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Practice Enquiry Circles:
An Inclusive Approach to Problem Solving in Further Education Organisations

EDUCATION & TRAINING FOUNDATION   touchconsulting   Leeds Trinity University   Edge Hill University

Contents

Preface

In 2020-21, we - Dr Christina Donovan and Dr Colin Forrest - were commissioned by touchconsulting Ltd to lead an evaluation of the, DfE funded, Advanced Practitioners Professional Development Programme (known as 'APConnect'). The aim of the programme was to enable Advanced Practitioners (or those in Advanced Practitioner-type roles) in Further Education (FE) settings to create the conditions to support the professional development of all teaching staff across their organisations. Therefore, our task was not just to undertake the evaluation, but also to ensure that the form of our evaluation reflected the collaborative values and purpose which underpinned the programme itself. This is how we first encountered the power and the potential of co-production as a means for leading meaningful transformational change. With the support of 10 programme participants and facilitators, we were able to form a 'co-evaluation' team to take a deep dive into the role of the Advanced Practitioner and the impact of the APConnect programme.

One of the key findings that we observed as part of our co-evaluation was that Advanced Practitioners (APs) felt they needed more freedom to enact meaningful change, yet they were often constrained by the often-rigid hierarchical organisational structures that they worked within (touchconsulting Ltd, 2021). Further research exploring the role of the Advanced Practitioner found that structures that supported change-making processes were those that provided space for "negotiation of practice, collective sense-making, dialogue and shared ownership" (Forrest et al., 2021: 37).

> "TAKING PART IN THE CO-EVALUATION CIRCLES REALLY GOT ME THINKING ABOUT MY ROLE AS AN AP... I KEEP THINKING BACK TO HOW INSPIRATIONAL THOSE SESSIONS WERE. THEY'VE CONTRIBUTED TO HELPING ME BECOME A STRONGER PROFESSIONAL"
>
> **SALMAN, CO-EVALUATION PARTICIPANT, AP CONNECT YEAR 3**

We found that the Practice Enquiry Circle (PEC) model has the potential to create the conditions for complex conversations to happen whilst also loosening up organisational hierarchies through its underpinning philosophy of co-production. In a very practical sense, this model requires problem solving to occur in a democratic space, which not only deepens our knowledge of the topic under exploration, but also empowers participants to discover their own voices in this context.

In order to build genuinely collaborative partnerships, it is necessary to redistribute power. Our hope for this guide is that we might be able to support FE professionals who wish to open up spaces in which each participant has an equal stake in the conceptualisation of, and solutions to, a shared problem. It is this process that allows us to identify new or unexpected solutions. In response to the insights that arose from our 'co-evaluation', we developed and ran a 'pilot' module as part of the 2021-22 continuous professional development series of the APConnect programme. Within this module, FE practitioners from contexts across the UK identified their own 'sticky problems', using the PEC model as the organising principle for exploration. In this accompanying guide we will take you through the process of setting up your own PEC, as well as our learning from the pilot module.

Introduction

The Practice Enquiry Circle model that we have developed is rooted in the principles and practices of the Research Circle Approach, a model for democratic knowledge exchange, first developed in the Swedish trade union movement, but is now used in multiple contexts across the public sector (Holmstrand et al., 2017). As such, many of the ideas discussed here draw upon the extant literature in this field, and further reading is recommended throughout this guide. One of the key characteristics of the approach is the collective deliberation over a problem that (usually) emerges from practice and would benefit from closer examination. In this context, knowledge arises from the lived experience of working contexts. These problems may often be seen as 'sticky', and as such require the negotiation of many different voices to identify solutions. We feel that there is significant potential for this approach to inform and enrich quality improvement strategies and cultures in further education organisations.

A BRIEF NOTE ON 'STICKY PROBLEMS'

In the context of the development of the PEC model we saw sticky problems as being linked to persistent quality improvement challenges in further education organisations. Such challenges can be complex where the full scope of the issues can be difficult to understand. Solutions to sticky problems are therefore likely to lie in a diversity of perspectives originating from different stakeholders. The persistency of sticky problems means that collaborative and creative approaches are more likely to bring success.

The aims of this guide are:

◗ To provide a background for the practice enquiry circle approach

◗ To provide a tool to enhance critical enquiry in further education organisations

◗ To support Advanced Practitioners, FE leaders and other relevant stakeholders to develop insights into approaches that strengthen alignment between practice, research approaches and outcomes

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Why Co-Production?

The beauty of co-production lies in its simplicity. The approach starts with a disposition towards building genuine collaborative partnerships. This commitment to partnership is also a commitment to action, where members are working towards something meaningful and useful (Cooke et al., 2017). It is an aspirational approach where participants commit to imagining possible futures and making them happen (Bell and Pahl, 2017). This explicit remit to imagine better futures opens imaginative spaces where people can start thinking for themselves.

The principles of co-production explicitly challenge the dominant discourses of management and models of educational leadership by offering a 're-description' of professional objectives through generative dialogue (Hulme et al., 2009). This process allows us to see common issues or problems anew, creating room for people to define their own questions and contexts for action, which are rooted in the lived experience of those involved.

The commitments - or principles - that guide a co-productive space seek to challenge commonly held understandings of 'expertise' by privileging embodied forms of knowledge rooted in lived experience, through identifying problems that emerge from the grassroots of a community or education context. These commitments to reciprocity and the active exchange of ideas support the construction of a space in which everyone is heard.

KEY PRINCIPLES IN CO-PRODUCTION

- Commitment to reciprocity and dialogic inquiry
- Establish a commonality of purpose
- Openness and hopefulness (allowing opportunities for change to emerge)
- Commitment to authentic, generative and collaborative change
- Make embodied and tacit ways of knowing visible

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The commitment to dialogue is how members can establish a commonality of purpose. Of course, everyone will bring their own unique ideas and agendas. Opinions may differ regarding the question that should be investigated, or which aspects of the issue should be given more importance. Navigating differences is unlikely to be easy, and while the goal is not to achieve consensus, acknowledging those things that bring the group together are important. The collective priorities of the group may also not always stay the same during its work together. It could be that the guiding question changes or evolves, or that the outcome of the enquiry is very different to what it was at the start. Co-production is viewed as a generative process, where knowledge builds over time. Holding these principles together allows for possibility thinking to happen, creating a space in which all participants feel recognised and valued.

> "BEING PART OF THE CO-EVALUATION WAS THE MOST UPLIFTING EXPERIENCE I HAVE EVER HAD. THE WAY IT WAS PRACTISED WAS ABOUT FREEDOM OF SPEECH, LISTENING TO OTHERS AND SHARING IN A TRUSTING ENVIRONMENT WHERE EVERYONE WAS EQUAL. WHERE EVERYTHING YOU SAY DOES MATTER, AND YOU DO HAVE A VOICE"
>
> **STACEY, CO-EVALUATION PARTICIPANT, AP CONNECT YEAR 3**

Further Reading

Holmstrand, L., Härnsten, G. and Löwstedt. 2017. *The Research Circle Approach: A Democratic Form for Collaborative Research in Organizations.* In: Handbook of Collaborative Management Research. SAGE

Bell, D. and Pahl, K. 2018. Co-Production: Towards a Utopian Approach. *International Journal of Social Research Methodology.* Available online: https://doi.org/10.1080/13645579.2017.1348581

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Chapter 1: Putting Your Practice Enquiry Circle Together

1.1 What are Practice Enquiry Circles (PECs)?

We are positioning the PEC approach as a method that builds on several styles of professional development that you are likely to be familiar with such as Communities of Practice, Action Learning Sets, Thinking Environments or other coaching and mentoring models. As such it might be tempting to treat PECs as part of this suite. However, what sets this model apart lies in the deep commitment to the values and principles of co-production outlined above together with the emphasis on partnership with stakeholders.

The PEC provides dedicated space for teachers and other education professionals to reflect on their own practice by providing the conditions required for this kind of work to be undertaken effectively; namely time, continuity, and space for dialogue (Persson, 2009). In this sense, it can be considered a site for professional learning and development, as well as knowledge-production.

> "THE COLLECTIVE KNOWLEDGE OF A TEAM BECOMES QUALITATIVELY DIFFERENT FROM WHAT EACH INDIVIDUAL CAN POSSIBLY CONTRIBUTE ON THEIR OWN"
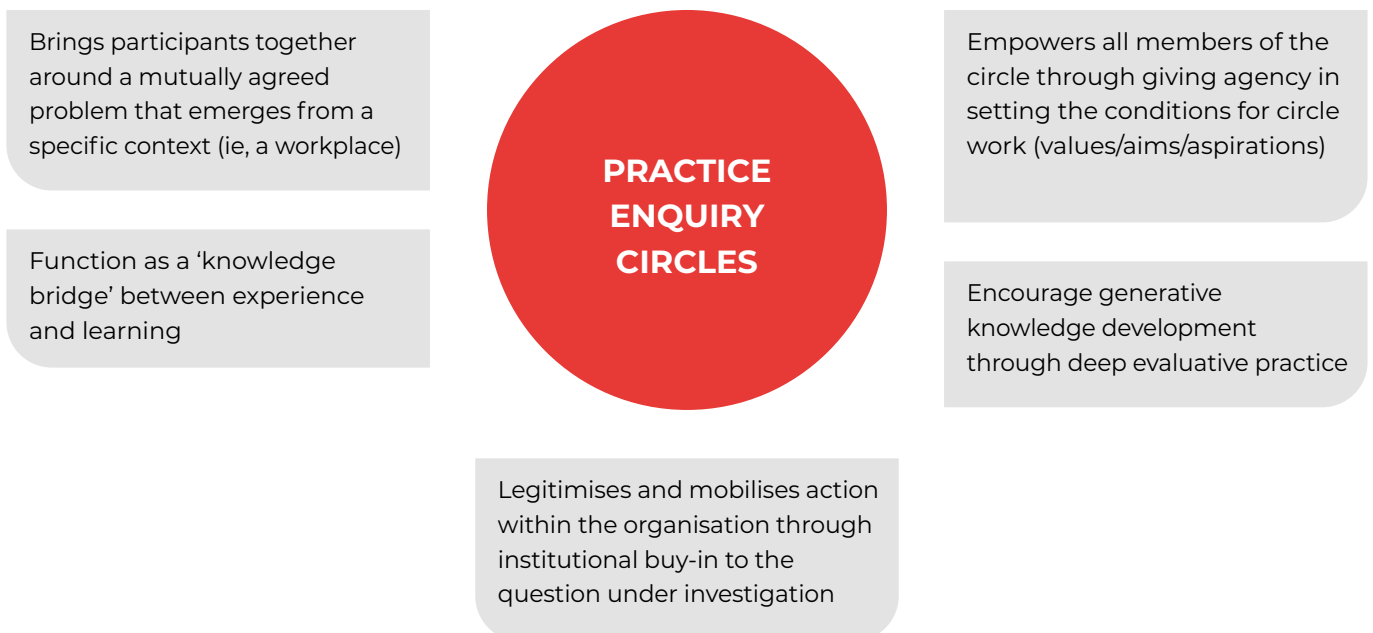>
> **ELM AND NORDQVIST (2019)**

According to Persson (2009: 7), the central purpose of a Research Circle (the model upon which the PEC approach is rooted) is to facilitate "a meeting between research-based and experience-based knowledge". Specifically in education, the approach seeks to acknowledge practice as a form of knowledge, which enhances and contextualises knowledge gathered from research. Persson (2009) argues that in educational research knowledge is often decontextualised, meaning that teachers often struggle to recognise their own practice in research reports, as it does not sufficiently capture the complexity and nuance of the teacher's work in context. By involving teachers in the research process, the teacher is repositioned as a *producer* of knowledge, rather than a receiver; thereby challenging the notion that research is *about* teachers. Rather, *research starts with practice*, giving due weight to the value of lived experience in evidence-based research (ibid).

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1.2 Key Principles of Practice Enquiry Circles

The PEC approach is underscored by a **core negotiated question or problem** within a dedicated, facilitated space which supports knowledge generation. This question is usually one that emerges from the context in which you are working and is likely to relate to a 'sticky problem', as discussed above. Solutions (as actionable knowledge) are identified through dialogue amongst a diverse group of stakeholders that have an interest in the problem under investigation, or who are the intended beneficiary of this work. It is this process of **collaboration** that leads to new knowledge.

Brings participants together around a mutually agreed problem that emerges from a specific context (ie, a workplace)

Function as a 'knowledge bridge' between experience and learning

PRACTICE ENQUIRY CIRCLES

Empowers all members of the circle through giving agency in setting the conditions for circle work (values/aims/aspirations)

Encourage generative knowledge development through deep evaluative practice

Legitimises and mobilises action within the organisation through institutional buy-in to the question under investigation

The diagram above outlines key elements of a PEC that you might observe if you were to participate in one yourself.

1. Participants gather around a mutually agreed problem that emerges from a specific context (e.g. a workplace). All members of the circle are empowered to contribute to and set conditions for the work of the circle. This includes defining the values and aspirations that shape the work of the members, which in turn, shape the problem or question that you intend to explore.

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2. Knowledge is generated through deep evaluative practice through collaborative enquiry. This knowledge is generated through further interrogation of the experiences of a representative group of participants and the sources of information they have available to them within their respective contexts.

3. The circle itself functions as a 'knowledge bridge' between lived experience, and what can be learned from that experience, supported by forms of documentation which might include (but is not limited to) further reading, consultation with experts or data generation. The outcomes or aims that you are working towards as a group are legitimised by the presence of a diverse collection of stakeholders that are key to institutional buy-in.

PECs create a space that is dedicated to the problem, sets a collaborative direction and functions as an arena to have complex conversations that would otherwise be overlooked. This might sometimes mean participants are required to surrender their usual role within the organisation to balance out the power dynamics and establish a generative space based on equality.

Depending on the focus of your PEC, you might be working towards different priorities. Persson (2009) identifies several different types of enquiry that might be suited to research circles. We find the same logic is useful for the practice enquiry approach. These are listed in the table below.

DIFFERENT KINDS OF ENQUIRY

▶ **A PEC with a given theme** with which teachers or other educators can connect. For example, attendance, retention, student voice, decolonisation, mental health etc...

▶ **PECs linked to dedicated subjects** such as particular pedagogical approaches, subject-specific practice, or theory

▶ **PECs which are based on questions (or 'sticky' problems)** which represent recurring or long-standing issues for individuals or organisational practice

▶ **PECs which target certain categories of professional** such as leaders, middle managers or early career teachers

1.3 The role of the Facilitator(s)

The role of the circle facilitator can be quite complex and challenging to navigate, with the dual purpose of both facilitator and circle participant. Navigating both roles, as well as any power dynamics that might be associated with your position in the organisation, can be a fine balance. It is important to think about how you might manage this in context, taking into consideration the roles that other members may also bring with them to the PEC space. For example, all participants in the pilot module were in Advanced Practitioner type roles. As such they were close to the practices of teaching in the organisations but also occupied leadership and management positions. Therefore, their positionality in this middle, 'in-between' space needed careful consideration for both the architecture and facilitation of the circle.

It might be helpful to set some 'pre-conditions' for the work of the PEC (Persson, 2009) so that you can communicate terms of engagement clearly, including the setting of boundaries as well as the importance of the principles which underpin the approach. Some examples of things to think about are provided in the table below (and will be covered in more detail later):

PRE-CONDITIONS FOR PECS:

▶ **Number of participants.** How many members are feasible? Whose voices are required to answer the question?

▶ **Time scales.** How long have you got to explore the question? Is it time-limited? Or is it an ongoing, long-term project?

▶ **Length of meetings.** What is realistic? What is necessary to achieve the depth you need?

▶ **Responsibilities of membership.** What will be required of members who commit, both within and in-between meetings?

▶ **Values, aims and aspirations.** What principles will guide the work and inform your approach?

While it is the responsibility of all participants to respect the underpinning values and principles of the PEC and establish the conditions for collaborative enquiry, it is the role of the facilitator to hold this space and ensure that all members feel valued and respected. In turn, encouraging reciprocity and the equal exchange of ideas so that everyone feels that they are fundamentally part of the process. As the facilitator, you might find yourself asking more questions than you answer, being conscious of dominant and marginalised voices, and negotiating the power you hold in the space you have created.

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It is also through the careful attention of the facilitator that the discovery process is captured, through reflective and incisive questioning and supporting the group to identify areas for further action in this process. For example, you might identify a further stakeholder who should be invited into the circle, or a gap in knowledge which requires further research to enable the circle to move on in its thinking. In this sense, the facilitator acts as the 'knowledge bridge' between what is known and what can be learned through the elicitation of tacit knowledge and experiences of participants and identifying new directions in the process.

FACILITATOR(S)	ALL PARTICIPANTS
▶ To facilitate knowledge-building processes ▶ To support the development of actionable questions and methods in aiding the discovery process ▶ To facilitate the circles in a way which encourages reflection and develops insights into new ways of working ▶ To Support participants to define the conditions for circle work ▶ To act as the 'bridge' between what is known within the group and what can be learned	▶ To respect all participants on an equal standing and draw upon the tacit knowledges and experiences that each brings to the circle ▶ To listen to understand and explain ▶ To contribute to establishing the conditions for circle work ▶ To identify areas of knowledge/experience for investigation ▶ To Identify areas for further action/reflection

To effectively facilitate co-produced and democratic spaces, it is important that the facilitator learns to let go of their own desire to control the outcome of the problem under investigation, whilst still contributing to the solution. This involves embodying a set of qualities which keeps the PEC open, so that the experiences of all participants are brought to the surface and the space can be held in the spirit of authentic collaboration.

Qualities of the Facilitator

▶ Open, self-critical, and willing to modify their own knowledge

▶ Able to establish trust amongst all members of the circle through a commitment to holding equality in the space

▶ Able to establish clear lines of communication

▶ Encourage the process of reflective critical enquiry through critical questioning and engagement with wider knowledge bases

▶ Act as a 'catalyst' to bring forth hidden knowledge

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Through practising the above qualities, the facilitator can hold a space where everyone can contribute on an equal footing through a commitment to a shared vision, underpinned by the values of co-production. It is worth noting that we found that the principles of the Thinking Environment* were useful tools for upholding the values of co- production. The development of the PEC approach has its origin in the APConnect programme, with Thinking Environment principles at the core of its design. Therefore, in the pilot PECs, facilitators often shaped discussion in the circle activities using these principles. While it is not strictly necessary to do so to conduct a PEC, its successful facilitation does lie in the ability to hold equality in this space. Participants in the pilot module reported that the principles of the Thinking Environment lent themselves particularly well to achieving this goal due to their explicit commitment to respecting everyone as equal thinkers.

HINTS & TIPS: THE *THINKING ENVIRONMENT

Rooted in 10 principles developed by Nancy Kline (Appreciation, Attention, Difference, Ease, Encouragement, Equality, Feelings, Incisive Questions, Information, Place), and facilitated through a set of 'applications', the Thinking Environment approach offers facilitators an effective tool-kit to structure and support high quality thinking and collaboration. In turn, this improves the quality and clarity of decision-making.

For further information regarding the use of this approach, please refer to:

Mycroft, L. and Sidebottom, K. (2022). *Creating spaces to think in Further Education and Training (2nd Edition)*. London: Education & Training Foundation. Available online: https://www.et-foundation.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/OTLA-AP-guide-CreatingSpaces-31.03.22-FINAL.pdf

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1.4 Identifying Stakeholders

Identifying appropriate stakeholders is crucial to the success of PECs and, in turn, this is dependent on the 'sticky problem' under consideration. The discussion above highlights the main characteristics of PECs, and it is important to also consider the players who will make up the circle. Below are prompts to aid thinking on who should be involved, and importantly, how their participation should be facilitated.

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QUESTIONS TO THINK WITH:

‣ Who are the people who need to be involved with this to gain traction with the problem under investigation?

‣ What expertise are required to support the enquiry? Who holds this expertise inside/outside of your organisation?

‣ Who might be a beneficiary of the work of the PEC? Have they been invited to participate?

‣ Who might be negatively affected by the work of the PEC?

‣ Who might be critical of the work of the PEC? How would their concerns be addressed?

‣ What inequalities might exist between members in your stakeholder group? How might you facilitate the participation of marginalised voices?

Stakeholder engagement, availability and ownership of problems are also essential aspects to consider, and it may be important to prioritise the involvement of some stakeholders over others. The beneficiaries of the resolution of the problem may not always be those who participate in 'conventional' organisational decision making, despite being end users of an FE organisation's activity. PECs have the potential to rebalance this dynamic and encourage different types of stakeholder engagement that sit outside traditional organisational structures.

> "AN IMPORTANT DIMENSION OF FULL PARTICIPATION IS EACH PARTICIPANT HAS REASON TO BELIEVE THAT THEIR PRESENCE WILL MAKE A DIFFERENCE"
>
> **ÅCKERSTRÖM AND BRUNNBERG (2012)**

Additionally, certain stakeholders may be at risk of marginalisation due to the inherent power dynamics and inequalities that could exist in makeup of your PEC. Careful consideration needs to be given to structuring their participation. In line with the principles of co-production outlined above, the work of the circle must work towards tangible outcomes that are of benefit to the whole participatory community.

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EXAMPLES OF STAKEHOLDERS

▸ End users (for example, students)

▸ Teachers (newly qualified, experienced, trainee)

▸ Middle managers

▸ Advanced Practitioners (or those in similar roles)

▸ Colleagues in cross-organisational roles

▸ Leaders

▸ External affiliates (industry partners, intra-organisational colleagues)

In some cases, further capacity building may be required to support open and equal participation such as information or training sessions in the preliminary stages of development. PECs do require (and warrant) dedicated time and space to function effectively, often in smaller core groups that are able to commit to participation for the duration of their work. Equally the success of the PEC in terms of the utilisation of its outcomes depend on the buy-in of key gatekeepers in your organisation that are invested in the problem and its solutions.

HINTS & TIPS: COMMITMENT AND BUY-IN

It is important to note that the role and purpose of PECs are communicated clearly to stakeholders. Exactly how this is communicated may need to be treated carefully if strategic stakeholder engagement is to be achieved. From our experience, buy-in – particularly from management – was a concern for those trying to establish PECs in their institutions. Developing a clarity of purpose and appealing to cross-organisational agendas might be important in this respect. This might involve establishing early agreement on clarity of purpose, rationale and expectations. For example, the timescales involved, the level of commitment and the sticky problem that you hope to resolve.

Further Reading

Persson, S. (2009). Research circles – a guide. City of Malmö: Sweden

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Chapter 2: Establishing Values, Aims and Aspirations

2.1 Values

To begin collaborative work, trust must first be established (Clarke et al, 2019). Being transparent about the context for action initiates trust building processes and builds the participatory nature of what you're trying to do. Values conversations can be a real leveller, because they give everyone an important place from which to talk about who they are and what is important to them, and a space for them to listen to what is important for other people as well. Therefore, having open and transparent conversations about values establishes important foundations for the work you will do together moving forward and frame the goals of the work of the PEC. The democratic essence of the model requires these values to underpin the operation of PECs, and as such, time needs to be taken to agree on these. We found that it also helpful for the facilitator to make suggestions to stimulate this debate. The image below provides some examples of values that participants on the pilot module told us were important to them. Space to allow individuals to discuss why these are important can prove powerful in the collective negotiation of the conditions and direction for the work of the PEC.

IMPROVEMENT COMMUNITY OPEN MINDEDNESS RESPECT INTEGRITY SYSTEMS THINKING SUPPORT EQUITY COURAGE ETHICS CURIOSITY CARE INCLUSION INNOVATION COLLABORATION JOY HONESTY ENJOYMENT EQUALITY FAIRNESS TRUST POWER EMPOWERMENT UNDERSTANDING OWNERSHIP DEMOCRATIC SUSTAINABILITY QUALITY PROFESSIONALISM

2.2 Aims and Aspirations

We hope by now it is clear that the aims and aspirations of a Practice Enquiry Circle need to be arrived at collectively if the activity is to be faithful to the model. Our evaluation of the pilot PECs showed that it may be helpful if the facilitator rehearses the central principles of PECs with members before agreeing the aims and aspirations. In some cases, it may also be necessary for the facilitator to seek permission to conduct and engage others in the PEC activity. This means that a degree of provisional framing of the purpose of the PEC might be necessary. The questions below are examples that may help with this preparatory work and the discussion in the circle itself.

QUESTIONS TO THINK WITH:

‣ What do you already know about the sticky problem under investigation?

‣ What preferred future(s) are you working towards?

‣ What values shape this aspiration?

‣ For whose benefit will the work of the circle work towards (both within and outside the circle)?

It is likely that the aims and aspirations will evolve, along with the question(s) in successful circles. Such iterations are central to the value and benefits of PECs. As relationships deepen and shared understanding grows the knowledge bridges that result enhance appreciation of the problem at the centre of the circle. This assimilation may be added to by circle members seeking fresh evidence and new perspectives between circle events.

2.3 Defining the question

Defining the sticky problem is a vital part of shaping the aims and aspirations of the circle and needs to be agreed on at an early stage. The next step is to develop a central (or researchable) question that will guide the circle towards the preferred future articulated in this aspiration. While the aims and aspirations set the direction for the work of the PEC, the question helps the PEC build evidence towards this preferred future.

The example below is taken from the work of the co-evaluation of the APConnect programme (touchconsulting Ltd, 2021) and illustrates the relationship between aims, aspirations and the question that underpins the work of the PEC.

AIM:
For the programme to create conditions for APs to support all

ASPIRATION:
For the Community of Practice to support APs to become affirmative change agents in their contexts

QUESTION:
How does the Community of Practice support APs to navigate the challenges they encounter?

Questions such as the one above can be conceptualised by considering **how the circle will know it has made progress towards its aims and aspirations**. Below are a few questions to help guide thinking in this area.

QUESTIONS TO THINK WITH:

- What information do you need to further understand the sticky problem?
- How will you know you are successfully (or not) working towards the preferred future you have identified?
- What would this success look like?
- What would barriers look like?
- What question might help you to gather evidence towards this outcome?

The question that you arrive at as a group becomes the central spine of the PEC's enquiry and structures the thinking of the PEC as its work progresses. The problem and the related questions can be complex; however, a sense of realism also needs to be in play if the question is to be addressed and researched within the resources available.

Below are examples of questions that emerged at various stages in the evolution of the pilot PECs. The questions vary significantly in scope and focus (though their 'sticky' nature is shared) and are dependent on the skills and attributes of those making up the circle. It may be necessary for the facilitator to take the lead in finessing the question(s) and aims/aspirations that relate to them. This, and engaging in preparatory work for the circles, may seem to contradict several of the key principles of PECs outlined above. However, in practice such engagement of the facilitator can bring momentum and direction to the discussion. Further information on questioning is provided in section 3 below.

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PRE-CONDITIONS FOR PECS:

How do we improve teacher participation in CPD?

How do we create engaged staff and enhanced student learner voice?

How do we help staff to be more involved in organisational change?

How do we engage practitioners in Ideas Rooms for CPD?

How do we understand 'quality' in teaching and learning?

How are retrieval and recall practices best used in classrooms to support learning?

How do Advanced Practitioners support teacher development?

How does engagement with professional learning impact upon practice?

How can we collaboratively explore and embed ESD into the curriculum?

2.4 Ethics in Co-Production

"OUR POSITION AS KNOWLEDGE PRODUCERS IS NEVER INNOCENT. POWER IS OMNIPRESENT"

OLESEN AND PEDERSEN (2013)

The discussion above is intended to illuminate how PECs have the potential to enhance democratic, open, and collaborative decision making. It is important that these dimensions are all underpinned by a high degree of ownership of the ethical considerations that are in play in the operation of the PECs.

The ethical positioning of PECs share much in common with other research approaches, notably the need to avoid doing harm to the participants and beneficiaries. The distinctive features of PECs, however, raise unique ethical challenges. These largely relate to the importance of setting aside the power relations that may characterise an organisational hierarchy, ensuring that end user participants have an equal voice and achieving consensus on the values that frame the circle. Below are some prompts that may help thinking around the ethical operation of a PEC.

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QUESTIONS TO THINK WITH:

▶ How might differences of agenda in the make-up of your PEC (in terms of role/priorities/interests) influence the dynamics of power in your circle?

▶ To what extent does your circle reflect existing hierarchies in your organisation? How might that influence engagement?

▶ To what extent do all members of the circle have equitable access to the circle (specifically in terms of voice and participation)?

▶ How possible is it for all members of the PEC to surrender or alter their identities to participate in collaborative work?

▶ How do you ensure that no participants come to harm through their participation in circle work?

▶ How will you record the conversations you have in the PEC? What permissions might you need for this? How will you respect confidentiality?

Further Reading

For an example of how the approach has been used to formulate researchable questions, the report for our co-evaluation work referenced above can be found here:

touchconsulting. 2021. *Re-thinking the role of the Advanced Practitioner: AP Connect Year 3 Evaluation Strand Final Report (2020-2021)*. Burton-on-Trent: touchconsulting Ltd, on behalf of the Education and Training Foundation. Available online:
https://touchconsulting.net/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/AP-Connect-Y3-Evaluation.pdf

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Chapter 3: The Process of Critical Enquiry

To establish conditions that are ripe for collaborative enquiry, and to observe the ethical considerations that are unique to the purpose and organisation of your PEC, it is important that in the facilitation of this space, it adopts a distinct character that suspends the usual relational dynamics that might exist outside of it. As we have already established, making the boundaries and principles of the space clear acquires importance if the right balance of power is to be achieved.

Clearly articulating the purpose of the PEC and the co-produced philosophies that underpin it will support the facilitator to communicate the importance of participants suspending their usual relationships with one another to establish open dialogue. This is particularly important if members of the circle have less power (e.g., students) or more power (e.g., managers or directors in the organisation). Therefore, once the PEC has established the question that will guide its work together, addressing issues around voice and participation at the earliest stages will be central to collaborative critical enquiry.

3.1 Collaborative Critical Enquiry

Hulme et al. (2009) describe the process of collaborative critical enquiry as a move away from silo working, where our understanding of the 'sticky' problem may be very individualised, to a place where shared understanding can be established. In this process, we begin to break down cultures which might prefer to keep well established hierarchies in place and commonly held understandings unchecked. Persson (2009) discusses the importance of establishing a collective knowledge base to ensure a critical approach to the analysis of individual experience. Collaborative enquiry is not just to confirm what an individual already 'knows', but to build knowledge from a 'bank' of experiences (ibid). Hulme et al. (2009) describe contexts for collaborative critical enquiry as 'third' spaces which have three core characteristics. They are recognised, navigational and conversational. Importantly, it is in creating this third, 'in-between', space that relationships between circle participants can be reorganised to arrive at a new place of understanding.

It is the question that you have collectively identified that is the vehicle you will use to arrive at this new understanding. This calls for the facilitator to consider the methods that they will use to structure the circle in such a way that encourages open dialogue and brings the separate knowledge of a diverse group of people to the surface, while avoiding privileging the knowledge of some members over others. This involves guiding the thinking of the PEC with a respectful curiosity, identifying gaps in the PEC's collective knowledge, and developing questions that support the group to propel its thinking forward.

3.2 Research, Documentation, and Curation

The process of critical enquiry can also be supported by work that is done in between circle sessions, that can be undertaken by the facilitator(s) or distributed amongst all members of the PEC. If all members agree, it is useful to record the sessions for review to identify further actions or questions for the next PEC meeting. This does not necessarily mean conducting empirical research (as per the classic 'Research Circle' approach discussed earlier), though in some cases it might be appropriate. Here we conceptualise 'enquiry' as critical engagement with tacit knowledge and experience; using resources that are already available to arrive at fresh or new understandings. Documenting how you do this will allow you to build an evidence-base that supports the PEC in answering its identified question.

> "THE PRODUCTION OF KNOWLEDGE SEIZES INSTEAD UPON WHAT WE KNOW, THAT WHICH IS KNOWN AND COMES UP AGAINST WHAT WE DO NOT KNOW, WHAT IS UNKNOWN TO US"
>
> **PERSSON (2009)**

It is inevitable that there will be points at which the PEC will reach limitations in its knowledge. It is at this point that the PEC may consider reviewing how it might use the resources at its disposal to seek, curate or research relevant information to support its ongoing enquiry. The places you might go for this information, or the processes of curation you might engage in are wide-ranging. It will depend in large part on the question you are exploring as well as the makeup of your PEC. For example, in studies which adopted a research circle approach, practitioners produced reflective blogs in response to a series of core readings that were discussed as part of bridging the gap between research and practice in the early years (Elm and Nordqvist. 2019), while in a piece of research conducted by Åkerström and Brunnberg (2013), students were invited to record their experiences of

participation in school using photographs. In both studies, these forms of documentation were used as a focal point of discussion within circle meetings. Not only did this support the identification of key areas for discussion, analysis and reflection, but also maximised the participation of all members through their multimodal approaches to documentation.

HINTS & TIPS: DOCUMENTATION

The types of information that may be sought, and the way this is used within PECs will be unique to the group and their guiding question, and this can take any number of forms. Below are some examples from across the literature and our own experience can include (but is not limited to):

▶ Consulting research literature (either individually or selecting articles/books/chapters to be read by the PEC)

▶ Self-assessment activities.

▶ Curating 'artefacts' to prompt discussion (e.g. photographs, poetry, stories etc)

▶ Reflective diaries

▶ Analysis of pedagogical activity

▶ Consulting other members of staff or students who hold relevant expertise

▶ Inviting someone who holds 'expert' knowledge that may be absent from the PEC to join a meeting

▶ Sourcing institutionally held data for further analysis

3.3 Approaches to Questioning

The kinds of questions that we ask have the power to influence change, and have the capability to lead to transformation for those who both ask and answer them. Reflecting on the process of interviewing, Husband (2020: 8) reminds us that the questions we ask, "open up the potential for critical reflection on concepts, ideas and opinions that may be formed… or newly articulated as they [experiences] are recalled, thus bringing them to the fore of consciousness". The facilitator has significant power to shape the direction of PEC, as it is the response to critically reflective questions that makes the PEC a site for knowledge creation.

> "THE INTERVIEW [OR QUESTION] GIVES ACCESS TO THE MANIFOLD OF LOCAL NARRATIVES EMBODIED IN STORYTELLING AND OPENS UP A NEGOTIATION OF THE LIVED WORLD"
>
> **KVALE (2007)**

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We have found Kvale's (2007) nine elements of a qualitative interview useful in supporting the PEC facilitator to understand how they might use questions to structure the thinking of the group. These elements encourage critical reflective enquiry, whilst allowing facilitators to be cognisant of their own influence upon the thinking of the group. To achieve this, in the development of critical questions, the PEC facilitator should consider these characteristics:

1. **Life-world:** Give due consideration to the everyday experience of the PEC membership to create new knowledge.

2. **Meaning:** Check for meaning regarding their own interpretation of what has been said, checking for confirmation or disconfirmation of their own understanding by reflecting back what they are hearing.

3. **Description:** Seek to elicit rich descriptions from participants regarding their experience and knowledge.

4. **Specificity:** Explore nuance and complexity where it is relevant to the question that is guiding the PEC.

5. **Qualified Naiveté:** Bracket their own assumptions to create an openness and curiosity towards unexpected or new phenomena and being aware when their own interpretations may be impeding those of others.

6. **Focus:** Have a very clear understanding of the purpose and direction of the conversation (rooted in the question that has been identified by the PEC). This might involve structuring each session around 2-3 questions that are related to the core question under exploration and build on what has been learned in previous sessions.

7. **Ambiguity:** Explore ambiguous understandings where there may be complexity or confusion amongst PEC members. We have found the use of metaphor particularly helpful in making sense of ambiguity as it encourages people to describe their thinking in different or creative ways that might be recognisable to others.

8. **Change:** Be flexible in their approach, accounting for changes in direction for the enquiry where appropriate. A carefully framed question can set new directions.

9. **Interpersonal situatedness:** Be conscious of the relational dynamics between circle members and manage this where the need arises.

HINTS & TIPS: FACILITATING CRITICAL ENQUIRY

From experience, we would advise developing 2-3 questions that the PEC will work with in advance of each meeting. These questions will usually arise from the discussions that have been had in the previous meeting. In some cases, they may require further research or documentation, in others the clues may have already emerged from the circle discussions. Below are some questions that might help you reflect on the process (Löfqvist et al., 2019), and support in future planning.

▸ What was the most productive activity/conversation during your PEC?

▸ What facilitated or hindered the PEC process?

▸ How were the levels of engagement and the mix of competences in the group?

▸ How was the interaction within the group and how did they perceive you as the PEC facilitator?

▸ What does this tell you about what needs to be picked up on or explored in the next circle?

▸ What information might the PEC need to further its knowledge and understanding of the problem/question under investigation?

3.4 Actionable Outcomes

We have already established that co-produced knowledge is generative. This means that knowledge builds within and in between PECs. A successful circle will have navigated participants towards their preferred future as identified in the aims and aspirations, and in so doing establish tangible and actionable outcomes which are of benefit both to the circle and the beneficiaries of its work.

While there is no prescribed or set number, frequency, or length of meetings (this will depend on the nature of the sticky problem and other contextual factors such as organisational commitment, time and identified membership), it is useful to identify a point at which the findings of the collaborative enquiry will be reviewed. This usually takes place in the final PEC meeting, though for longer-term projects it may take place at intervals. This meeting takes on a different character, and this is where all the artefacts, recordings or other forms of documentation that have been produced for the PEC become useful as this is the evidence base which has supported your enquiry.

Below are some questions that might help guide the PEC in identifying actionable outcomes from their collaborative enquiry.

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QUESTIONS TO THINK WITH:

▶ What do you understand about the problem or question now, that you did not understand at the start of the process?

▶ What has been the most important concept or idea that has emerged from your collective discussions?

▶ How do these ideas relate to the values, aims and aspirations that you established at the start of the process?

▶ What needs to change or be actioned in order to start working towards the preferred future that you identified?

▶ Who needs to know about the findings of your work, and what can they do to help inform solutions?

▶ How might the dissemination of your findings look, and how will this reflect the audience you are trying to influence?

It is also important to acknowledge that members of the PEC might have very different ideas regarding how actionable knowledge arising from your enquiry should be disseminated. This opens opportunities to be creative in conceptualising how the work of the PEC is communicated to the wider community. This might also lead to a multi-pronged approach to communication and dissemination, to ensure that the outputs are meaningful for all members.

HINTS & TIPS: DISSEMINATION EXAMPLES

▶ Blogs (internal or external)

▶ Newspaper or professional magazine articles

▶ Presentations

▶ Social media (e.g., twitter chats)

▶ Podcasts

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Further Reading

For more depth about collaborative enquiry and critical questioning:

Hulme, R., Cracknell, D. and Owens, A. 2009. Learning in third spaces: developing trans-professional understanding through practitioner enquiry. *Educational Action Research*. 17:4. pp. 537-550, DOI: 10.1080/09650790903309391

Kvale, S. 2007. *Doing Interviews*. London: Sage

For examples of documentation:

Åkerström, J. and Brunnberg, E. (2013) 'Young people as partners in research: experiences from an interactive research circle with adolescent girls'. *Qualitative Research*. 13:5. pp. 528–545. DOI: 10.1177/1468794112451035

Elm, A. and Nordqvist, I. (2019). The research circle - a tool for preschool teachers' professional learning and preschool development. *European Journal of Teacher Education*. 42: 5, pp. 621-633, DOI: 10.1080/02619768.2019.1652899

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FAQs

Who should be involved with the PEC?

The membership of the PEC is largely determined by the sticky problem under investigation. Stakeholders in this problem (or the solutions to the problem) should be identified to ensure the outcomes of your circle are actionable and useful. However, it is also important to think of the gatekeepers to the implementation of solutions. Who needs to be involved to ensure that your work is fruitful, productive and the findings are actioned?

Does the membership of the PEC need to remain the same throughout the process?

For a sticky problem with deep and complex roots, we would recommend that all members should, as far as possible, attend all meetings and that this membership should remain constant. However, there may be some questions which are helpfully explored by a broad scope of people and as such you could invite members as the need arises. A small, operational core may still be helpful though.

How many participants should a PEC have?

The larger your PEC is, the harder it will be to achieve depth. The key to a successful PEC is to make sure that your membership is fully representative. It is the diversity of perspectives that makes for fruitful knowledge, rather than the number of participants. This might mean that over time, the PEC may identify a missing voice, and seek to add to the membership. However, we have found that a group of more than 10 may prove quite tricky to manage as a facilitator (though you could always find a co-facilitator to help!).

How long should PEC meetings be?

This will largely be determined by the amount of time and resource available in your organisation, and the complexity of the sticky problem. You will find that an hour goes very fast, so if you have the luxury of more time you may find you are able to achieve greater depth.

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How frequent should PEC meetings be?

As above, this will depend on your context. If you do not have time for long meetings, more frequent shorter meetings might support knowledge generation. If you have longer meetings, you might decide to have a deep dive at 'pinch points' depending on the problem and whether there are specific relevant timescales that the PEC is working towards. According to Persson (2009) classic 'research circle' approach would have a duration of up to 1.5 years with a 2-hour meeting every third week. However, it is up to you to decide how long you have to dedicate to the problem, the time scales involved and what frequency of meetings would be realistic.

Can there be more than one facilitator?

Yes! It is very common for PECs (or their Research Circle cousins) to have more than one facilitator - often with slightly different roles. You will understand by now that there are many functions and complex considerations associated with the role, so sharing this load will help.

Where should PEC meetings take place?

Several of the pilot PECs took place virtually. While we have found virtual PECs to be successful, it does potentially bring about additional challenges to the facilitation of the circles and may require consideration. As long as the location (virtual or physical) is accessible, this is the key to successful collaboration.

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