

The Professional Enquiry Process / A Short Guide for Teachers in Scotland

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Introduction

The revised GTCS Standards¹ frequently reference “enquiry” as a key aspect in the professional learning of a teacher in Scotland. For example, the Standard for Full Registration includes the following:

2.3.2 Have knowledge and understanding of the importance of research and engagement in professional enquiry

And under “Enquiry and Research” the Standard for Career-Long Professional Learning includes the following actions:

- *develop and apply expertise, knowledge and understanding of research and impact on education;*
- *develop and apply expertise, knowledge, understanding and skills to engage in practitioner enquiry to inform pedagogy, learning and subject knowledge;*
- *lead and participate in collaborative practitioner enquiry.*

The Standards for Leadership and Management also include the following statement:

Leaders continually develop self-awareness; they regularly question their practice through processes of reflection and critical enquiry.

In this context, how can teachers and schools engage in a professional enquiry process if they are not already doing so? The purpose of this document is to share some of my own ideas based on my experiences of engaging with professional enquiry as a teacher and through my MEd in Professional Enquiry in Education. Obviously I owe a massive thanks to my tutors at the University of Stirling and my colleagues at Preston Lodge High School for most of these experiences.

Whilst it is true that enquiring into professional practice can be greatly enhanced by the rich input and support from colleagues in Universities, this is not always going to be possible. However, I do not believe that this prevents us from engaging in professional enquiries as individuals or in small groups in our schools. In actual fact, many teachers are probably already engaged in some form of action research or enquiries but may not refer to them in this terminology and may not complete all of the stages all of the time. I believe that we can all engage in professional enquiries in some way, and gradually work to develop and improve our ability to manage the enquiry process over time.

I've therefore decided to outline a series of steps which could be used to support an individual teacher or small group of teachers to either engage in an enquiry process for the first time or to enhance a process which is already developing. I do so in the hope that it might be helpful to some, but I in no way claim that this is a comprehensive or accurate guide to professional enquiry. If you want something like that I would recommend you try and get your hands on “*Practice Based Learning*” by Reeves & Fox² or “*Improving Schools Through Collaborative Enquiry*” by Street & Temperley³, but hopefully this might act as a useful starter for some.

Professional Enquiries can be purposefully carried out by individuals, but I believe they are even more powerful when carried out in a small group. The process outlined below can be used in either context, but I think it's important to stress that if working collaboratively then the group should agree on a common approach and bring their learning together at the end. Some school “Learning Teams” choose to each individually enquire into a different aspect of practice, but I find a truly collaborative approach to result in a much better professional learning experience and reveals much more about the practice being researched.

Obviously, a real enquiry process is messy and doesn't fit into neat boxes as suggested by the table which follows. You might, in fact you will, find that it never really flows as neatly as my list might suggest. You might end up jumping back and forth between earlier stages and you'll more than likely run out of time to do the later stages as well as you'd like. This is natural and to be expected. I personally just aim to try and improve the process the next time I try it.

Finally, carrying out a professional enquiry can be an incredibly intensive and rewarding learning experience, but you can't do it all the time. Carrying out the process with one aspect of practice in one academic year is more than enough in my opinion.

If you'd like to know more about some of the enquiries I've tried in the past, you can do so here: www.fkelly.co.uk/med and you can also get in touch with me through my blog if you like: www.fkelly.co.uk/about.

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What's the problem?

In my opinion, the best place to start with a professional enquiry is you and your learners. Think about what's causing you and your learners the most problems just now. What are they just not getting? Which class do you dread teaching the most and why? I find that by targeting the issue which vexes you most encourages you to stick with the process to the end, and leads to the biggest benefits from carrying out the enquiry. Professional Enquiry isn't about doing research for research sake. It's about having impact, and so you should choose to work on the issue which is causing you the biggest problems. Obviously if you're working as a group this may take a bit of discussion and negotiation. Often you'll find that there's a common underlying issue which you can agree on.

How does it fit in?

Although I've just suggested that you start from the perspective of your learners and you, we shouldn't forget the context in which we operate. It's therefore worth reflecting, at least briefly, on where your chosen focus fits in to the bigger picture. How does it relate to local and national curriculum and assessment policies? In what way will this address an aspect(s) of the four capacities? This step is beneficial as it can help you realise how your enquiry fits into your work as a teacher, which can help justify the time spent on it to yourself as well as any school leaders who might ask. You might also find that the policy documents help you to more clearly state the issue which you decided on in the first stage.

What's already known?

Once you've decided on the issue you'd like to address and how it fits in, it makes sense to try and find out what's already known about this issue. Obviously this stage is more challenging without access to a University library and peer reviewed journals, but there's more out there than you might think. You might find that your school or local authority has a professional library, and there's always Google! You never know, someone might have written a blog post on your very issue. You can also make use of Google Scholar [<http://scholar.google.co.uk>]. This searches books and journal articles and you'll often find that there is a free to download paper, or you can read a section of a book for free. Even if you can't get access to the paper you want, you can always read the abstract which is often enough for our purposes. Obviously if you're working in a small group then this process can be a very rich professional learning opportunity as you all come together with what you've each found out.

How will you tackle it?

This is probably the stage that you were itching to decide upon at the very start...*what are we actually going to do?* As tempting as it is to jump ahead to this stage, I strongly recommend that you hold off. Try to remember that the point of the enquiry isn't just to do something differently, but to have an actual impact on your learners in a way that matters to them and you. As you've worked through the previous stages you will most likely have come up with various ways of changing your practice in order to meet your desired outcome. Try to put these ideas to one side and save them for this stage. There is likely to be various ways in which you could go about changing your practice to have your desired outcome. I recommend that you find out as much as you can about each of them, and based on what you've learnt choose the one which you think is most likely to have the impact you desire – don't just choose the latest "in" thing. Once you've chosen your approach, you might need to do even more reading up to get yourself ready for trying it out. If there's someone you know or can get in touch with who has tried it out already, then see if you can meet up with them to learn from their experience. This is where twitter.com can be invaluable. If you've taken the time to build up a network of teachers on twitter then you could at this stage ask if there's anyone in your network who has experience with your chosen approach. If you're new to twitter and you don't have an established network, feel free to tweet me (@fkelly) and I'll happily retweet your request.

How will you know what happened?

This is perhaps the most daunting part of the enquiry for many. How will we know what happened? This is about evidence. Not evidence for evidence sake and not evidence for school leaders or inspectors. This is about finding out what happened as a result of the change. It can be tempting at this stage to use evidence such as test scores to evaluate impact, but it's crucially important that the evidence you choose is valid for the issue you decided upon at the first stage. For example, if you decided that the problem you wanted to address was the ability of your learners to collaborate more effectively in class, then a change in test scores won't be particularly relevant to this outcome. You're much more likely in this example to use your own observations and reflections, maybe invite a colleague in to observe the class and possibly ask the learners directly through a whole class discussion, small group interviews or questionnaires. Obviously, test scores are a valid form of evidence for some outcomes, especially if the enquiry is attainment focused, but in my experience this sort of evidence is often not valid for the sorts of outcomes we've chosen. Always remember that while it's good to share the outcomes of your enquiry if possible (which I'll return to later) the primary purpose of the enquiry is for your learners and you. So, don't be worrying about what other people might think of your choice of evidence – just make sure your evidence is valid and useful to you.

What's the plan?

Once you've decided upon and/or agreed on all of the above, don't forget to do the easy bit and actually plan out your enquiry. This is true if you're working on your own, but obviously it's crucial if you're working as a group. Decide when you'll be gathering evidence, when you'll be changing your practice and when you'll be gathering evidence again. This helps ensure you get everything done at the most appropriate time and if you're working as a group, helps to coordinate everything. At this stage you might also need to nail down some of the details of the enquiry which you might have glossed over in the earlier discussions. What precisely will you be doing differently in your lessons and when? Who's going to make up that questionnaire and what will it contain? What precisely will observers be doing when they visit a lesson?

What's the situation now?

In order to evaluate impact, you will most likely need to gather evidence before you implement your change in practice. In my experience it's best to have two or three forms of evidence which you aim to gather at the start of the enquiry and again at the end.

Implement the idea.

Then you need to implement the actual change in practice. The length of this implementation phase will vary depending on the enquiry. Anything between a term to an academic year is probably most appropriate. Although you may not have planned to gather any formal evidence during this period, you will at the very least be observing and reflecting throughout. You shouldn't be afraid to change your plan depending on what occurs during this time. If you're working in a group you should therefore arrange the occasional meeting to allow you to exchange observations and thoughts to allow you to pick up on the need for any change. Once again remember that the purpose of the intervention is to implement change which has meaningful impact for you and your learners...don't blindly persevere with something if it clearly isn't working.

What happened?

Once you've reached the end of your planned intervention period, you now need to repeat your evidence gathering to allow you to evaluate impact. Obviously, it's best if this follows the same process as the first round of evidence gathering, but if something clearly didn't work the first time don't be afraid to change it. For example, if you interviewed individual students in the first round of evidence and they barely spoke, don't be afraid to change it to small focus group interviews instead in order to help get them talking.

What have you learnt?

Once you've gathered the second round of evidence it's tempting to stop there...especially as you're probably now completely snowed under with other sorts of work demands. However, if you don't do this bit then it's kind of all been a bit of a waste. Whether working on your own or in a group, you need to sit down at the end and find out what you've learned. Did you manage to impact your desired outcome in any way? In what ways have your learners changed? What worked and why? What didn't work and why? How well did your enquiry planning work out? How useful was your methods for gathering evidence? Did your forms of evidence let you see what you wanted to see? What have you learned yourself?

It is mainly because this stage is so crucial for the enquiry that I strongly recommend that you have the following stage arranged well in advance.

How will you share?

Although there's nothing to stop us submitting academic papers to journals, the reality is that most of us don't and wouldn't think of it. But you should still consider planning a way to share the outcomes of your enquiry. This is mainly to make sure you do the previous stage! For example, if you have arranged to share the outcomes of your enquiry at a school in-service day, you will be forced to sit down and properly analyse and evaluate your enquiry in preparation for your presentation. If you were working as a group, arrange to deliver one synthesised presentation together and you will be forced to sit down and discuss the collaborative outcomes as you prepare your presentation. If you don't want to present to your peers in your school, you could always apply to present at the Scottish Learning Festival, or sign up to share at a TeachMeet [<http://teachmeet.pbworks.com>] or write a blog post about your enquiry on Pedagogoo.org. Sharing benefits you, but it also benefits the rest of the profession, and therefore their learners, through exchanging and discussing ideas.

As mentioned in the introduction, these are my own reflections based on my own experiences. I hope it might prove useful to some, but obviously this guide is only a brief overview to get you going. I personally have found professional enquiry to be the most powerful form of professional learning and I strongly recommend you giving it a go. Don't worry about it not being perfect first time, just make sure you think about how to improve the process each time. If you also find you enjoy the process and you would like some support to improve upon it you could check out the references below, or perhaps consider embarking on some post-graduate study if that appeals. I'm always happy to help out and can be contacted using the details below. If you've found this guide useful please feel free to pass this onto others.

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References

- 1 <http://www.gtcs.org.uk/standards/revised-professional-standards.aspx>
- 2 Reeves, J. & Fox, A. (2008) *Practice-Based Learning*. Edinburgh, Dunedin Academic Press
- 3 Street, H. & Temperley, J. (2005) *Improving Schools Through Collaborative Enquiry*. London, Continuum

