



AVETRA Conference April 2008

Putting research to work

Cheryl Wilkinson
Adult Community & Further Education
www.acfe.vic.gov.au



Theme of the AVETRA conference is to explore ways VET research informs policy and practice for development (social, economic, workforce) in a range of contexts – local, national and international.

This presentation is about the interplay between research, policy and practice or ‘Putting research to work’

The Circles experience tells us something about what quality research is –

- That it does need be relevant to and inform public policy in current and emerging environments; and
- That it does need lend itself to affecting practice as well as policy

It demonstrates that you can build a research culture:

- Both the capacity of practitioners and VET organisations to use research; and
- to undertake local research professionally



Aims of the session

To describe the Victorian experience of Research Circles for ACE practitioners

In the light of the Circles experience, to consider what practitioner action research can achieve *beyond* simply awareness of current research

To argue that the greatest benefits of practitioner research come when there is engagement with research and policy frameworks

- I do this as it might relate to the broader VET sector and national research such as the NCVET study *Supporting vocational education and training providers in building capability for the future*
- Key messages of that research resonate with ACE and the key messages from the evaluation of the circles initiative are highly congruent
 - Focus on capability of both individual and organisation
 - Strategic focus
 - Freedom from restriction – local autonomy, flexibility, diversity of providers and response
- Circles provide a case study or a model
- Rich and complex experience well beyond what is usually understood by ‘professional development’



Overview

- What are Circles of Professional Research Practice?
- Aims
- Rationale
- Policy and research frames
- How did the Circles work?
- Who was involved?
- Outcomes
- Success factors
- Key dynamics
- Circles as knowledge formation, capacity building, change catalysts
- Key messages
- Applications beyond ACE



Aims of Circles

To bring together interested ACE practitioners and organisations to learn about ACFE research and apply it to their own situation

To provide an action research model that can be employed within the ACE sector at the local level

To contribute to the ACE sector's collective capability to better meet the policy goals within the Ministerial Statement

— ACFE Research Strategy: *Putting Research to Work*

Particular challenges for ACE (quoting John McIntyre's evaluation here)

1. The ACE workforce is not fully professionalised, though the gradual integration of ACE into the national training system has led to greater professionalisation of some areas of practice
2. ACE is not characterised by highly institutionalised knowledge-management systems, professional identities and role relationships. The identity of ACE teachers and tutors is not often defined by formal qualifications or credentialed expert knowledge found in formal education
3. ACE organisations, as community agencies, perform a variety of social functions besides knowledge transmission, and they do so through a culture of voluntary participation. Their knowledge systems are 'socially distributed', less formalised and more open in their boundaries with other social systems (Solomon and McIntyre 2000). This gives the sector its flexibility and community responsiveness, but its also leads to variability in skills and expertise



Circles of Professional Research Practice

Circle	Collaborative in nature—bringing together researchers and practitioners in a dialogue
Professional	Research into practice - is a mark of professionalism - generates professional expertise
Research Practice	Research practice can be developed - using findings of research - through action learning - through collaboration with peers

Define 'practice' in a broad way—beyond pedagogy, as including organisational culture and strategy, networking and professional relationship, and policy process



Rationale for Circles initiative

Capitalising on the research investment: generating practical results from the strategic research that could impact on learner outcomes

Promoting engagement with research and policy frameworks (esp ACE Ministerial Statement goals)

Supporting professional development and educational innovation through participatory action research

Congruent with contemporary thinking about the formation of professional expertise through reflective practice in the workplace

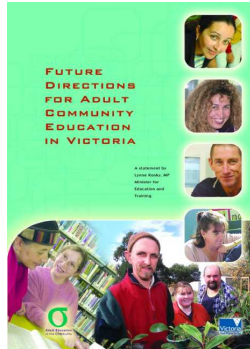
To implement its vision of strategic research ‘put to work’, the ACFE Research Strategy outlined a concept of ‘Circles of Professional Research Practice’.

It spoke of the Circles as ‘a mechanism to support implementation of the findings of high level research at a regional and local level ‘ and stated that—

This initiative is designed to support participating ACE organisations to learn from research, apply its findings to their own local context and design strategies to address the challenges it raises for them in meeting the goals of the Ministerial Statement.



Policy and Research frames



ACE Ministerial Statement Strategies

A broader role for ACE through expanded community partnerships

Increasing the participation of specific groups

Developing sustainable ACE organisations

Investment in ACE





Policy and Research frames

Strategic Research

Men's learning through ACE and community involvement in small rural towns (University of Ballarat)

ACE Longitudinal Study (University of Melbourne)

Pedagogy for life and employability (Victoria University)



How Circles worked

ACFE Board supported:

- establishment of three Circles of Professional Research Practice
- two rounds over a year each with different participants



How Circles worked

- managed by ACE organisations
- bringing together university researchers and ACE practitioners
- to apply understandings from the research to the local context.

Funding:

1. Management of statewide Circles

- recruit participants from sponsoring ACE organisations,
- arrange the involvement of the researchers,
- administer the funding and
- report to ACFE on their progress.

2. Researchers

3. Contribution to individual costs of participation

Ref Group



How Circles worked

- Employing participatory action research
- Circle members investigated problems in three areas of the original research

It was intended that the Circles would entail ‘two main kinds of activity’—

1. learning about research from the researchers and other members and
2. then applying the learning in practical ways that produce outcomes for learners.

‘Applying learning’ was defined as

- designing strategies in the light of identified local needs;
- developing partnerships with other community agencies to assist in their achievement; and
- following their implementation, reflecting on the outcomes of the strategies and their implications.



The three Circles were

Men's Learning Circle managed by the Continuing Education and Arts Centre of Alexandra (CEACA) with University of Ballarat researchers.

ACE Pedagogy Circle managed by the Sandy Beach Community Centre with the Victoria University researchers.

ACE Connects Circle managed by Preston Reservoir Adult Community Education with the University of Melbourne researchers.



Who was involved?

Reached over 100 participants in over 75 organisations, or about one fifth of registered ACE organisations

Represented managers, coordinators and teaching and tutoring staff in the organisations

Spread across all regions, with half in metropolitan and half in non-metropolitan areas

- In four of the nine regions, the proportion of providers participating was over 25%

There were some differences among the Circles in their participants

Differences due to nature of research eg ACE pedagogy attracted teachers



Outcomes

Awareness of the Board's research, e.g. the need to develop strategies to promote the participation of specific groups

Applying research e.g. improving teaching and learning practices and generating strategies to increase participation

“Participation in the Research Circles project has definitely meant that I have developed a deeper understanding and appreciation of the initial research conducted by Melbourne Uni and I am now awaiting the results of the third and final stage of the longitudinal study with a sense that I have personally invested in it.”

Instead of ACE trying to make the target group of men fit our requirements in ACE, we would find the needs of the group and look at ways to fit ACE into their current learning patterns. In a sense, to use Barry Golding's words, “Sometimes it is important to meet men where they already are rather than trying to smoke them out.”



Outcomes

Strengthening organisational capacity e.g. by forming partnerships and adopting new ways of delivering services

Promoting professional development through collaborative inquiry, by working with others, acting on needed changes, learning from other organisations

Fostering a participatory research culture in ACE, by promoting reflection on professional practice and setting up action learning as part of work

“The experience of conducting my own research in a methodical manner and with the support of others has been very valuable and empowering. The circles model not only provided the peer and expert support for the research process but also facilitated a networking and information sharing opportunity with people and organisations outside of our own local sphere. The encouragement and enthusiasm from researchers and peers was particularly sustaining and beneficial”.

“The value of talking face-to-face with other practitioners facilitated by a ‘significant other’ is ‘huge’ in this model – very valuable.”



Top 20 outcomes



The participants were asked to identify those statements that best represented their perceived outcomes and to rate them.

This gives us a good idea of the outcomes that were most salient and most significant for participants.

The **significance score** is the average of the rating of significance for the statement multiplied by its frequency of selection.



Success factors

Funding - signaling the project's high priority

Autonomy - management by ACE organisations

Leadership - by the ACE managers and researchers

Structure - clear expectations and activities

ACFE's policy of autonomy for the development of the Circles by experienced managers in leading ACE organisations, supported by funding that motivated organisations and individuals to give the project priority

The leadership role of the ACE managers and the clear demarcation of the roles that enabled a high degree of support to the participants by both ACE managers and the expert researchers.

Structured activities that ensured clear expectations of participants and their focused involvement, effective interactions among participants and the best use of time of researchers.



Success factors

Research frameworks - robust and highly applicable

Support - from the sponsoring ACE organisations

Flexibility - in applying action research

Qualities of the Circle members and their projects

The robust research frameworks that practitioners readily applied to their situations, supported by the expert researchers' wisdom and experience in ACE policy, research and practice

The support of the ACE organisations that sponsored participants, a core of whom were leaders in organisational innovation, while other were seeking to move in new strategic directions or achieve organisational renewal.

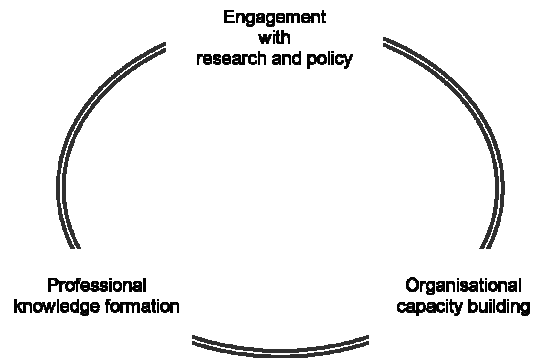
A flexible and informal approach to the adoption of action research methodology, giving scope for experimentation and creativity, and an emphasis on practical relevance rather than academic sophistication.

The character of the Circle members themselves, and their willingness to engage in the Circle process, to take opportunity to working collectively on researching their practice.



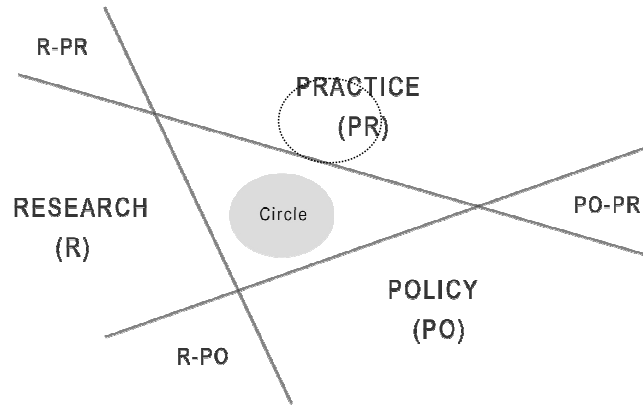
Key Dynamics

The *engagement* of practitioners with research and policy is a condition for the *formation* of new professional knowledge and expertise and the *building* of organisational capacity ...





The Circle as a negotiable space



How does the Research Circle model ‘create a nexus between policy, practice and research’ and how does it work as a mechanism to support change and improvement in practice in the context of public policy’?

The Circle can be visualised as a unique space at the intersection of three domains of research, policy and practice.

The idea of a space at the intersection - a space which has to be given meaning by the participants - which participants have to negotiate by drawing on the different domains of knowledge



Circles as change catalyst

Because the Circle is beyond 'everyday' professional life, it can lead to questioning taken-for-granted assumptions

Participants can access 'a virtual web of knowledge relationships' from the three domains of research, policy and practice

In a space where questioning and experimentation is OK



Circles as change catalyst

The facilitators' integrated knowledge of these domains enables them to mediate their application to practice

Professional perspectives are modified through the 'take-up' of new ideas through participatory action research

Change is effected through interaction and collaboration with peers and exposure to their perspectives

Unique access to high level researchers

Quote Rowena Naufal Circle manager

.... “the active engagement with research findings and skills - and the research process in the community has promoted real change for most participants and their organizations. They have introduced new focus to strategic planning, sustainability planning, curriculum and program delivery and staffing management.

The involvement with the research process is changing the culture of organizations. It's changing their view of themselves and their communities and the ways they choose to relate with them.”

This project has initiated an assessment of ACE practice and community needs.

“The project didn't answer our question because the question has changed.”



Circles as knowledge formation

Experienced participants found the Circle to be a powerful validation of their existing professional knowledge

There is a generational challenge - younger practitioners seeking more professional approaches, particularly in RTOs

Improved practices resulted from increased professional networking and interaction in the Circles and beyond them



The practical strategies flowed from this process and the results were amazing in range of thought, originality and response they generated. That was the end of the Circle process, but in reality it has just been a beginning.

They have established partnerships that are ongoing and strengthening.

Created resources that will assist new teachers with effective teaching strategies

develop & implement improved work pathways for students;

More effective marketing strategies;

Transformed staff meetings and staff interactions.



Circles as knowledge formation

Organisational change goes hand in hand with the transformation of individual perspectives

The participatory action research model is consistent with new trends in work-based professional learning



Circles as capacity building

The capacity of ACE organisations is *underwritten* by a professional knowledge and expertise

The Circles developed ‘enabling expertise’—the kind needed for ACE organisations to expand their role through community partnerships

Professional knowledge is the key to capacity building

Case study from the Men's Learning Circle

‘Secret Men’s Business’ was a cooking course that had been successful in reaching and retaining men in learning because of its ‘holistic approach’. The tutor is a commercial chef who runs the course as a hands-on experience in the Centre’s new kitchen—as one observer saw it, a master directing his virtual apprentices. The key ingredient in the course’s success is companionship and interaction around the preparation and cooking tasks—it avoids didactic teaching about following a recipe.

The value of the Circle for Yvonne was gaining a wider understanding of ‘what works’ and a validation of the holistic approach to men’s learning. Success has flowed on to other courses with men from the course learning computing skills, web design and digital storytelling. ‘Secret Men’s Business’ has been mapped to Certificate 2 in Hospitality, opening the way to a strong partnership with Wodonga TAFE, who provide hours to enable some courses to run on smaller class sizes at a lower cost, strengthening TAFE’s outreach capacity and offering opportunities in smaller communities in the alpine region.



Circles as capacity building

Many sponsoring organisations were looking for organisational renewal or new strategic direction

Many organisations challenged their accepted culture and practice (regarding tutors, learners, community and specific groups)

Case study from the ACE Pedagogy Circle

The centre is moving into a new phase, expanding its program and making a change to more structured and professional ways of working. Their project ‘Is there a better way?’ focused on the teacher-student relationship of the ACE pedagogy framework, where they explored how well they were meeting the learning needs of the older students in their aged care services classes.

Advice from the Circle manager helped them frame their survey realistically. Their work together prompted a lot of discussion with colleagues and tutors, who were paid by the Centre to participate, distributing evaluation forms to students and coming to meetings to discuss the project.

As a result of feedback about teaching-learning practices, the two tutors realised the untapped potential of their students’ experience. Following student suggestions, they introduced study groups to make greater use of their life skills and added computer training to the course. Changes were made to the assessment process. A form of on-line support for tutors was set up using EdNA.



Key messages

The Circles provided a unique space for ACE practitioners to engage with research and policy frameworks

They activated a key dynamic of professional knowledge formation and organisational capacity-building envisaged in the ACE Ministerial Statement's goals



They were successful because of a particular set of conditions

The Circle model is highly congruent with current trends in work-based professional learning

The ACE Circle model has wider applications to professional learning linked to research-based public policy



Applications beyond ACE

The Circle concept has the potential to contribute to professionalisation of the workforce (qualifications) ...
... is highly congruent with current thinking about the formation of professional expertise in the workplace ...
... shows the value of structuring work-based professional learning in terms of research and policy frameworks



Applications beyond ACE

The Circles showed how there can be a 'virtuous circle' of research and policy engagement, professional knowledge formation and organisational capacity building

The model is highly applicable to other areas of professional practice



Much more than professional development

How can you put **your** research to work? –

- On VET practice in context of research-based public policy
- To further professional learning
- Part of government?
- Researchers/ research bodies?

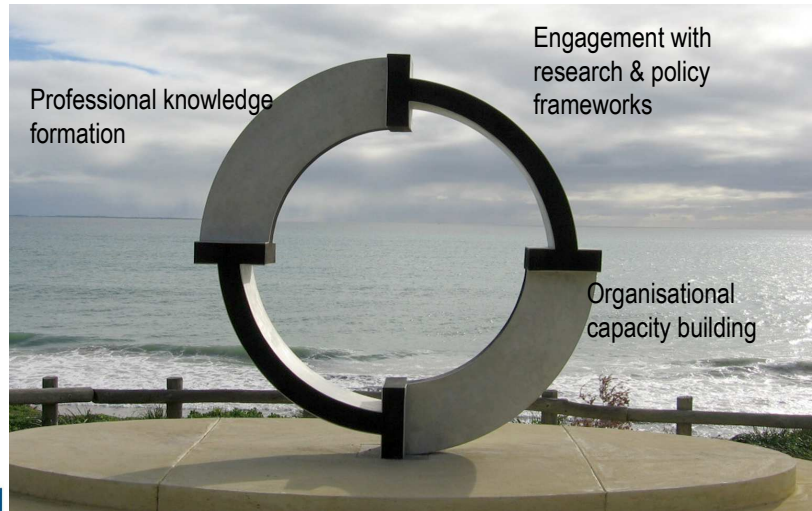
Is it cost effective?

Shows conditions that are favourable in terms of the investment of time and energy by participants beyond the notional compensation received, and the range of outcomes achieved for the modest resources applied. There was a multiplier effect, in that some ACE organisations added funds to support more staff to engage in collaborative projects, and many hours of professional development were generated beyond the Circles themselves.

The cost-effectiveness of the Circles is not only about the resources directly supporting Circle participation. ACFE significantly capitalised on its investment in the original high-level research



Virtuous Circle



Department of Planning
and Community Development



Adult, Community and
Further Education

What is ACE doing now?

Springboard grants – direct impact on learner outcomes for most difficult to reach and cater for. Plan (fund), implement, and document and share

Circle model used eg

- Capability Building Lit Num
- Course design capability project

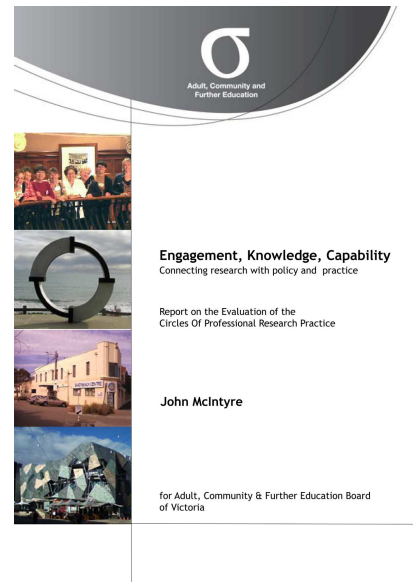


Evaluation report

Engagement, Knowledge & Capability: Connecting Research to Policy and Practice

Report of the Evaluation of the Research Circles

www.acfe.vic.gov.au



Objectives of Circle evaluation

- captures and conceptualises the Circle experience in a way that can be shared in research, policy and practice circles
- examines to what extent the initiative has met its objectives and identify outcomes and benefits
- explores how the Research Circle operates as a model of change-management and innovation in the context of public policy