



BUILDING AN FE RESEARCH COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE

STEPHEN EXLEY

ABOUT FETL

The Further Education Trust for Leadership's vision is of a further education sector that is valued and respected for:

- Innovating constantly to meet the needs of learners, communities and employers;
- Preparing for the long term as well as delivering in the short term; and
- Sharing fresh ideas generously and informing practice with knowledge.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Stephen Exley, Director of External Affairs at Villiers Park Educational Trust

After starting his career in the regional press, Stephen became education correspondent at the Cambridge News in 2008. This was the start of more than a decade in education journalism. In 2010 he joined Tes (formerly the Times Educational Supplement) as a reporter, and subsequently was twice named the winner of the Award for Outstanding National Education Journalism at the Chartered Institute for Public Relations' Education Journalism Awards. In 2015 he was appointed Tes' Further Education Editor, taking responsibility for the overhaul of the publication's editorial coverage of the sector and expansion of the Tes FE Awards. In 2020 he joined the Villiers Park Educational Trust, a national social mobility and education charity, as Director of External Affairs. He is also a primary school governor and a Fellow of the RSA, and maintains a strong interest in education, skills and industrial policy.

CONTENTS

Foreword	7
Introduction: What is a community of practice?	9
The genesis of the Villiers Park project	11
The format	13
Sector response	15
Early impact	17
What next?	21

FOREWORD

Dame Ruth Silver

This short report describes the beginnings of an attempt to establish more formally a 'community of practice' among practitioner-researchers in further education. This is a concept which is of particular interest to the Further Education Trust for Leadership (FETL). We recognised in it our own DNA – encouraging colleagues in the field to share their thinking and preoccupations and to engage in 'collective learning', being respectful of the views of colleagues, while adopting a questioning stance and mobilising the voices of the deliverers.

From its inception, FETL has sought to support colleagues within the sector to think individually and together about the future of FE, both through the spaces our work had created and the resources we have produced. The hope is always that the work we fund will have a life beyond the page or screen, and support the sector to shape the next generative step in its own story. This project, described expertly by Stephen Exley, is an attempt to do just this. The report shows how a community of practice for FE was created online by Villiers Park Educational Trust, combining communication, discussion and peer support. Face-to-face activities will begin as soon as circumstances allow.

We hope that the project will provide a model that will encourage others to research in partnership, sharing their knowledge and building a community of people and ideas to nourish the sector of the future.

Dame Ruth Silver is President of the Further Education Trust for Leadership

INTRODUCTION: WHAT IS A COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE?

A community of practice (CoP) has been defined as a group of people who “share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly”¹. The concept was initially proposed by cognitive anthropologist Jean Lave and educational theorist Etienne Wenger in *Situated Learning*. It was then significantly expanded upon on by Wenger in his book *Communities of Practice*.

A CoP can evolve naturally because of the members’ shared interest in a particular field or be created deliberately. A key characteristic is that they are formed by people:

...who engage in a process of collective learning in a shared domain of human endeavour: a tribe learning to survive, a band of artists seeking new forms of expression, a group of engineers working on similar problems, a clique of pupils defining their identity in the school, a network of surgeons exploring novel techniques, a gathering of first-time managers helping each other cope.²

Within the context of education, CoPs tends to be deliberately formed by like-minded professionals with a shared area of interest. While most groups would historically have met in person at conferences, seminars or workshops, the Covid-19 pandemic has led to new networks of people, often in geographically disparate locations, coming together to discuss their shared interests virtually. It was in this context that the seed of the idea for the Villiers Park FE CoP was planted.

1 <https://wenger-trayner.com/introduction-to-communities-of-practice/>

2 <https://wenger-trayner.com/introduction-to-communities-of-practice/>

THE GENESIS OF THE VILLIERS PARK PROJECT

Villiers Park Educational Trust is a national social mobility charity which works with 14-19 students from disadvantaged backgrounds. It works with colleges, schools and universities on widening access to educational opportunities, and aims to give young people the skills and knowledge needed to give them agency in their futures and raise their aspirations and ambitions. Communities of practice and learning are central to how Villiers Park operates as an organisation, and our collective work is underpinned by a commitment to sharing our expertise and experience and learning from each other to support a process of continual improvement and maximise the impact of our work with disadvantaged young people.

CoPs have become an area of expertise for senior staff at Villiers Park Educational Trust. Chief executive Rae Tooth previously led the evidence and effective practice team at the Office for Fair Access. She launched the international 'Pracademic' programme, which partnered outreach practitioners with academics in the UK and Australia to develop and publish work based on their professional expertise and experience. Similarly, in his previous role of managing the Widening Participation Research and Evaluation Unit at Sheffield University, Julian Crockford (now Villiers Park's chief programmes officer) set up and led a nationwide, HE sector-wide community of practice for widening participation evaluators. This comprised an online community, conferences and events, including, most recently for Villiers Park, a 10-day, online evaluation conference, titled *Why Evaluate?*, for which more than 300 people registered.

Inspired by the success of *Why Evaluate?*, Villiers Park developed plans to establish discrete CoPs for researcher-practitioners in the schools, FE and HE sectors. Pleasingly, thanks to the support of the Further Education Trust for Leadership (FETL), it was the FE project that was the first to get off the ground. FE research culture is much less developed than that in HE and schools. We felt that empowering and supporting this movement would provide a fitting legacy for FETL's influential work contributing to thought leadership and academic debate in the FE sector. The CoP has a particular focus on social mobility and educational access, in line with the charitable mission of Villiers Park, and is intended to empower and support the grassroots research community working in this field, with the aim of complementing existing networks such as #FEresearchmeet and the Learning and Skills Research Network (LSRN).

THE FORMAT

We build communities of practice that are online and face-to-face, bringing new and experienced researchers and practitioners together to share thinking, questions and effective practice to drive sector-wide development and create a momentum of continual improvement underpinned by collaboration and shared communication. In the short term, due to social distancing restrictions, the FE CoP was launched as an online space for communication, discussion and peer support. The Villiers Park team will seed and build the volume of discussion, drawing participants into thinking about contemporary challenges and contexts and co-developing an evidence base. Alongside this, we will create and facilitate online events to give practitioners and researchers a platform to share thinking and practice and debate contemporary issues with their peers. We look forward to running face to face activities and workshops as soon as we are able.

SECTOR RESPONSE

The project has been greeted with enthusiasm by the FE research community, and achieved media coverage from *Tes*³ and *FE News*⁴. We have also been grateful for the support of the Association of Colleges, Sixth Form Colleges Association and #FEresearchmeet, as well as other organisations in the sector, in raising awareness of the initiative.

“Further education is full of excellent practice but there is too little research into it, something we need to change. The community of practice is a great opportunity to showcase research and best practice, encourage more research within and about our sector, helping to build new networks and facilitate collaboration between further education professionals helping to make our great sector even better.”

David Hughes, chief executive, Association of Colleges

“Sixth form colleges have a history of working with students for whom the widening participation agenda is critically important and they will welcome this Villiers Park initiative. Colleges are committed to social mobility and educational access, and recognise the imperative to give a chance to all students, whatever their background, who aspire to higher education. Increasingly, college teachers are sharing research, ideas and strategies that open doors

³ <https://www.tes.com/news/colleges-community-practice-launched-showcase-fe-research>

⁴ <https://www.fenews.co.uk/press-releases/63647-villiers-park-launches-fe-research-community-of-practice>

to the best opportunities for everyone in the college. This new community of practice will help them to develop and disseminate the latest thinking and ideas, helping all their students to realise their ambitions.”

Bill Watkin, chief executive, Sixth Form Colleges Association.

“Creating spaces to hear the voices and research work from within the sector has always been key to #FEresearchmeet. We believe that there is lots of work that could be used to shape and influence the sector and create spaces to share these ideas and network the ‘knowers’. Therefore we welcome this initiative from Villiers Park, and look forward to practitioner researchers sharing ideas and connecting in this forum.”

Sam Jones, lecturer at Bedford College, founder of #FEresearchmeet and former teacher of the year at the Tes FE Awards.

Early conversations have also taken place with the Department for Education about potentially using the community of practice for sharing its policy research.

EARLY IMPACT

Ahead of the first online meeting on 3rd March 2021, more than 90 people registered to join the community, including representatives from FE and sixth form colleges, universities and schools spread across England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland. Half of them attended the first discussion event, titled “Research in FE: Building an evidence-led sector”. The panel featured: Stephen Evans, chief executive of the Learning and Work Institute; Vicky Duckworth, professor in education at Edge Hill University; Sam Jones, lecturer at Bedford College and founder of #FEresearchmeet; and Rae Tooth, CEO of Villiers Park.

Jones spoke about how carrying out research has influenced her own professional practice. She spoke about how Bedford College Research Group was formed, and how this eventually led to the creation of the national #FEresearchmeet movement, before discussing the challenges and opportunities that practitioner-led research poses for the sector.

My conclusion, after eight years of being involved in FE practitioner research, is that I think FE practitioners research to rebalance their marginalisation and the idea they are being ‘done to’. I think it’s really important that, as a result of this, they have some leadership of the spaces where FE research is shared... This is putting them in a more central position in the college, and research in a more central position in the sector. And I think it has also shown we are capable of thinking and leading in these spaces.

Evans explored the state of research from a national policy perspective, and discussed what the FE sector can do to win over sceptics in government as well as the role research could play in raising its profile and status on society.

Wouldn't it be great if we had some politicians stand up and say what they really want to do is test something out properly, do some proper pilots, and they're going to listen to all of you working in the sector to find out what those things should be... This is an amazing sector doing brilliant work and brilliant research but I don't think policymakers, politicians and civil servants listen enough to it.

Duckworth spoke about the Right 2 Learn campaign and her work leading the University and College Union's FE Transforms project, intended to be a "lens to illuminate transformative pedagogical practice", as well as the role of practitioner-led research in establishing the identity of teachers.

Why is practitioner research so important? It enables teachers to generate powerful knowledge from their practice. They are perfectly positioned within their classrooms to have powerful, powerful research. It empowers them, the learners and the communities they serve. And I would argue that in these complex times of accountability, changing student demographics, inequity and notions of professionalism, practitioner research is vital for teachers. It underpins the importance of who they are as professionals, returning teachers and their voices as thinkers, curriculum developers, data analysts and generators of knowledge about teaching and learning.

Tooth, who previously led the evidence and effective practice team at the Office for Fair Access, spoke about the international 'Pracademic' programme she launched, which partnered outreach practitioners with academics in the UK and Australia to develop and publish work based on their professional

expertise and experience, with the aim of improving the link between practice and policy.

I've been reflecting on what it was about this project that worked. And for me it was about openness, it was about being prepared to be vulnerable in a professional space, and holding on to your professional identity while allowing yourself to be open to the possibility of looking at things in different ways and from other perspectives. And recognising that people bring tacit wisdom from all different areas of their experience that can add value to you. For a lot of us, I think that can be quite a difficult space to get into, particularly when we spend a lot of time defending our budgets, our patch within our organisation, our level of influence.

The presentations led to a wide-ranging discussion among participants, and prompted a host of suggestions of topics for future events.

WHAT NEXT?

Subsequent events are to be announced shortly. These will include a discussion on the impact and legacy of the *12 Dancing Princesses* series of books on FE identity and scholarship. We at Villiers Park are optimistic that the FE CoP will evolve and grow in the coming months to become a valuable resource for the sector, and a vehicle by which the status and profile of FE practitioner-led research can continue to increase its reach and impact.

To join the community, please register at:
<https://www.smartsurvey.co.uk/s/FEcommunity/>

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