

An Enquiry Process

PREPARING

What's your 'itch'?

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 issues just now. What are they just not getting? Which learner, or group of learners, is really concerning you? Which class do you dread teaching the most and why? 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. 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 most concern. 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. This is your 'itch'.

How does it fit in?

Although you should start from the perspective of your learners and you, we shouldn't forget the context in which we operate. It's therefore important to reflect on where your chosen focus fits in to the bigger picture. How does it relate to local and national improvement frameworks? 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 and others. You might also find that the policy documents and improvement plans 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 can access a large number of Journal Articles and eBooks through EBSCO using your MyGTCS account [gtcs.org.uk] and you might find that your school or local authority has a professional library. You can also make use of Google Scholar [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?* 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 are likely to be various ways in which you could go about changing your practice to have your desired outcome. 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, tweet @Pedagoo and they'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 others. 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. Always remember that while it's good to share the outcomes of your enquiry if possible (which we'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 your question?

You should now be ready to write an enquiry question which captures your focus. There are normally three parts to an enquiry question:

1. The question stem: This is really important as it influences the way you approach your evidence gathering. For example, if you start with "Does..." you will be attempting to 'prove' that your approach has worked, which is unrealistic and not overly informative. Better question stems include "In what way..." or "How does..." or "What happens when..." This encourages you to instead explore what is happening rather than attempting to prove it works. This can often result in more qualitative forms of evidence gathering and less of a focus on quantitative evidence.
2. The intervention: This is the aspect of practice you are changing which has been informed by literature.
3. The impact: This the outcome you're intending to arise from your enquiry approach for the learners.

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?

Your plan might look as follows:

- **QUESTION:** This is your enquiry question.
- **WHO:** Which group of learners will you be working with?
- **WHAT:** What will you be doing differently?
- **WHY:** Why are you taking this approach, with reference to literature?
- **EVIDENCE:** What forms of evidence will you be using to evaluate impact? Is there anyone else involved?
- **WHEN:** A week by week outline of what you will be doing for each week of the intervening period.

INTERVENING	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. It's best to have two or three forms of evidence, which you aim to gather at the start of the intervening period.
	Initiate the approach.	Then you need to implement the actual change in practice. Although the ultimate aim will be for this approach to be embedded in your practice in the long-term beyond this intervening period, you will need to plan to evaluate the approach in the medium term. This could be after a few months, or at the end of the session. However, 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's happened so far?	Once you've reached the end of your planned evaluation period, you now need to repeat your evidence gathering to allow you to evaluate impact of the approach so far. 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.
SENSE-MAKING	What have you learnt?	<p>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 this point 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? What do you need to do next to sustain this approach? How well did your enquiry planning work out? How useful were your methods for gathering evidence? Did your forms of evidence let you see what you wanted to see? What have you learned yourself? What will you do you differently next time?</p> <p>It is mainly because this stage is so crucial for the enquiry that you should have the following stage arranged well in advance.</p>
	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 [teachmeet.scot] 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.