

# Reflections of a Personal Research Journey

**Alison Hramiak** and **Helen Boulton** tell us about finding each other! and the benefits of sharing a philosophy of educational research.





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We were invited by the editors of this special issue on Research in Education to share some thoughts on our research journey. When planning the article it occurred to us that finding a research partner who shares the same philosophy of educational research, the same research interests, and a similar background is not easy to do. Yet we have managed this, and it has helped us both in developing our research profiles nationally and, more recently, internationally. This is our story...

We met quite by chance. At the time we were working in different universities but both within a School of Education and in the field of teacher education. We were part of an Information Technology in Teacher Education (ITTE) discussion list but had attended ITTE conferences at different times so had never met. We both responded to an email asking if anyone was interested in writing chapters for a book on Virtual Learning Environments (VLEs) in secondary schools and Helen, working at Nottingham Trent University (NTU),

offered to host a meeting with other interested colleagues. We started chatting at the meeting, and later continued talking about our backgrounds and research. We had both worked in Further Education, then moved to secondary education, then into Higher Education; our subject was Information Communication Technology; and we were both strand leaders for the Post Graduate Certificate in Education – we found we had so much in common.

The VLE book became our first publication, a project with two other colleagues. We worked independently on our chapters, but arranged to meet up at the 2006 ITTE conference to pull the book together; as we continued to develop the book, our friendship grew. We started emailing each other with new ideas, chatting on the telephone at weekends and Alison became external examiner to Helen's PGCE. We found we were researching similar areas, for example Helen had been running a community blog for a year on her PGCE and Alison and she decided

to develop this to use as a tool for professional reflection. We are now working with ex-students to identify the barriers to using web 2.0 technologies in secondary schools.

Alison had been involved in research with colleagues at Sheffield Hallam University (SHU) looking at Assessment and Feedback and asked Helen to be involved, providing a different perspective. This was developed into a successful bid to ESCalate for funding to carry out research with Year 13 students and Year 1 and 2 undergraduate students in both NTU and SHU.

We have very busy lives: Alison is married with two young children, Helen has one child and is working to complete her PhD. We both work full-time with all the demands of a mainly teaching academic post in a new university. We are lucky that our children get on well together and we generally manage to combine a social visit in the holidays with making revisions to research papers, finalising presentations and so on. ►



As long as the kids get pizzas at the end of the day they don't seem to mind all the work! We carefully divide up jobs and agree to deadlines – which we both stick to, and this mutual trust is what really makes it work.

Working in new universities with limited time for research, we are prepared to continue with our research because it is something we love to do and it improves our practice. We have both had to face rejection in our research, particularly when it comes to writing for those all important peer reviewed journals – who hasn't? We think it's important to have a colleague with whom mutual support can be given during the inevitable moments when one or other's work is rejected, and to move on quickly. So, for example, when we first met, Helen had been writing a paper on e-learning in secondary schools and had received two rejections; that Alison shared she too had various rejections before being published spurred Helen on, and that particular article has now been published.

At the moment our ESCalate research into assessment and feedback is taking up much of the time we are able to allocate to

research. Therefore, to help with the work we decided to pay a postgraduate student to carry out the analysis – we were very clear with the direction for this and are delighted with the results. We also decided to involve some Year 2 undergraduate students to give them some much needed experience in generating research ideas.

What's next on the horizon? Well, we will continue to work together. We are in the process of finishing a joint paper on action research and are now into the 3rd year of our research into using blogs for professional reflection; this is now impacting very much on the secondary schools we work with. We also need to write up the assessment and feedback research and move this into a new phase, to look at the transition from undergraduate to postgraduate – something that is very close to our teaching roles. We try to stick to what will benefit our students and the courses we teach since this is what is both manageable and beneficial to our work.

It has been a journey that is at times frustrating but mostly very rewarding. Finding someone you can work with, who you trust and get on with, who is able to meet

deadlines, and with whom you can socialise as well, has been very valuable. Writing this article has helped us to reflect on how glad we are that we replied to that email asking for interest in writing a chapter on a book – a chance encounter that has benefitted us both, way beyond our expectations.



**Helen Boulton**  
Nottingham Trent University

Helen Boulton is a Principal Lecturer in the School of Education at Nottingham Trent University. Her research interests include blended learning and teaching, the application of new technologies to learning, and work based learning.



**Alison Hramiak**  
Sheffield Hallam University

Alison Hramiak is responsible for the 14-19 ICT PGCE course and is also a Faculty Fellow for Assessment and Feedback. She is co-author with Helen Boulton of *Learning and Teaching with Virtual Learning Environments* (Learning Matters 2007).