



Adult, Community and
Further Education



Executive Summary



Engagement, Knowledge, Capability

Connecting research with policy and practice

Report on the Evaluation of the
Circles Of Professional Research Practice



John McIntyre



Adult, Community & Further Education Board
Victoria



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Connecting Research to Policy and Practice

Evaluation of the Circles Of Professional Research Practice
for Adult, Community and Further Education Board of Victoria

FINAL REPORT

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I hope that the report reflects the uniqueness of the Research Circles and their potential to contribute further to the development of adult community education in Australia.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In 2005, the Adult Community and Further Education (ACFE) Board adopted its Research Strategy 2005-2007. This placed a high priority on realising practical benefits for ACE organisations from its high-level research in support of the goals of the Ministerial Statement on the Future Directions for ACE in Victoria.

To achieve this, the Board supported the establishment of three Circles of Professional Research Practice that would be managed by ACE organisations and bring together university researchers and ACE practitioners to apply understandings from the research to their local context. Employing participatory action research, the Circle members investigated problems in three areas of the original research—encouraging men’s learning, applying the ACE Pedagogy framework and widening ACE participation in local communities.

In 2007, the ACFE Board commissioned an evaluation of the Research Circles initiative to capture and conceptualise the Circle experience for participants, identify its outcomes, benefits and impact and explore how the Circles operated as an approach to research-based innovation and organisational change consistent with the goals of the Ministerial Statement. The evaluation was to advise on sustaining the momentum for practitioner research generated by the Circles and applying the model more widely in ACE and beyond.

The evaluation reviewed a wealth of documentation and sought information from participants during site visits, consultations, personal interviews and surveys. It found that the Circles actively involved over 100 participants besides the researchers and facilitators, and some 77 ACE organisations, or about 20% of all current regional providers. Further, these organisations were spread across both metropolitan and non-metropolitan segments and across organisations of different sizes. This represents a significant leavening of practitioner-based action learning in ACE.

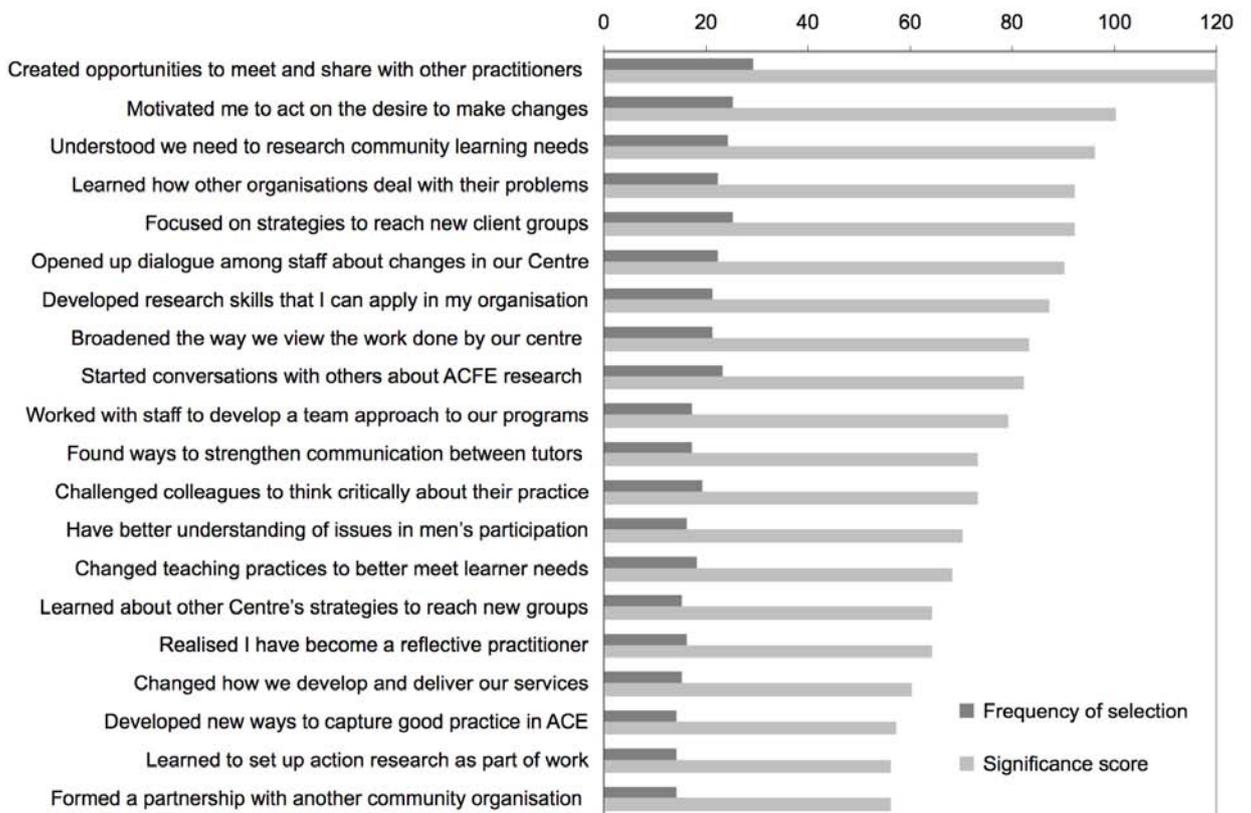
The Circles resulted in a range of outcomes (see Figure 1 below) that are highly congruent with the strategic directions of the Ministerial Statement:

- Awareness of the Board’s research, including appreciating the frameworks that the research provides for understanding teaching and learning in ACE, researching community needs and developing strategies to promote the participation of specific groups.
- Applying research to practice, leading to improvements in teaching and learning practices, to induction systems and staff communication; finding ways to understand and capture good practice in ACE; generating strategies to promote men’s participation in learning; better meeting the needs of local communities.
- Strengthening the capacity of ACE organisations to meet the goals of the Ministerial Statement, by learning how to reach specific groups, opening up dialogue about di-

rections, changing ways of delivering services, developing team approaches and forming partnerships with other agencies.

- Promoting professional development through collaborative inquiry into practice, by creating opportunities to work with others, motivating action on needed changes, working with other organisations and learning about their approaches
- Fostering a participatory research culture, by developing the capacity to research practice in organisations, promoting reflection on practice as a professional activity and setting up action learning as part of work.

Figure 1. Twenty leading outcome statements (n=51)



*Significance score refers to the average of ratings for a statement multiplied by its frequency of selection.

The Circles were cost-effective 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 and the support expressed among organisations for the idea indicates that there would be additional value in further Circle activity.

The evaluation found that a number of factors account for the success of the Research Circles initiative.

- 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 of the ACE managers and the clear definition of the support role of the expert researchers, enabling effective support to the participants
- The robust research frameworks that practitioners could readily apply to their situations, supported by the expert researchers' wisdom and experience
- The support of the ACE organisations that sponsored participants, a core of whom were leaders in organisational innovation, while others were seeking to move in new strategic directions or achieve organisational renewal
- Structured activities that ensured clear expectations of participants and their focused involvement, effective interactions among participants and the best use of time of researchers
- A flexible and informal approach to the adoption of action research methodology, with scope for experimentation and creativity, and an emphasis on practical relevance rather than academic sophistication

The key message is that the Research Circles were successful because they created a unique space where participants could investigate the relationships of practice to research and policy. Their 'negotiation' of the Circle space gave them insight into knowledge relationships not normally available to practitioners. By promoting collaborative inquiry practice, they set up conditions for the formation of professional knowledge and expertise that is essential to building organisational capacity. In doing so, the Circles assisted ACE organisations to become more sustainable and perform a broader community development role, as envisaged in the Ministerial Statement.

The Circles were able to activate this key dynamic of professional knowledge formation and organisational capacity building by providing a means for ACE organisations to engage with research and policy. The Circles operated as an effective catalyst for educational innovation and organisational development in a way that is appropriate to community-owned and managed organisations, demonstrating how change, supported by research-based public policy frameworks, can be achieved in a coherent way.

The Circles experience was created by particular factors and in their absence the Circles have not been self-sustaining. Similar conditions would be needed to repeat their success, and there was general support for further Circles activity. There are benefits in continuing to capitalise on ACFE's research investment by resourcing their further development in strategic ways, including activities with a focus on local or regional issues.