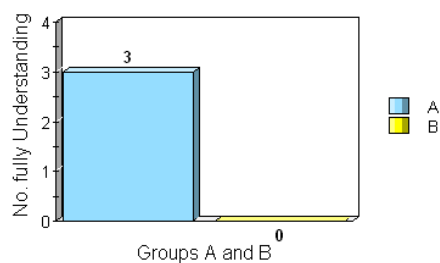
### Difference in levels of understanding between groups A & B

**Understanding learning aims**



**fig1**

**Goals helping learning**



**fig2**

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**Providing an example of a learning goal**

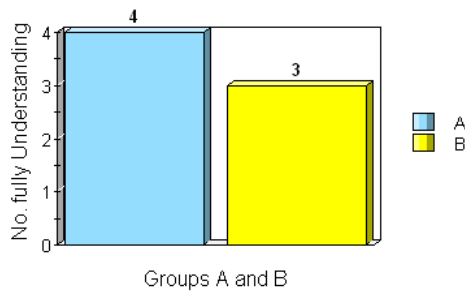


fig3

**Confirmation of discussing learning goals**

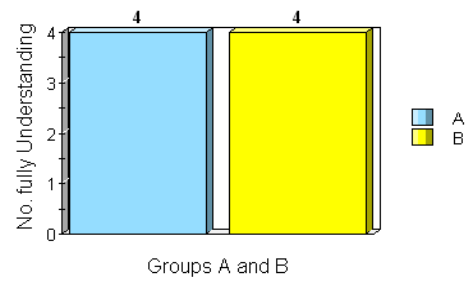


fig4

A disparity between the two groups can be observed from the data. The nil scores on the graphs, (figs 1 and 2) for 'B' uncovered a further point for the researchers to investigate, as the themes in figs1 and 2 were evidently higher in the cognitive domain than figs 3 and 4. This suggested that, in this exercise, group 'B' learners' cognitive processes were limited to the comprehension stage, whereas 'A's appeared to fall between application and analysis (Blooms Taxonomy, 1964). This instigated a further qualitative analysis of the data which is presented in the following discourse.

For ease of reporting we will label the Functional Skills group 'A' and Community Learning 'B'. One learner from 'A' described learning aims as *'When you are doing something and you are aiming for it... so you can get a certificate and get higher'*, in contrast, a learner from 'B' replied less succinctly: *'Like when you want to know how to do something and (tutors name) tells you.'* The latter answer could have resonance with Hall et al's (2003) point about learners trying to please the interviewer by naming the tutor in a supposedly positive statement,

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and is a reminder of Miller's (1992) point on issues of power and authority, though in this instance, independent observers were present ensuring objective practice.

A second learner from 'A' said goals helped learning aims as *'you take little steps to achieve bigger steps'*. This statement shows Assessment For Learning clearly working as the learner is using evidence of progression to understand what comes next (Stiggins, 2005). Furthermore, Pintrich's (1999) work is evident yet again as the learner shows that goals and motivational beliefs are operating simultaneously. However, a member of 'B' replied to the same question *'If I do one I get a tick on my work'*, illustrating a much shallower understanding of the purpose of goal setting. Overall, this question was only fully understood by three learners, leading the researchers to review their goal setting practice once more.

Both groups confirmed discussion of goals with their tutor, but on the whole, 'A' members showed a better grasp of the concept of ownership, one saying: *'...The goals help me with my reading and writing and make me understand better'*, illustrating both understanding and individual ownership. A second member of 'A' confirmed negotiation of her goals saying, *'you talk about them ...in the group...I understand them better than if someone...says just get on with it.'* This evidences the collaborative nature of the project, reminding us of Brechin's (1993) point that research should empower the people it serves by providing them with an opportunity for personal influence, confirming their right to political

participation (Heron, 1996) which can lead to reflection and emancipation (Habermas, 1968).

The tutors had the opportunity to influence each others practice, and reflect on their own practice in the OTLs .One tutor progressed from commenting that she needed *‘coaching in setting goals which the learners understand and discuss with me’*, to saying that she was *‘much more confident in setting the correct...goals...which has led to greater achievement by the learners.’* The coaching also focussed attention on distinguishing between the task – involved, and the ego – involved learners, (Ryan & Guardia, 1999), which encouraged AFL (Stiggins, 2005), leading to more appropriate learning goals and a shared acceptance of critical advice on pedagogical issues (Hubball & Birt, 2006; Huston & Weaver,2007).

When asked to reflect on the impact of the research one tutor related how her goal setting and learner achievement had improved answering: *‘Although achievements have been excellent in the past, by collaboration...my teaching technique has improved...I have re examined my approach to goal setting, making them more interesting to the students’*. A second tutor remarked that *‘you can see from their ILPs that... achievement rates...are... between 90 and 100%’*. This being a significant improvement from the previous term’s 60%, (WEA moderation event, 2012) and she attributes this success to *‘...sharing good practice...and modelling my goal setting on a proven method.’*

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Within the OTL the tutors would plan, act, observe and reflect (Kemmis & McTaggart, 1988) leading to the continuous improvement of teaching and learning, including goal setting. This cyclical process encouraged Schon's (1983) reflection – in – action, and triggered one tutor to reflect that further improvements could be made by *'relating goals to learners, by recognising types of learner...'*. This led to further discussion, on learner's motivation, self efficacy beliefs, and expectancy for success, (Harackiewicz & Linnenbrick, 2005). Alternatively, student response in the interviews seem to support Pintrich's (1999) view that achievement of the learning goals is the deciding motivational factor, one participant amusingly reporting that discussing them is *'...like University Challenge!...I am glad when I can tell which one I am doing...'*.

The questionnaire was set in February 2013, and again in April 2013, after the AR findings were shared with the students. On each occasion, participants scores were expressed as a single score out of 56 (derived from the Likert scale values) the difference between the two sets of raw scores showing a significant and unanimous upward trend. The scores can be examined in columns 1 and 2 in Fig 2; the lowest score in February was 17 which shifted to 39 in April and the highest shifting from 31 to 47, though the largest difference was from 29 to 51. The results are presented below using the **Wilcoxon Test** for matched pairs, which determines any significant change in the participant's attitudes over the period. The first stage of computation is shown in figure 5, with the results.

Fig 5 Data: Scores on a Goal setting Questionnaire

Participant Identification code	Column 1	Column 2	Column 3	Column 4	Column 5
	Sample 1 (Responses February)	Sample 2 (Responses April)	Differences	Positive Ranks	Negative Ranks
A	22	40	-18		5
B	17	39	-22		8.5
C	28	42	-14		1
D	27	47	-20		6
E	29	51	-22		8.5
F	31	47	-16		2
G	26	43	-17		3.5
H	25	50	-25		10
I	28	45	-17		3.5
J	25	46	-21		7
	Median = 26.5	Median = 45.5		Sum = 0 T = 0	Sum = 55

T is the sum of the ranks of negative sign or the sum of the ranks of positive sign - whichever is smaller.

As  $0 < 55$ , then  $T = 0$

From the table Wilcoxon Test's critical values of T for a two-tailed test

The value of  $T = 0$  is less than (or equal) to the critical value in the table ( $\alpha = .01$ ,  $N = 10$ , two tailed) therefore it is significant.

This procedure provides a means for testing the existence of a significant difference between the two medians of two related samples of data. If random factors alone are responsible for any difference between the two sets of scores, it would be reasonable for the differences of the scores to be equally divided between positive and negative values. Bearing this in mind, the researchers predicted in a two tailed experimental hypothesis that: *'If students are given an insight into the results of an Action Research project on the setting and*

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*achievement of learning goals, there will be a significant change in their attitude and understanding towards them.'*

Alternatively, if the two sets of scores are unequally distributed between the two conditions, as is shown in figure 2, the effect of the exposure on the subjects of the action research is supported. The table shows that  $p = 0.01$ , therefore the researchers can conclude that there is strong evidence (99.9%) of a shift in participant's attitudes towards, and understanding of, learning goals, and can therefore, accept the experimental hypothesis.

The shift was a very strong indicator that the collaborative research had encouraged a positive outcome in this area. The participants responded to the findings of the tutors from two different curriculum areas and, perhaps, more crucially to the student's responses. This can be linked to Borko's (2004) study which revealed that growth of knowledge and change of practice occurs, when teachers pose questions informed by data from their students.

When examining the initial individual responses more closely (**Stage 4 – Ethical** considerations were again discussed ensuring the research was valid and reliable by showing respect for the dignity and privacy of all participants (Pring, 2000, cited by Busher, 2005). All participants are reported with anonymity, being voluntarily engaged in the project. Informed consent of the

adults with LD was obtained from them, but with the approval of those in a position of duty of care, (following the British Educational Research Association guidelines, 2011).

The students participating in the questionnaire clearly understood the nature and context of the research and were given anonymity at all times, with the responses of the research tutors also being recorded anonymously.

The researchers are confident that the reliability and validity of the findings are made more robust by their triangulated approach to research and data collection. A balance of both quantitative and qualitative measurement was employed whilst objectivity was ensured by a third party presence at interviews.

The collaborative research methods were strongly linked together, complementing the flow of the project, exposing at times, unexpected and surprising results, which informed the researcher's conclusions and prepared them for any recommendations.

## **Conclusion and Recommendations**

The powerful technique of **Triangulated research** further verifies the reliability and validity of the project by providing a detailed and balanced view of the findings. The complex and rich elements of human behaviour have been studied from a variety of standpoints, providing a full and comprehensive view of the

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researchers subjects and topics, leading to a more holistic and accurate picture. By combining the methods of observation, interview, questionnaire and coaching, and by using both qualitative and quantitative data, the researchers consider that they have overcome the weakness and intrinsic biases that single method research presents.

The aim of this Joint Practice Development was to improve the quality of teaching and learning and, in particular, to establish the extent of cross – curricular collaboration on the improvement of the setting and achievement of learning goals, bringing the cycle to **Stage 5** – Reflection.

The researchers are satisfied that the findings of JPD (supported by the results of the Wilcoxon Test) have had a dramatic affect on the attitudes and understanding of the students (and partners) participating in the research. The collaboration clearly illustrated that tutor and student achievement rates were positively affected by JPD as is evidenced by the dramatic increase in achievement rates of the Community Learning students. The results had a positive impact on WEA teaching practice as many tutors are now engaged in making the goal setting process an established part of their schemes of work, and are developing and sharing strategies to improve teaching and learning practice in this area.

Historically there has been a negative attitude from both tutor and learner alike towards the setting of learning goals, and a lack of understanding as to their effectiveness in the learner journey. The transcripts of the learner interviews go

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some way to eradicating this negativity and indeed the findings of the project show that when sound, interesting and personal goals are set, learners engage more and develop personal efficacy, which leads to greater achievement for all. In setting learning goals it was important to ensure that learners had both understanding and ownership of their goals, and the student interviews demonstrate that learners can embrace the concept of ownership and self efficacy, if their tutors provide effective motivation and negotiated, relevant learning opportunities. In fact, as the learners had LD the findings could be viewed as having greater generalisability amongst mainstream learners as their level of understanding, education and communication skills would naturally equip them with better negotiating tools. The researchers are aware, however, that an area of weakness was exposed in the thematic analysis of the interviews which illustrated that not all students understood the concept of 'learning aims'. There could be a strong link between this lack of understanding with some tutors who subsequently have expressed lack of confidence in their own ability to express learning aims in a clear fashion. This has resulted in a recommendation to run a 'refresher' event, including this topic on the agenda. The practice is highlighted in the WEA North East Region's business plan (April 2013) as an area of *good practice* to be disseminated across the region and shared nationally at a WEA Education conference.

**Footnote**

**It has recently been confirmed by one of the partner organisations that up to forty students have gained employment as a direct result of courses featured in this research.**

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