

Community of enquiry guide

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What is a Community of Enquiry?

A Community of Enquiry (CoE) is a workshop-style session that offers space for a group of people to collaboratively explore ideas and ask rich and meaningful questions of each other. The session starts with participants being presented with a prompt to get them thinking — this is often a piece of evidence that can be related to an area of work, or a theme that can be explored. It may be in the form of something that seems more obviously like evidence, such as an explorative research paper or a video talk/presentation by an academic. But it could also be something more abstract, like an animation or a short personal story.

The CoE allows participants to share what they think and do and why, while listening to others coming from different contexts or positions. Crucially, it is different to other facilitation methods in that it doesn't start with a set of questions or a problem, but instead lets a group define what they want to discuss.

Why might it be useful for you?

The CoE approach is based around principles of trust and exploration. It helps people, either from a single team or a cross-organisational team, come together to share knowledge and experiences. It helps build understanding by encouraging people to acknowledge other viewpoints, but also asks them to share their own. We ran these workshops with a number of organisational teams and found this process particularly useful to collectively identify and address issues that were important to those taking part. The process also helped explore not just service-based challenges, but those that are embedded in core values. This then gave people a route into discussing changes they wanted to make to organisational and individual behaviour and practice.

Setting the scene

What you need to run a CoE workshop:

- Someone to facilitate the group and discussion (the 10-step process below assumes it will be you doing the facilitation)
- A group of no more than 20 people
- A safe and comfortable space with a circle of chairs (no tables in-between)
- Coffee, tea, snacks, lunch — generally some built in time to chat over food and drink
- Name labels (if appropriate)
- Sheets of A4 card
- Marker pens
- Time commitment — one CoE session, described below, should take around half a day (3/3.5 hours depending on how long you have for a break)

To begin with, the facilitator should introduce the process, explaining what a CoE is and give the participants a summary of what the process consists of. The process used to conduct the enquiry is highly structured and can be followed using the 10 steps below.

SETTING THE SCENE



The 10 steps

GETTING SET



Warm-up to prepare for enquiry

10 mins

This is just some time to get people loosened up and chatting at the start of the day. Feel free to be creative and use your own ice breaker. If it is important to your discussion, you can also get people to start by saying their name and their organisational role — asking them to wear name labels if they don't know each other is a good idea.

A simple technique we used was to get everyone to select an image from a set of postcards that reflects something meaningful to them, and to share it with each other in pairs.

Another method we used was to ask unusual questions of each other. Each person is given a question on a piece of card and then, standing up in pairs, they take turns to ask their questions. After two minutes they swap cards and do this with another person. You can ask them to do this a few times so they get to speak to more people around the room (question examples include: *What is your favourite sound? If you could witness any past event, what would it be? What's your favourite animal superpower? If you could choose anyone, who would you choose as your mentor?*).

PRESENTATION OF THINKING PROMPT

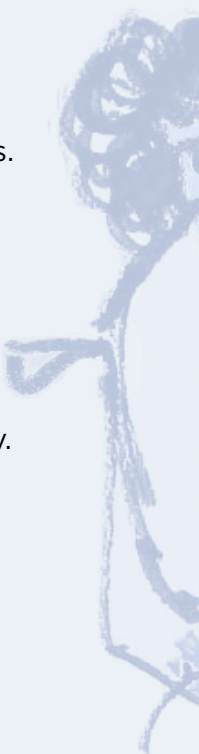
Present a prompt to the group that will get them thinking
and encourage discussion

/2

10/15 mins

The exact prompt used is up to you. The idea of this is to use something provocative as a starting point and stimulus for discussion. This can be done on the day, or you can ask people to look at, or complete, something before they come along. The stimulus could be a piece of evidence that people can have differing opinions on. This can be related to an area of work you want to explore, or something that has been pre-prepared. It may be in the form of something that seems more obviously like 'evidence', such as an explorative research paper or a video talk/presentation by an academic. But it may be something more abstract. You could use an animation, a short story, or a personal diary that will provoke discussion. The idea is that it will get people thinking critically and maybe introduce them to something new or contentious.

For example, we asked participants to bring along a reflective work diary of their last week, writing down things that they found to be both rewarding and challenging. This encouraged people to think reflectively about their work and to use this as the stimulus to explore similarity and difference with others' experiences. Participants used these diaries very differently. Some filled these in as they went through the day, while others filled them in at the end of each day. Some included aspects of their personal life, merging and relating work and home life. Some even included sketches and doodles. The feedback we got from this was that people really valued being asked to reflect and to put that on paper (not electronically), which gave them the ability to express their thoughts more freely and more visually. This helped unearth what was important to participants, what they valued, while also revealing what wasn't working well for them.



INDIVIDUAL REFLECTION

/3

Participants are given time to make personal notes on what the stimulus made them think about

5 mins

In the circle, give people the opportunity to sit and jot down some of their thoughts on the stimulus. You can give them some prompt questions if appropriate (*How did it make you feel? What do you think is the take home message?*) but we found it most useful to leave this open.

When using the reflective diaries we asked people to think about something that they had written that they felt was most meaningful — and to then use this in the next step to share with someone else.



THINKING TIME IN PAIRS

Participants are put in pairs to share their thinking and begin to identify some common themes

/ 4

15 mins

After individual reflection, ask people to pair up with the person beside them in the circle and discuss their thoughts. If you have an odd number, you can have one group of three, but follow the same principles. Try out some active listening here.

Each person should speak for three minutes about some of the individual thoughts they have had, completely uninterrupted by the other person. At the end of that time the person listening should offer them a thought or a question in response. Then the pair can swap roles so they have both had the opportunity to speak and to listen.

After this, give them five minutes to discuss similarities or how their thoughts oppose. It is really important to give them the full three minutes and encourage people to use that time. It is often an unusual experience for someone to speak for and fill that amount of time uninterrupted, and we found it led people to explore their own thoughts and feelings, even if they did find it slightly unnerving.

QUESTION MAKING

/5

Two pairs join together to share ideas and come up with a question they would like to spend time thinking about

20 mins

Each pair should join up with another pair around the circle, and make a group of four. Using their paired active listening and discussions, as a foursome, they should come up with a conceptual question that they want to present to the full group. It is key that this is a conceptual question and fits the following criteria:

- Common — it isn't jargonistic but something that everyone can engage with
- Central — it is meaningful to people
- Contestable — it will provoke disagreement and opposing views
- Connecting — it can be connected to people's experiences

For example, questions about 'why' we do a thing tend to be good to promote the type of discussion that has conceptual meaning. This is probably the hardest step as groups often get stuck on thinking too much about making it the perfect conceptual question. It's useful to say to them beforehand that it doesn't have to be perfect. Examples that some of our groups came up with were:

- How do we show the value of relationships with young people, families and colleagues?
- What keeps us motivated when we are frustrated with change?
- Why is it important for us to show the same care and compassion to each other in the same way as we do for the people we work for?

It is worth noting that the style of building on experiences and reflection often encourage the enquiry to be about values and relationships. This may depend on the exact prompt you choose, but these types of themes lend themselves to meaningful and conceptual discussion. You may be surprised that the different foursomes come up with similar or closely related questions.

QUESTION AIRING

/6

Each foursome presents their final question to the rest of the group and explains how they got to the question

15 mins

Each group writes down their final question clearly on a piece of A4 card and places it in front of them so the whole group can see. Going round the circle, each foursome presents their question and why they chose it. This can be presented by one member of the group, but often it is useful for one person to start and others can add in extra knowledge or context.



QUESTION CHOOSING



Use a democratic voting system to choose a final question for enquiry

5 mins

Depending on the size of the group you may have up to five questions to choose from. To keep the voting anonymous and democratic we used the following voting method:

1. The facilitator reads out all the questions again in full
2. They then ask everyone sitting in the circle to close their eyes
3. Reading out each question individually, the facilitator asks participants to vote on each question by either raising one hand, two hands, or keeping both hands down
4. The winning question to be explored is the one that receives most votes

This voting process ensures the only person who knows the final vote is the facilitator, meaning there won't be too many hurt feelings if a group's question gets very few votes and isn't chosen for the final enquiry.

This is a good time for a short coffee/snack break before the main enquiry starts.



ENQUIRY



The group engage in an enquiry to gain a better understanding of the concepts embedded in the question

50 mins

This is very much the focus of the CoE session.

Initially, ask the group whose question has been chosen to outline how they got to their question and why they think it is important. Then start the enquiry by getting someone in the wider enquiry group to respond with a comment.

Here are some rules to be presented to the group before the enquiry starts to encourage the flow of discussion:

1. People shouldn't interrupt or talk over others. Instead, when someone is speaking, others can put their hand out in front of them with their palm facing upwards. The person speaking then invites someone with their palm up to speak next. Ideally, they should invite them by saying their name (name labels help if people don't know each other). The feedback received from this palm-up method was that it was less confrontational (than speaking over someone or even putting a hand up in the air) and encouraged better listening. The groups also self managed so if someone who hadn't spoken yet had their hand out, they would often be selected. Finally on this rule, it is okay to leave a silence for a short time once someone has spoken and no-one else has their hand out. Give it a little time before intervening as the facilitator, often people are just digesting what was said and thinking of a response.
2. When someone is invited to speak they should build on and acknowledge what was said before. Crucially, this doesn't need to be in the form of agreement. In fact, disagreement is encouraged — as long as the person gives their reasoning for this.
3. Before the enquiry, in our sessions, we encouraged people to speak for no more than 90 seconds at a time. This was just a rough guide and meant that the conversation was not overly dominated by one comment from one person. On average, across the enquiries we ran in a 45 minute period, we had around 30-35 separate contributions so it seemed to work well.

8. ENQUIRY



As the facilitator in these discussions I tried to stay relatively silent. I only intervened if the above rules were being blatantly broken, or to nudge the conversation back to being more explorative if the group began to get caught up in a particular detail. Ideally the group will begin to do the following things with each other without too much intervention from you:

- Ask for reasons or clarity from each other
- Offer alternative points of view
- Acknowledge other viewpoints and build on the conversation
- Gain a deeper understanding of each others' views

As a final note to the enquiry process, in every session we ran, this could have continued beyond the 45 minutes. Feel free to let the discussion continue longer if you have time, but I wouldn't recommend going on any more than an hour.

LAST WORDS

/9

Participants are given the opportunity to have a last word on the enquiry and the session as a whole

10 mins

At the end of the enquiry time, I went around the circle clockwise and invited each person to make a comment on final thoughts they had about the subject of enquiry. People are also welcome to pass if they haven't got anything to add. This ensured that, even if a person had been relatively quiet during the enquiry, they still had an invited opportunity to speak.

Finally, I went around clockwise a second time and asked people to comment on what they had thought about the whole CoE process that they had been taken through (it is up to you if you want to do this — I found the feedback very useful).



WHAT NEXT?



This is final reflection on the outcomes of the enquiry and implications for practice

10 mins

After having such an explorative discussion it is sometimes quite jarring to then ask the group: *What do we do now?* Actually, this is the biggest challenge for the CoE process as the answer to this question is so context dependent and dependent on the discussion you have had as a group. It is, however, important to pull out some key thoughts and actions from the session when it is so fresh in the minds of participants. There may be some very obvious things that have emerged from the enquiry and the last words. If so, you can use this as a prompt to ask what we should then do about that issue as a group. If there is nothing directly obvious, some useful questions to put to the group may be:

- Was there an issue/s that emerged from the discussion that we want to directly address?
- In relation to this, where are we going now?
- Is this a desirable direction?
- Should we be doing something more or doing something differently?
- If we did begin to do something differently, what difference would it make?
- Who else do we need to involve in these discussions and actions?

As the facilitator, you may want to capture responses as notes to be shared with the group after the session, especially if you want to come back together at a future date to further discuss actions. For our sessions, we audio recorded the enquiry and wrote up a short report from the day for those who participated. We then ran a follow-up session with participants to prioritise actions to be taken forward. It is up to you whether that further session is needed.

Our feedback

The CoE process focuses on the richness of what is said and how it's said, seeking to create a safe space for participants to share views and build cohesion. In itself, this was a valuable thing to do for the groups we worked with and we got some of the following feedback:

'Powerful process... for me this is one of the best situations I have been in for a while and to meet everyone from all the different services, doesn't happen very often and that needs to happen more often. It's been fantastic to build new relationships in the room.'

'It felt calm and you could listen to others.'

'I saw a different perspective from others... it was great to have the time to have this type of conversation.'

'A very respectful process, even the physical part of hand out and not arm up, I liked that.'

'I found the process really helpful, all joking aside about it being a Friday and a heavy day, this has given me a lift for the end of the week. I've enjoyed it and it's been helpful to reflect on why we come in and do what we do. I've really valued being here today.'

'I liked the way it was run, and the rules, and everyone responded really well... to begin with I found the process quite daunting and I actually partook a lot more than I thought I would and actually quite enjoyed it in the end.'

'I found the whole process really calm, and that's how I feel, dead calm.'

Acknowledgements

Thanks must be given to Nick Andrews (Swansea University) and Dr Sue Lyle (Dialogue Exchange) who, hosted by Iriss, ran a two-day CoE training course with a range of social care practitioners in Edinburgh in 2016. This inspired Iriss to test out this approach in their work. Thanks also to two of the organisations, Loretto Care and Aberlour Child Care Trust, who took part in the CoE workshops — much of the learning in this guide is based on feedback from those sessions.

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Your notes



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