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FEResearchmeet. A further education (FE) practitioner–researcher-led, initiative to share and develop capacity for research and scholarship across Wales and England: analysing and theorising the period of initial development

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ABSTRACT


This paper analyses emergent issues from four conceptualisers of FEResearchmeet. FEResearchmeet claims to be a free and democratic model for building and supporting engagement with research, led by practitioners. The narratives presented seek to document and analyse FEResearchmeet as a movement across the first three years since its inception (2017–2020). After setting out the context and methodology of the work, narrative one explores how a reaction against New Public Management (NPM) sparked an event and how this grew into a movement of collaborating individuals seeking to reposition their voices and knowledge. The second narrative looked at how an early ‘meet’ was used to challenge norms and barriers to research by creating safe spaces for the development of expertise. Narrative three journeys through the early months of COVID-19 to explore how capacity building through collaboration allows sector workers to value their voices. These narratives lead to a critique of the epistemological changes these experiences have developed and have the potential to develop in the future. The paper concludes by arguing that FEResearchmeet was a reaction against NPM by agentic practitioners who used collaboration and capacity building as tools to create new pools of knowledge in an attempt to change this position.

KEYWORDS

Further education; New Public Management; research; collaboration; capacity building and knowledge

Introduction, the conception of FEResearchmeet and running the first meet

The English Further Education (FE) system was described by Coffield et al. (2008, 4) as: ‘fascinating, turbulent, insecure but desperately important’. There has been a regular commentary on the dearth of research in FE

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(Elliott 1996; Solvason and Elliott 2013), however, the voice that we would argue is the most marginalised in this picture is that of the practitioner.

Russell, in (Jones 2022) xiii, when discussing FE teaching argues that ‘FE teaching needs to be forged by practitioners’ and evidence-based rather than eminence-based. The issue here is that there has been a paucity of books and articles written on FE practice by FE practitioners, in comparison to other sectors. As many of the actions taken by teachers that contain their practice and knowledge of practice lack a ‘material trace’ (Tyson 2016, 363), so without capturing the narrative of practitioner-researchers this knowledge is lost. The lack of an enduring narrative of practitioner expertise is further hampered, or perhaps perpetuated, by a lack of recognition and status for practitioner research (Chen et al. *Forthcoming*) and by ‘a trend to undermine the value of experienced teacher [and practitioner-researchers]’ (Daley 2015, 15).

At the time of writing, the FE-based research landscape is arguably in a relatively healthy state, with high levels of involvement from a growing number of researchers within the sector and with some colleges beginning to create roles that focus on the leadership and use of research. However, this picture is not one that has been consistent over the last 20 years.

The sector has had only one body that has worked persistently in this space over the last 20 plus years, the Learning and Skills Research Network (LSRN). Created in 1997 as the Further Education Research Network (FERN) and comprising members from both the further and higher education sectors, the LSRN today is still the meeting point for researchers from both sectors. Individual universities with post-graduate courses exploring the FE sector have also contributed to the FE research landscape, both through qualification, encouragement for their researchers to attend conference, and by events such as ReImagineFE, a non-conference which set out to explore the challenges facing the FE sector. Finally, the Education and Training Foundation, a body directly funded by the English Department of Education, has also supported research both at the level of action research through the Outstanding Teaching Learning and Assessment (OTLA) and as a postgraduate level through its programmes delivered in conjunction with the University of Sunderland.

With the exception of OTLA, all these initiatives were led by researchers based in the Higher Education sector. Whilst this is not surprising as the FE sector does have difficulty in retaining its academic or research active staff (Husband and Jones 2019), leadership by the HE sector can result in spaces that are informed by HE norms and epistemologies, which sometimes left FE academic researchers feeling like ‘imposters’, with their work lacking status (Chen et al. *Forthcoming*).

Moreover, these spaces were separate from each other, if an initiative, such as OTLA or a university, had a conference or publication, it tended to

only share the work from that initiative or university. Depending on its origin, some work was suitable only for an academic audience, who sometimes speak a different language to FE, which can affect the degree to which senior managers see it as 'useful' (Lloyd and Jones 2018). This leaves practitioner researchers often feeling isolated and unrecognised, concerns that are recognisable in other attempts to develop a research culture in the sector (O'Donnell 2013).

FEResearchmeet, aimed to bring together FE academics and practitioner researchers in spaces that were democratic, and familiar to them. It embraced all forms of research and scholarship from all sector projects or universities and allowed presenters to use academic or non-academic voices and language in the presentation of their work and ideas.

The first FEResearchmeet was conceptualised by Sam Jones and Norman Crowther at a Learning and Skills Research Network meeting, as a safe, welcoming and free to access space for all levels of researcher working in the sector, from action research to post-doctoral researchers and everyone in between to share their work.

The days were designed to be flexible; a series of workshops that allowed everyone to share their work to a small group, formal abstracts were replaced with friendlier outlines to the sessions, and as the audience were all other FE workers, the fear of an academic asking a question that the presenter felt they couldn't answer was removed. In response, an FEResearchmeet was designed to be democratic; all voices had equal value, it was free to attend, and anyone could run one.

The initial FEResearchmeets were all funded and supported in both the development of the concept and with the administration by the Association of Teachers and Lecturers (ATL) union, now the National Education Union (NEU). This reduced the burden placed on the individual lecturer running the event and made the event more possible.

The first meet was hosted at Bedford College on 26 June 2017. The event was, in part, a response to the development of the Bedford College Research Network (BCRN) which was formed in 2014 and by now a mature organisation seeking contact with other communities in order to network across the sector (Lloyd and Jones 2018).

The day started with the sound of The Prodigy's 'Firestarter' and led into the welcome and keynotes by Professor Kevin Orr and Dr John Lea. The workshop sessions from the practitioners ran in the afternoon (see [Appendix 1](#)). The day ended with coffee and a group discussion with the overarching sentiment that 'a rising tide floats all boats' (Kevin Orr) and the comment from Norman that he was 'looking forward to next year's meet'. As the feedback ([Figure 1](#)) was very positive, by the end of day 1, it appeared others also wanted to continue to network and hear from each other.

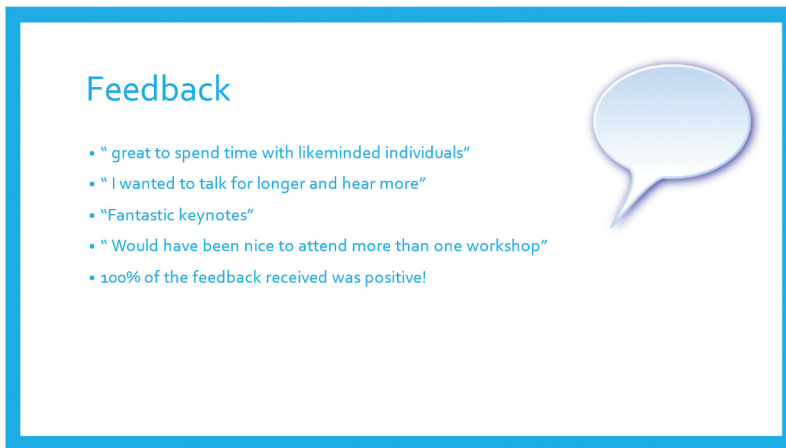


Figure 1. A slide from the 2017 ATL presentation outlining feedback from participants (Jones 2017b.) (Researchmeet: exploring research in post-16).

Although only conceptualised as a one-off event initially, eleven ‘meets’ ran between 2017 and 2020 (see [Appendix 2](#)). The ability to replicate the meets across temporal and spacial dimensions was one of the advantages of the format of the meets which created an outline which could be adapted by others and their contexts. The democratic nature of the event meant that anyone could take the format and run with it. You did not have to take part in a specific research initiative, nor did you have to wait to be invited to run an event; anybody could run a researchmeet. In this respect, the format handed the autonomy to the individual lecturers. However, like much of the sector, this work was completed through the organisers’ initiative and against recognised time constraints (Smith and O’Leary 2013), which demonstrated their commitment to what felt like a needed and welcome space.

Norman was instrumental in ensuring the practice was disseminated and connections made. At the 2017 ATL conference Sam Jones and Dr Simon Reddy presented their FEResearchmeet experiences which allowed Sam to meet the next person to run the FEResearchmeet journey, Amy Woodrow of City of Bristol College. Through the use of social media, new contacts, such as Kerry Scattergood and Jo Fletcher-Saxon were made. These activists presented the #FEResearchmeet ideas at other conferences, social media and publications, which broadened the initial network to include Jodie Rees, Annie Pendrey and James Synder. Through these actions #FEResearchmeet began to develop from a one-off event into a movement of people.

The three narratives within this article are from three of the organisers from this initial period of #FEResearchmeet. As at a researchmeet, each individual speaks with their own voice, in their chosen language, and so are unique but reflective of the multiplicity

of voices that #FERResearchmeet represents. From the initial spark that brought #FERResearchmeet into life, following its journey from English to Welsh FE spaces and its adaptation to the Covid pandemic, our narratives illustrate #FERResearchmeets adaptability, strength of community and its importance to those people participating in the movement.

Methodology

Methodologically, this paper is a simple interweaving and analysis of three narratives. In taking just three narratives, we are aware that there are perspectives missing and are therefore presenting one set of perspectives in a world of many (Kendall et al. 2016). In contrast to many narrative studies, 'we' are multi voiced and are both the participants and the researchers. This means our words do not require interpretation of our perceived reality by a third party in common with many narrative studies (Loh 2013), instead we speak for ourselves. Although writing down narratives can risk depersonalisation and decontextualisation (Tyson 2016), by siting the narratives into their larger context of the #FERResearchmeet movement, we hope to reduce this risk. The three narratives are written in the different styles and express the different perspectives of the contributors with the intention of bringing verisimilitude or the 'ring of truth' to the reader as different contexts are explored. The maintenance of the context within the narratives that Tyson (2016) argues allows for the expression of practical knowledge and the development of the practice field.

As part of the construction of the overarching text member checking took place as we read and analysed each other's contributions as this is considered to further increase trustworthiness (Loh 2013). However, to add additional rigour, we have received audience validation (Kvale 2007) by ensuring that the peer review process with the journal included one reviewer who understood the context of #FERResearchmeet and represented our 'intended users and readers' (Loh 2013, 7)

A final part of our methodology has been, where possible, to introduce theorisation from papers written by other practitioner-researchers from within the FE sector as an expression of the valuable contribution that work published from this space can make (Chen et al. *Forthcoming*).

Why did people feel the need to join FERResearchmeet? A narrative from a conceptualiser and founder, Sam Jones

In this section, I will consider why and how FERResearchmeet developed from a one-off event into a movement of collaborating individuals across

the English and Welsh Further Education sector seeking to reposition their voices and knowledge within the narratives of policy and practice.

At the point of inception for #FERresearchmeet, I was a neophyte researcher developing my identity and looking for others with whom to connect with to develop arguments and mechanisms to change perceptions regarding practitioner research to enable it to be used to inform policy and practice in my college (Lloyd and Jones 2018). When I look back at my writing from this period, many of the themes that emerge are related to who owns the development of practice and knowledge (Jones 2016, 2017a) and the constraints that sector workers face in this respect (Jones 2016). Although I may not have been completely conscious of it at the time, in shaping FERresearchmeet around commonly faced issues of identity, the use of practitioner knowledge, sector managers' lack of value of the same, and researchers' feelings of dis-connection, it became an attractive or safe space to others who shared some or all of these concerns.

Lecturer identity has been formed through many of the discourses and policies informed by New Public Management (NPM), but perhaps the most important in terms of this narrative is disaggregation. This, I will argue, is a driving force for FERresearchmeet, if the movement is seen partly as an attempt by teachers in the sector to reclaim their right to be party to inclusion in discussion in, and of, the sector as Daley (2015) discussed. Disaggregation, the process of detaching policy formulation from its execution, is explained by Arnott (2000) as an explicit policy of Mrs Thatcher to break the power of the teachers through exclusion. This disaggregation has been mirrored by developments in learning institutions themselves; the increase in executive power shutting out teaching staff from ownership of teaching and learning (Jones 2016, 2017b), as it becomes a matter of performance measurement (Smith 2007). This is argued by Tolofari (2005) to create a clash of cultures between the management and 'school' culture which diminishes collegiality. This lack of collegiality may help to explain the feeling of disconnection myself and others within the movement felt at the time and the motivation that the BCRN felt to connect with other communities (Lloyd and Jones 2018). From the limited work written by sector researcher-practitioners themselves, it appears that the lack of connection between each other and between initiatives left researchers in the sector feeling part of a 'fragmented community' (O'Donnell 2013). The differences between the HE and FE research communities are well documented (Elliott 1996; Feather 2010; Solvason and Elliott 2013) and this leaves the practitioner researcher with considerable work to negotiate the language, discourse and identities between them (Lloyd and Jones 2018). Therefore, an initiative that seeks to bring together individuals sharing that identity and challenges, outside of a constraining college culture which does not grant them a space as knowers, may well motivate others to join.

The ‘clash of cultures’ described by Tolofari (2005) is evident in the clash of paradigms between the management and the practitioner researchers in a college. Despite Elliott and Crossley making the argument in 1994 that ‘If college managers wish to act wisely in a turbulent environment then they would be wise to privilege qualitative information on what is happening around them’ (Elliott 1996, 108), college management still privileges quantitative sources of data over the types of qualitative data often produced by practitioner-researchers. This lack of value given to practitioner work by managers is well documented in the literature (Elliott 1996; Lloyd and Jones 2018; O’Donnell 2013; Solvason and Elliott 2013) and from it emerges further barriers such as funding (Elliott 1996; Solvason and Elliott 2013) or lack of status (Chen et al. *Forthcoming*).

Perhaps, it is because practitioner researchers begin to read and absorb arguments which discuss how these management discourses contradict ideas of good vocational education (Chappell 2003), or become frustrated in knowing that their research, in bringing theory and a teacher’s own experience to bear on the developing practice, keeps skills and practices alive (Horder 2021; Robson, Bailey, and Larkin 2004; Tyson 2016) that they seek spaces through which to counter these ideological narratives. It may be that in being locked out of discussions at an institutional and policy level, these teachers who feel that they wish to make a contribution look for alternative spaces in which to share their knowledge and be heard. The reason that the practitioner researchers may need to move outside their organisations in order to be heard may be best summarised by Elliott (1996, 110) ‘the reasons may well be rooted in their reluctance to support an activity which has the potential to be dangerous, dangerous, for as Stenhouse (1981, 103) pointed out, ‘research can presage social change’.

In countering these narratives, in sharing work and giving a space for new identities and voices, #FERResearchmeet begins to find a use for the qualitative work produced by the practitioner researchers. As #FERResearchmeet is an inclusive space that allows people to be part of something bigger outside an individual college, it begins to attract leaders and managers (Catherine Lloyd and Jo Fletcher Saxon) and leaders of Teaching and Learning (Amy Woodrow, Kerry Scattergood, Jodie Rees, Annie Pendrey, James Synder and Sam Jones). Whilst this is by no means the whole scale systematic use of research Elliott (1996) discusses, what it does point to is the creation of a space connected to the sector, which allows knowledge to move horizontally across it, rather than outside to inside as much university-based academic work is required to do, does seem to have some, albeit limited, level of success.

These small successes and changes began to attract others and this, in turn, began to develop the capacity for research within the sector. Within the movement, and others like it, more experienced others

encourage and support those on the periphery to run events, to attend conference or to write for sector magazines, books, blogs and even peer-reviewed journals. We write together, to create multi-voiced narratives, generally organising ourselves alphabetically, rather than by rank, or by taking turns to be the lead author. This has become the FEResearchmeet modus operandi, our ‘shared way of doing things’ (Wenger 1998), a way of doing things that is underpinned by a conscious shift in thinking that deliberately moves the FE sector voice away from its ‘secondary position’. In these spaces, we want to hear from and give primacy to insiders, to allow each other to know what we know (Wenger 1998), to feel connected to a ‘bigger picture’. The backbone of this mechanism has been a free to access, democratic format for running and participating in the meets, this kind of egalitarian approach has been documented as a successful strategy in the formation of other sector-led networks (O’Donnell 2013). This level of cooperation and collegiality has allowed for a rapid flow of information and propagation of innovation around us as blogs, podcasts, publication spaces as individuals developed and grew. What we have perhaps developed are the seeds of a narrative to live within, or maybe even counter, the NPM world in which we find ourselves. Perhaps, we have begun to show that Resistance is [indeed] Fertile (Daley 2015, 20)

An FEResearchmeet conceptualiser’s narrative: using gramsci’s organic intellectuals to transcend imposter syndrome and emancipate research (ers) in FE, Jodie Rees

Dominant norms associated with traditional research, or in Gramscian terms, research cultures of ‘traditional intelligentsia’ (Gramsci, Hoare, and Nowell-Smith 2005) can exert symbolic, systemic and linguistic violence (Bourdieu and Passeron 1990; Žižek 2009) that, when internalised, manifests as imposter syndrome. Battling with this internal conflict created by hegemonic ideals of research has convinced us we are imposters in our own sector, doubting our ability to research with legitimacy and credibility, but if FE research is to flourish, we can no longer be held back by imposter syndrome (Scattergood 2019).

I explore how the ethos of FEResearchmeet can challenge and demystify hegemonic ideas of research to temper imposter syndrome and develop the ‘principled space’* for FE scholarship ‘that connects integrity, research, teaching, learning, personal development and contribution to the world’ (Fung 2017, 105). Not satisfied with tempering alone, I draw on Gramsci’s ‘organic intellectuals’ to transcend imposter syndrome and reposition FE researchers as a collective of intellectuals connected to the sector we

represent. By reclaiming our position as intellectuals connected to FE, we may emancipate ourselves from the existing hegemony and violence held within the traditionalist research intelligentsia to take forward a new organic and democratic narrative that challenges the research status quo and brings forth all voices from across the sector.

Imposter syndrome: internalising traditional intelligentsia

When discussing research trajectories with FE colleagues, there is a chronic awareness of the power exerted by the traditional intelligentsia. The hegemony, violence and mystification associated with how research should be completed and communicated posits it as a scholarly pursuit out of our reach; an otherworldly unknown orbit (Stevens and Sawyer 2018) far away from vocational education and training that is often held in lower esteem in comparison to 'traditional' academic programmes (Atkins and Duckworth 2019). Within these discussions, research is often synonymous with academia, experienced as an intimidating and foreboding arena beset with specific rules, rituals, systems and processes that exclude more than it includes and who can blame us for feeling like imposters when too often we've witnessed or experienced the unpleasantness of an academic interrogation about research that borders on blood sport, or academic snobbery and posturing in verbal or written form to assert dominance and exclusivity. Not only is this research culture unpleasant and off-putting, but it is also wholly unnecessary, and impetus enough to consider alternative ways to create more inclusive research and research cultures. If 'the rising tide of FE research is to float all boats' (Kevin Orr), then it must be welcome and accessible to all, and this is where the ethos of FEResearchmeet answers that call.

FEResearchmeet: tempering traditional intelligentsia

In July 2018, I was introduced to FEResearchmeet at the ReimagineFE conference, where I connected with other FE researchers for the first time. This developed on social media until I attended a mini-meet in June 2019 at the UKFECHAT conference. Being part of the mini-meet demystified the logistical and structural elements of holding a meeting, and the open approach dismantled much of the power struggle of academic authority. In this space, with its professional, appreciative dialogue and diversity of research and lived FE experience, my question about alternative research cultures beyond that of the traditional intelligentsia had been answered, and I wanted to develop this to support FE research in Southeast Wales.

In December 2019, I hosted the first FEResearchmeet in Wales with keynote from Professor David James. This event included research ethics,

narrative, and practitioner inquiry, and netnography representing FE teachers, students, gypsy and traveller communities, and PcET student teachers. It was from these spaces, listening to the purposes, motivations, and values informing this FE research that I found the greatest challenge to dismantling hegemonic norms of research, and tempering imposter syndrome; the principled space that was committed to the flourishing of FE research.

As FEResearchmeet collectively builds its alternative research culture to ‘float all boats’, it is time for FE researchers to transcend being imposters at the mercy of hegemonic research culture. We must take forth our principled spaces of FE scholarship that resist the domination of knowledge created about us and not with us. This means FE researchers must position themselves as intellectuals belonging to and part of the sector best aligned to create knowledge that represents theory and practice.

Gramsci’s organic intellectuals: transcending traditional intelligentsia

Gramsci’s ideas about organic intellectuals are a network of people that are equally and organically connected to and shaped by the group it represents, in this case, FE researchers representing FE. By ‘active participation in practical life’ of FE (Gramsci, Hoare, and Nowell-Smith 2005, 10) knowledge is constructed and organised to build on what lies within the FE lived experiences to elaborate its good sense (Crehan 2016). Within us, all are theories of how the world works, and we embody these theories in our practice; we shape FE, and FE shapes us – it is an inescapable dynamic, and therefore one which we should have every confidence to be intellectual about. It provides a start point to reassert our position, not as prisoners of imposter syndrome, but intellectuals with the theory, and practice that we embody in FE and our research that celebrates ‘the creative spirit of the people in its diverse stages and degrees of development’ (Schwarzmantel 2014). However, Gramsci’s ideas also hold a cautionary tale for FE researchers that we must never forget. He stresses the importance that organic intellectuals must remain connected in sustained reciprocal dialogue with the social groups we are part of. To achieve this, I also stress the importance of reflexivity to keep a check that our work does not become the hegemony we have worked so hard to overcome, and that our commitment always does remain to ‘float all boats’ in FE research.

* ‘principled space’ can also be attributed to Hanalei Ramos as an alternative to safe space. This reference is also helpful in considering how principled space may be co-created for the purposes of FE scholarship given the breadth, depth, challenges, privileges and ethical choices and

considerations that are enmeshed in research, and in dialogue about research.

Sharing practitioner research and practice during Covid-19 times – a FEResearchmeet conceptualiser’s narrative: Kerry Scattergood

An important aspect of developing practice-research networks is one that recognises teachers as researchers (Stenhouse 1975), which centres FE practitioners as producers of knowledge rather than solely consumers (Appleby and Hillier 2012). This narrative considers the development of a practice-focused research space as belonging to everyone, from first conceptions. It also considers an opportunity for building research capacity, by describing the modelling of a small-scale research project.

Beginnings

As an FE college with an HE centre, Solihull College & University Centre had already established an annual conference and an internal journal, but it was originally conceived only for staff working specifically within the centre. Those working across the wider college did not have access to either the conference or the journal. Practice-research networks situate professional learning (Appleby and Hillier 2012), and I felt this opportunity was something that could have been of benefit to all colleagues across the college, not just those working in the HE centre. There is a rich history of practitioner inquiry (Kendall et al. 2016) within the college yet, for FE colleagues, there were opportunities to share rarely (as is normal in FE) and, as a result, practitioner research remained largely invisible (Elliott 1996; Solvason and Elliott 2013). Connecting with Sam Jones and Jo Fletcher-Saxon on social media and observing their early successful meets from afar, an accessible, democratic, practitioner-focused event felt achievable and, enabled by the then Dean of HE who saw the benefit of developing a research ethos across the whole of the college, we ran the first FEResearchmeet at Solihull in 2019, with the explicit intention of opening up conversations about practice-focused research to everyone. Collaboration and leadership buy-in are key elements in creating a research culture within further education (Elliott 1996; O’Donnell 2013).

A virtual FEResearchmeet

The following summer, in 2020, colleges and other educational institutions across England were closed under strict lockdown rules, enforced as a result of Covid-19. The intention was still for a summer FEResearchmeet event to go ahead but, unable to meet in person, the

only possibility was using emergent technology, such as Zoom, to enable us to host what effectively was to be a virtual conference, held over three mornings. Virtual educational events and conferences are now ubiquitous but, at that time, it felt like an opportunity to attempt something new. It was also a chance to raise the visibility of FEResearchmeet, which previously has been contained by physical location to small spaces within colleges across the sector. Just like Sam's first meet described above, my first meet in 2019 has been a 'sellout', proving there is a thirst for such opportunities in FE. Furthermore, if 'the rising tide of FE research is to float all boats' (Kevin Orr), then it is therefore necessary to also 'change tack' in times of crisis to maintain space for critical dialogue.

During lockdown, many FE practitioners felt like they were working in isolation (Crawley et al. 2021). Feeling lonely and working in isolation, especially during such unprecedented times, can have a negative impact on practice (Morris 2020). Where many informal dialogue spaces, such as the staffroom, were no longer accessible, practitioners reported additional stress (Crawley et al. 2021). Many alternative spaces quickly sprang up and thrived, such as a lunchtime staffroom group on Twitter (now known as X) and informal TLA discussions between colleagues. One of the most important aspects of such spaces is the inclusive approach, where all are welcome. This is an important founding principle of FEResearchmeet, intentionally created as a space for FE practitioners to share their work. Such spaces in education are important; spaces based on 'collaboration, dialogue and sharing of practice' (Appleby and Hillier 2012, 34) that can promote critical professional learning. I suggest this is only possible in spaces where practitioners feel a sense of belonging as well as purpose, often created democratically amongst equals, because it promotes supportive opportunities that belong to us. The virtual FEResearchmeet meets this need, not only by being organised by insiders, but also in being accessible in language and format to FE practitioners. Moreover, practitioner research is known to be isolating at the best of times (Lloyd and Jones 2018; O'Donnell 2013), let alone at the worst of times. The virtual FEResearchmeet, therefore, creates and confirms a community of practice during a time of crisis.

The virtual FEResearchmeet events were held over three mornings and each session had a different theme. It was designed with the intention of platforming as many FE practitioner-researchers as possible, to make FE research more visible, whilst also offering as many spaces as possible to like-minded practitioners, to meet the desire for such events within the sector. The themes chosen were: *why*, *how*, and *share*, to engage the audiences in thinking about why we research in FE, how we research in FE and what constitutes knowledge in FE, but also to encourage as many people as possible to share their practice. The themes invited further engagement, for example in joining the writing project, making this not a

one-off but part of the larger movement, a democratic opportunity to get more involved, present at future events, to write and share experiences, and thus the ripples continue out (Evet Hackfort [forthcoming](#)). We are fulfilling the need to ensure that research for the sector is developed by the sector (Appleby and Hillier 2012), raising capacity through creating culture.

Modelling a research project

The *share* keynote, by Professor Sam Broadhead, encouraged practitioners to write more about their work, thus enabling us to ‘speak up and be heard’ (Scattergood 2019). It was also an opportunity to model a small-scale research project. Modelling is a pedagogy familiar to the sector (Jones 2022), through a process of imitation it can pass on skills and tacit knowledge (Polyani 1966) as it gives participants the opportunity to see the thinking behind actions taken. As the group worked collaboratively, it also gave opportunities to others to ask when they were struggling and receive peer support.

We launched a writing project, inviting all delegates to write a 750-word piece documenting their own experiences as an FE teacher and/or FE practitioner-researcher during Covid-times. The focus was on the value of their practice and experience to others, rather than on their ability to write. It was the intention of the project to work together as peers to develop the skills of all contributors so that everyone could share their voice and experience and, in doing so, to create a ‘collective memory of FE-based practitioners’ experience during the pandemic’ (Crawley et al. 2021, 11).

In creating this collective account, there was an intention to model a research project from contribution to analysis. Hence, we set four questions to guide contributors.

- (1) What’s been messy (hard) about teaching during COVID-19 time?
- (2) What has been refreshing (or ‘good’) about your work as a practitioner during the COVID-19 time? For example, new practices? New professional learning?
- (3) What’s enabling/constraining your practice (including research) during COVID-19 time?
- (4) Upon reflection, what have you learnt is necessary in terms of Teaching, Learning and Assessment and what is unnecessary?

To develop capacity and ensure a supportive experience, the participants worked together in pairs (or threes) to peer-review their writing. This ensured the prompt questions were addressed, so that everyone has the opportunity to peer review but also became that collaborative

opportunity to support for first-time or less experienced writers, ensuring that their voice was heard. As Dr David Powell stated during the event: ‘if we do not tell our stories, then someone else will tell them for us’, so ensuring all voices were heard was fundamental tenant of the work.

The editorial team analysed (Braun and Clarke 2006) the participants’ stories to identify collective experiences, or themes, to create an overarching narrative of the times. The themes identified included: ‘Supporting each other’; ‘Making connections’; ‘Technology as a catalyst for collaboration and sharing’; and ‘Ways of working and thinking’, all which reflect not only the difficulty of the time, but also the importance of collaboration to overcome some of those difficulties.

Part of the purpose of the #FEResearchmeet is for lecturers to find a space in which they develop their identities as practitioner-researchers (Stenhouse 1975) and experts in their practice. Providing space to develop their voice and share their experience outside the ‘meets’ themselves, to legitimate and share our stories and experiences offers us the opportunity to explore and understand our knowledge, which is situated in practice (Appleby and Hillier 2012) by centring the practitioner, and to build capacity for further research across the sector.

Therefore, surely the purpose of sharing our practice then is two-fold: not only to share what we have learnt, offering others the opportunity to also benefit from our learning, but also to inspire others to research their own practice too.

Developing communities of practice in the English FE sector: a new epistemic and ontological culture? FEResearchmeet conceptualiser: Norman Crowther

The contributions of this paper draw on the experiences and theoretical reflections of FE practitioners who have engaged with research inquiries in FE colleges. It is they who are laying the groundwork for potential further developments and should be congratulated for their efforts.

However, as the experiences and reflections show, there are many ways to engage with research inquiry and there are numerous motivations and aims. As a staff member in ATL (Association of Teachers’ and Lecturer’s) and now with NEU (National Education Union) which amalgamated ATL with NUT (National Union of Teachers) the support given to research inquiry in the sector has been tempered with structural factors (changing college landscape and policy turbulence) and issues of power (vested interests from dominant sector actors – though this, on reflection, has been impacted by the RM movement) than with personal development, research interest per se, and with

theories of research or models of research inquiry. In this way, I would hope that this contribution adds to the rich dimensions of the piece as a whole.

Dealing with structural factors and issues of power relations means that we understand FE communities of practice as being located within certain power structures, subject to a set of vested interests, and cultural and historical overlays. The sector has been particularly adept at developing large scale project-based work, primarily through quangos, and then changing them very quickly as new governments come in and quangos subsequently change along with government aims. This has created a transactional culture within research design (mostly action research focused on quality improvement) and always subject to external funding. Hence, there is little in the way of a sustainable research culture across the sector, nor even elements of more robust research methodologies and hubs of research (for and by practitioners).

It is now 10 years since IfL (Institute for Learning) was disestablished and yet, in its heyday, it had 200,000 members all subscribed to 30 hours per year CPD (minimum) and all achieving a recognised professional status, which included research inquiry. If there was ever to be a community of practice around research, one would have thought it would have started there and flourished. But it was not to be. It is not my intention to discuss this strategic error, nor the operational difficulties, but to merely point out that the IfL is now a distant memory, and its' legacy is not seen directly in the contributions here. That means there was no development of a community of practices around research inquiries. But that, of course, could be said for the Staff College in the 1970s and 80s, or the later FEDA (Further Education Development Agency) and LSDA (Learning and Skills Development Agency) which perhaps had the most presence for practitioner research that the sector has witnessed.

Of course, it does not mean that there was no legacy of these bodies or of IfL itself, the Society of Education and Training now has some 22,000 members and growing; nor some indirect influences, as practitioners may have taken up with the IfL professional formation offer and retained an interest in research inquiry.

My point is that major structural and policy changes (mandatory membership of a professional body) that have affected the entire college workforce (and beyond) have not broken through institutional and vested interests – who else was interested in research other than IfL at the time? How far they themselves were interested in research is a moot point, but their work was fairly arduous, and they were a new actor in the field (much to think on there). And, to fully make the point, SET now has 22,000 members after 10 years and is, at its core, a training arm of ETF (The Education and Training Foundation).

Lloyd and Jones (2018) have admirably laid out the development of a community of practice in a college setting and helped inform us of the theoretical understanding of developing such communities of practice. However, there are two areas of interest that I think we could add here. The first is the structural qua political forces at work, and the second is the ontological – what research is premised upon. While their piece touches on both aspects in the form of college managerialism in the former, and the epistemology of research (how we gain knowledge in our practice) in the latter, it does not explicitly elaborate on how these levels of analysis may help us further.

While the communities of practice literature is incredibly helpful in showing how practice can become transmitted via communities at levels that support personal, community and professional interests and identities, it is admitted that there are limitations to this focus regarding political or institutional intervention. Fuller et al. (2005), among others, discuss the lack of interest in such interventions by Lave and Wenger (1991) in regard to apprenticeship formation. And others have pointed out the lack of a politics in the socially situated theory itself.

What does this mean for FE research communities of practice?

The framing of research discourse by university-led research provides a clear institutional and vested interest by the HE community on any articulation of research. So much so that any FE research is eventually articulated at this level and via this community. The question that must be posed is how can an FE research community of practice develop outside of, alongside, and yet with, HE and college discourses?

The impetus to develop communities of practice was not organic in the sense that a successful group developed and became a voice in college and sector practices. It must be strategically managed. For example, the exact lack of that strategic management could be seen in the failure to develop of Tutor Voices (a primarily UCU articulation of grassroots research interest). However, with the institutional interests and capacity of ATL (now NEU) and LSRN, particularly, a developing research community of practice could be said to have emerged. This shows that institutional and vested interests cannot simply be argued against but must be utilised to mutually support common interests. In this case, professional voice and agency (in turn a key component in the ‘activist’ literature (Sachs 2003)).

The other aspect that could be looked at further is the epistemological assumptions that research inquiry itself makes. While college discourse is not interested in substantive research topics and debates, it is interested in ‘what works’ and while this is rightly contested (Lloyd and Jones 2018), it shows up something else for our concerns. The ‘object’ of epistemology in

educational research is different to that of the ‘object’ of interest in college discourses. But the terrain of ‘evidence’ suggests that it is not. The notion of ‘evidence’ suggests that we can, within reason, agree as to what is or is not the case. Whether this type of teaching leads to better performance or not or whether this entry requirement is more suitable for learner progression than other entry requirements.

This leads us to the question of research discourse itself. In FE the object of inquiry is ‘learning,’ hence the notion of a learning culture. James et al. (2007) put this clearly:

- What do learning cultures in FE look like and how do they transform over time?
- How do learning cultures transform people?
- How can people (tutors, managers, policymakers, but also students) transform learning cultures for the better?

This is the area that needs further debate and focus – for the object of inquiry determines how all practitioners, institutions, and even government (as well as other agents) understand ‘what’ is happening in the sector.

My concern here has been with how the FE Researchmeet culture is attempting to question its practices, concerns in the institutional context they are in. But this also draws attention to the very paradigm of understanding of what the ‘object’ of inquiry is of the sector. What do ‘they’ want to find out, to do better, to develop? Only when we answer these questions can the sector develop.

Coffield (2007, pXIII), glosses this in the Introduction to James et al. (2007) but he understands ‘learning cultures’ as the social practices through which people learn.’ And he gives initially four drivers of those social practices as: ‘First, they point to the need to engage the interests of students, which often go way beyond passing exams and getting jobs. Second, we should tap into the “reservoir of tutor experience, altruism and professionalism” (p. 148). Third, “a greater understanding of and support for excellent pedagogy . . . that is sensitive to the nature of the particular learning culture” (p. 149). Finally, we should take a cultural view of learning which would enhance the synergies between all positive aspects within an FE college.’

In using terms such as learning cultures or social practices, the points are being made successfully but not precisely enough, for they are underpinned by the need for a research culture that is autonomous, identifiable and, strategically steered to develop and innovate on sector interests – not institutional or other vested interests. Some might call this a professional discourse and I would not demur at that, but the challenge is not simply the manifestation of a ‘profession’ (we have seen those attempts by IfL), it is the justification for the profession itself. What is its ‘object’ of inquiry?

So, our question here, is that if the ontology changes of a community of practice. If, that is, the community of practitioners begins to believe that they have a new object of inquiry then that must change not only what they see as evidence, how they see that evidence effecting empirical reality, but also how their practice now negotiates that new object of inquiry. Knorr Cetina's (1999) work exemplifies this change in practice in research laboratories and it is applicable, I think, to what is happening – if it happens – in English FE research communities. If a new research culture is in town, then nothing remains the same if it is established. This is why it is so disruptive and challenging to all – even the researchers themselves.

The two aspects that I have drawn attention to attempt to reframe the community of practice thesis with, on the one side, a political focus that ensures attention is given to how communities of practice emerge, are sustained, and develop and, on the other, an ontological focus that respects what the community of practice is problematising. In this latter case, it is the object of research itself which, as Knorr Cetina (1999) defines it, is profoundly unknowable. Research is an ongoing investigation and the interminable dialogue that must take place around any new ontological paradigm that determines epistemologies and research models (Kuhn (1969) resonates here and his theory of paradigm change). English FE research could then be built around a new ontology of research in the first instance and, on that basis, have an epistemological culture of research that is adequate for the task.

To be sure, this last point does not mean it needs to copy the HE research paradigm (the 'science of discovery' as Boyer (1990) defines that particular paradigm). However, in some respects, it will emulate it (argument, evidence, methodology, papers etc.) and necessarily so. But it may, and arguably should, have specificity around its own concerns and ontological objects: work, techniques, training, and competency/expertise. This is what will give it its unique terminology, methodologies, and inquiry. It is what Boyer (1990) attempted to formulate in his theory of scholarship, and it is what FE research culture should explore further and note, did not pursue after yet another time-based and funding-based inquiry (The significant HE in FE Project).

I would like to thank the reviewer for pointing out the sources and points made in James et al. (2007) and Coffield in the same work.

Conclusion

We conclude by suggesting that #FERResearchmeet is one example of FE sector staff using their agency to react against the constriction of New Public Management. That by using collaboration as a tool to create new spaces, #FERResearchmeet allowed sector staff to change their conceptions of

themselves and to create new pools of knowledge that were reflective in their concerns, contexts and practices.

The ideology of New Public Management runs through the narratives presented and is evidenced through the recognition of the low value or status of FE workers' knowledge (Chen et al. [Forthcoming](#)) and practice, and the resultant imposter syndrome which handicaps opportunities to address this narrative. It is also seen in the power of the senior management over practice and academic authority and the fragmentation (O'Donnell 2013) or isolation that the narratives express.

We argue that the principal tool used by #FEResearchmeet to address the low value of the work and feelings of being an imposter is collaboration, which allowed us to create new ways of working. Collaboration allowed us to undertake the identity working (Lloyd and Jones 2018) which allowed us to shake off feelings of inadequacy and facilitated working together to build the capacity of the sector from within by presenting, sharing, creating dialogue and theory and writing together. The creation of new democratic spaces which were owned and belonged to the sector workers, that importantly sat outside the individual colleges and their leadership, facilitated this work. This movement outside these structures was important as such an initiative could not have taken place inside the constrained environment of an FE college or sixth form, as they are controlled by a very different set of values. In this respect, we would like to think that we expressed our professionalism and took a small step towards the dangerous social change discussed by Elliott (1996) and Stenhouse (1981).

The collaboration also allowed us to begin to create new pools of knowledge, which importantly reflect the sector workers' knowledge and practice. This was in part driven by the confidence in our own voices that developed within the movement, and which forms a central strand of the methodology for this paper. As our confidence grew, so did the opportunities to learn from our peers, about their research, about how to research, and about how to begin to make changes to the narratives and resultant culture around us. The network of individuals, which stood in opposition to the fragmentation of NPM, allowed for the movement of knowledge through the presentations and publications that these individuals produced.

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Appendices

Appendix 1. The programme for the afternoon practitioner workshop sessions for the first FEResearchmeet

1.00 – the workshops will be introduced, and each workshop leader will have 5 mins to give the conference an overview of their research. We have everyone from action researchers to doctors, lecturers, to tutors presenting.

Topics include:

Setting up a book club for ESOL students – Ida Leal – South Thames College

Facebook Pedagogy – Dr Simon Reddy, City of Plymouth College.

The impact of tutoring on attendance – Kerry Longo and Jo Fyfe – Bedford College

Resitting maths and English GCSE – Nadia Anderson – New College Nottingham and Howard Scott Association of Learning Technology

Learning from walkthroughs – Gavin Knox – Lincoln College

Setting up a research network – Catherine Lloyd – Bedford College

The workshops which will run for 1 hour and there will be an opportunity to share and develop ideas.

Appendix 2: #FEResearchmeets 2017 - 2020

Sam Jones
Bedford College Group
26th June 2017

Amy Woodrow
City of Bristol College
21st March 2018

Jo Fletcher-Saxon
Ashton Sixth Form College
21st June 2018

Sam Jones
Bedford College Group
4th July 2018

Kerry Scattergood
Solihull College and University Centre
25th June 2019

Sam Jones
Bedford College Group
3rd July 2019

Jo Fletcher-Saxon
Ashton Sixth Form College
29th November 2019

Jodie Rees
University of South Wales
12th December 2019

James Synder
Location unknown
Date unknown

Annie Pendrey
Halesowen College
17th January 2020

Kerry Scattergood and Dr David Powell
#FEVirtualResearchMeet, online, hosted by Solihull College & University Centre and
supported by the University of Huddersfield
June/July 2020