

MAP4U Murdoch University

The BIG PICTURE ACADEMIES Project

RESEARCH BRIEF No. 4 The Research Circle

Introduction

The research circle is our third methodological approach – along with ethnographic case studies and surveys - to our research in the Big Picture Academies Project.

The voices and knowledge of teachers are integral to school based research processes. Teachers are a vital source of data about student learning, classroom practices, school development, and how their own learning is evolving and how that is transforming them; leaders too. So the research circle brings together the same group of teachers and leaders - on a regular basis over time - and supports them to describe, and document, their practice and learning.

A second purpose of this 'coming together' is to give the members of the group an opportunity to share their stories with each other, and to give and receive feedback from each other.

Thirdly, the group acts as a learning space where people can work on individual and shared dilemmas and

problems. Teachers and leaders work with each other to enrich their understanding of the context and where possible to develop strategies to try out in practice. The research circle gives them the opportunity to report back on how it went in action.

Fourthly, the research circle will enable participants to notice and understand each other's perspectives and interpretations of ideas and events. We set out to establish a learning community that allows people to speak for themselves 'without fear or favour' where institutional hierarchy and system constraints have less influence. Indeed, they can even be discussed.

Finally then, by working like this together over time, the group participants will begin to create shared understandings and build new knowledge together; not with a view to agreeing on everything but developing a coherent understanding of their learning.

The Research Questions

We have identified four key research questions that will continue to guide our work together in the research circle.

- A. How do school communities effectively implement a Big Picture academy or Big Picture Education orientation within an established school?
- B. How does the Big Picture Education design influence student engagement and learning?
- C. How does the experience of being in a Big Picture academy or Big Picture Education inspired school influence student aspirations and capacity to undertake further education?
- D. What are the teachers learning?

Participants will hone in on aspects and questions of interest to them to enable the work to be manageable and get to depth.

The Structure of a Research Circle

The research circle will consist of at least one advisory teacher and one leader (associated with the Big Picture academy) from each site. Where possible the membership stays the same for the duration of the life of the research circle. Other participants will include the research associates from the research project, and the Big Picture school coaches from the Big Picture Academy Project. The BPA Research team will facilitate the research circle in collaboration with the whole group.

The research circle will consist of 2-day workshops in each of Terms 3 and 4 this year and Terms 1 and 4 next year. There will be 1-day workshops in each of Terms 2 and 3 in 2015.

The initial day will involve sharing people's journeys to this point; identifying issues, ideas and questions of interest to them; exploring approaches to writing, doing action research and using the Big Picture reflective practices already built into the design.

Day two will involve doing some initial writing, critique and multiple drafts. Time will be given to exploring some issues together, making plans for 'what next' and to also noticing and documenting what the group is learning from doing this work together.

The Typical Research Circle Day

Once under way, each research circle develops its own unique 'look and feel'. No two groups are ever the same. Things evolve, develop and mature. Typically the group participants come together to share their stories (along with

various examples and artefacts) of what has happened since the last meeting. People document this while it is fresh in their mind. Good ideas, issues and questions emerge; some of which are worked on by the group. Occasional workshops, on topics agreed to by the group, are made (for example an aspect of the Big Picture Education design, an approach to doing research or an issue that has emerged from the research.)

The second two-day workshop in 2015

These two days focus on bringing our work together to an end. Each participant works on their case with the help of the group. The whole group undertakes to identify the key ideas, issues and learning that they want to document and works together to find the best way of doing that. Agreements are made about 'what next'.

Agreements for working together in the group

As indicated above, this work requires a respectful and safe, yet challenging, space. It is imperative that participants feel safe, valued and equal. However it is also crucial for people to participate fully, listen for understanding, co-operate in good faith, and appreciate, and respect difference. And yet, the group has to find ways to challenge assumptions, give and get feedback, and engage in critical conversations². No group can work perfectly with such a list but participants can make agreements to try hard to work at it.

The Key Principles of a Research Circle²

The process of the research circle is intentionally interactive, exploratory and action learning. The following set of principles has underpinned the work of the Australian National Schools Network (ANSN) in research circles over two decades:

1. Engage in an on-going program examination of the work and learning.
2. Engage in inquiry which is informed by principles of social justice and which is directed towards improving learning outcomes for all students.
3. Engage in collaborative and democratic processes both in the development of the school based strategies and the interpretation of the data.
4. Commit to principles that give precedence to the questions generated in the school setting.
5. Ownership of the results of the inquiry is jointly negotiated by the research circle.
6. The results being published only with the approval of the participants and with due acknowledgment of the contribution of all members and with respect for confidentiality where appropriate.

1. See also the ANSN norms as outlined in Stewart, G with Hogan, J (2003) *The Reflective Teacher*, p, 73, Australian National Schools Network and DETWA.

2. White, V et al (2001) *The Heart of Teaching, How can we use student work to strengthen our professional practice?*, p.45, Australian National Schools Network in partnership with the Coalition of Essential Schools (USA).

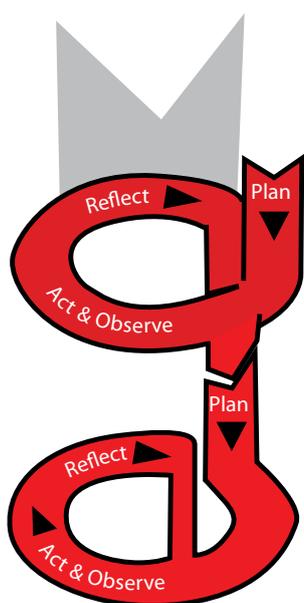
A final word on ‘the group’ – three levels of intention, action and impact³

Evaluation of training and development tends to focus on the individual and his or her response to a particular day, content, and/or leader. In the research circle we are very conscious of working as individuals but in a group and for the benefit of the wider community in which we live and work. We are not just ‘there’ for our own benefit.

1. Individual participation – participants learn from their own experiences. Teachers and leaders research their own work. The learning is directed by the individual. Individuals work and learn to describe existing theories and to develop new theories underpinning the actions enhancing their personal practical knowledge.
2. Working with a group – participants do this work with others for support and challenge for their learning but also to provide support and challenge for others in the group. Further working as a group creates new learning that individuals can adopt, adapt and try out.
3. For the benefit of community – sharing learning with wider community (school, system, profession) and for the new actions to help a community (school, system, profession) achieve better outcomes for more people.

Action Research⁴

So our approach to the work of the Research Circle is very much in the tradition of action research. The Action Research Model, as described by Kemmis et al is shown in the figure below as a series of spirals which include planning, acting and observing,



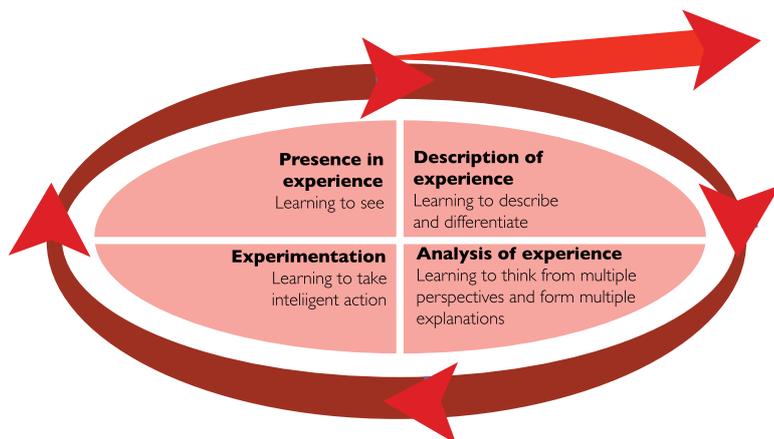
reflecting and revising the plan. The process is then repeated with the new insights and learning helping to shape the next phase. This process is likely to occur many times during a project. Identifying where you are in the cycle at a particular time is helpful in order to keep the project in perspective and focus.

Action research as applied to the Research Circle method is participatory, social, working with people (not ON people), practical, and includes exploring the structures, contexts and the cultures that shape and constrain our work in schools.

Reflective Practice⁵

A key feature of our work in the research circle is a reflective practice. We work hard at slowing down; to look at, think about and understand ‘moments’ from our work to help us explain our work. School leaders and teachers are constantly ‘reflecting’ even as they do their work. Here we are talking about the practice of deliberate slowing down to explore, examine and focus. Rogers (2002) (who based her work on John Dewey) illustrates this process in the diagram below. The research circle provides us with the time and space to practice this approach. The Reflective Practice Cycle helps remind us to continually notice and describe the activity around us, and to push ourselves to seek and find multiple interpretations and explanations for what happens. Finally it

The Reflective Practice Cycle



Taking action

In our own work places

At each day (or two days) of the research circle process, participants will make plans to take action ‘back in their workplace’ from their reflections and also make plans to research and document what happens; teachers, leaders, researchers, school coaches, project leaders...everyone.

3. John Hogan, 2001. Adapted from notes presented at ANSN QTP District Leaders Action Learning Workshop, Perth.

4. Kemmis, S & McTaggart, R. (1988) *The Action Research Planner*, Deakin University

5. Rodgers, C (2002). *Voices Inside Schools. Seeing Student Learning: Teacher Change and the Role of Reflection*. Harvard Educational Review, Vol. 72, No. 2 Summer 2002.

Writing our story

One way the research circle ‘takes action’ is for participants to develop products – as individuals, interest groups and as a whole group. Over time the participants will write about their work and learning. This may result in an array of products: individual cases, stories within schools, the journey of the research circle itself, illustrations of particular issues and insights, examples of Big Picture pedagogy at work in the classroom, etc.

As a project

A key element will be for the research circle to make a contribution to the Big Picture Academy Project. There is an assumption that the work will include explorations and explanations in relation to the project research questions.

The group might also have ideas about how to help other groups of teachers and leaders embark on working together ‘like this’, and/or ideas for learning about Big Picture Education, and/or ideas for taking political and community action about student learning.

Leadership of the research circle

There are inevitable tensions in the work of the group in a research circle. Some of them are outlined below.

We try to ‘create’ time for people to come to together to share and think about their work and learning. But in reality we don’t have a lot of time. We maximise this time by having leaders prepare and conduct the research circle.

We seek to be democratic but we don’t have time to ‘make it up as we go’. We give leaders the responsibility of taking responsibility for preparation and delivery of the research circle.

We seek to be equal but we still have different knowledge and expertise around the work. Decisions have to be made about what is to happen; how, when and to whom.

We try to create a learning community but as we get to know each other our differences become more apparent. We won’t always be working at the same rates nor in the same way. Tensions arise when this happens. Not everyone has their immediate needs met.

Our work is complex and complicated. It isn’t always clear about what to do and how to do it. We don’t always fully understand things as we are learning about them. We still need to work even when this happens. It gets hard to do this sometimes.

To help the group through these and other issues the research circle has a leader(s). The leaders prepare for the sessions, and they make decisions about content, process and activities. The leaders identify experts who might work with and help the group as they do their work. The leaders take responsibility through the days to create a ‘safe space’ for the work to happen and the people to be in. Throughout, they stay conscious of where the group ‘is at’ (albeit, that is hard to know at times) and make decisions about what to do. The leaders will choose protocols and processes to get feedback from the group on agendas, on activities and on learning. Where they can, the leaders take their lead from the group.

The Research Team

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