**Title:** *Stronger, Fairer, Greener: A social learning approach to supporting practitioners to operationalise policy in Wales*

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**Introduction**

Public Service Organisations (PSOs) in Wales have recently experienced a ‘perfect storm’, dealing with challenges including the task demands of COVID-19, increased financial pressures derived from the pandemic and its impact on future revenue flows, obligations to meet 2030 Net Zero targets, Welsh Future Generations Act (2015) legislation and Foundational Economy policies. These challenges have highlighted the requirement for PSOs to enhance their innovation capabilities (Arundel et al. 2019) in order operationalise the new concepts (Foundational Economy, Circular Economy, and Social Value) that they are obliged to deploy to support Welsh Government deliver a ‘Stronger, fairer, greener, Wales’ (Welsh Government, 2022). However, unless practitioners fully understand the new concepts, they are unlikely to implement succesfully (Walpole et al, 2023).

The paper presents qualitative and quantitative data collected from the 101 participants from a series of half day workshop that applied the Nonaka and Takeuchi (1995) SECI model within a Social Learning Space (Wenger & Wenger-Trayner, 2020) informed pedagogical design. The paper reviews published academic literature on the development of practitioners’ capabilities to implement new concepts, like CE and FE principles, and contributes to the nascent literature on the application of contemporary pedagogical practices to support practitioners to innovate. This paper provides insights for practitioners, academics and policymakers.

**Background**

The challenges facing PSOs in Wales to reach net zero targets, implement foundational economy principles and embed the five ways of working of the WFGA (2015) are common and therefore supporting practitioners to fully understand the concepts to operationalise appear to be of real value (Wales Centre for Public Policy, 2023). A Welsh Government commissioned report (Walpole et al, 2023) suggested that ambiguity around recently introduced concepts of the [Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act (2015)](https://www.futuregenerations.wales/about-us/future-generations-act/) (WFGA), [Foundational Economy (FE)](https://www.gov.wales/healthier-wales-foundation-economy-programme#:~:text=Foundational%20economy%20(FE),housing)/Community Wealth Building (CWB), [Circular Economy](https://ellenmacarthurfoundation.org/topics/circular-economy-introduction/overview) (CE) and [Social Value](https://www.gov.wales/procurement-guidance-on-social-value-clauses-community-benefits-html) is proving to be a barrier to implementation of their principles. Based on one of the recommendations of the report by Walpole et al (2023), the Welsh Government commissioned a series of half day workshops to support practitioners in Wales to develop a clearer conceptual and operational understanding of how existing statutory frameworks and concepts (WFGA, FE/CWB, CE and Social Value) can be incorporated within their processes, and practices. The workshops were designed and delivered within an action research methodology by academics at Cardiff Metropolitan University, informed by social learning spaces theory, to achieve this aim. The workshops were designed to enable practitioners to engage with the concepts and reflect on examples of implementation of the concepts with peers to sensemake (Weick, 1995) through a shared learning process, based on the SECI model (Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995).

Contemporary learning interventions with participative pedagogies aim to support participative approaches to learning as proposed by Hodgson and Reynolds (2010) whereby the learner co-constructs the ‘curriculum’ and learning to enable a greater impact on the challenge they face within the workplace. Such a collaborative and participative approach to learning relies on the dialogical creation of meaning and construction of knowledge (Hodgson and Watland, 2004).  Transformative learning seeks to stimulate a learner’s questioning of underlying assumptions and to restructure the way the learner sees the world and acts within it (Laros et al., 2017).

**Methodology**

To address the aim of the research, a multi-stage methodology was developed, as outlined in Figure 1. An action research approach (Carr and Kemmis, 2003) was adopted, and the data analysed within the theoretical framework of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). The survey data was anonymised and is presented as summary data below. The qualitative data was thematically analysed and is presented in data tables below with explanatory commentary. The data is augmented with four semi-structured video interviews with participants. Ethical approval was obtained for the study.

*Figure 1: Research Design*

*A diagram of a survey data

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**Findings**

*Quantitative data*

The workshop participants completed a pre-workshop survey to benchmark their existing understanding of the concepts. The survey consisted of three questions to gauge participants’ initial understanding of the concepts Foundational Economy/Community Wealth Building, Circular Economy and Social Value as well as their understanding of the implementation of the seven well-being goals of the Well-Being of Future Generations Act within their existing organisational processes and practices. The pre-workshop survey was completed by **79%** of participants. Participants were asked to complete a post-workshop survey to gauge the extent to which their understanding of the concepts had increased and to obtain feedback on the efficacy of the workshop and the social learning approach employed.

*Table 1: Quantitative data obtained.*

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Workshop participants | pre-workshop surveys returned | post-workshop surveys returned |
| 101 | 80 | 96 |

The data suggests that, prior to the workshops, **62%** of participants had little or no understanding of the concept Foundational Economy/Community Wealth Building, **46%** had no to little understanding of the concept of Circular Economy and **31%** of participants and had little or no understanding of Social Value. Only **9%** had ‘somewhat of an understanding’ of Foundational Economy/Community Wealth Building while **22%** of participants had somewhat or a good understanding of Circular Economy. However, **39%** had somewhat or a good understanding of the concept Social Value. These figures suggest that participants were least familiar with the terms Foundational Economy and Community Wealth Building and more familiar with the term Social Value.

The data further suggests that participants enhanced their understanding of the concepts Foundational Economy/Community Wealth Building, Circular Economy and Social Value through the workshops. The majority (**88%**) stated that their understanding of the concept Foundational Economy had improved, **88%** believed the workshops improved their understanding of the term Circular Economy and **88%** stated the workshops improved their understanding of the term Social Value.

The below figure compares participants’ understanding of the concepts Foundational Economy/CWB, Circular Economy and Social Value before and after the workshop. This chart amalgamates the responses of participants who said they ‘somewhat understood’ or fully understood the terms.

Figure Understanding of concepts FE/CWB, CE and Social Value before and after workshops

Figure 3 shows participants’ understanding of the implementation of the well-being goals of the Well-being of Future Generations Act in existing processes and practices before and after the workshops. This chart amalgamates the responses of participants who said they ‘somewhat understood’ or fully understood the implementation.

Figure 3 Understanding of implementation of well-being goals in existing processes and practices

The pre-workshop survey data suggests **65%** of participants had good or full understanding of where the well-being goals could be further implemented. Post-workshop survey data suggests that **84%** of participants strongly agreed that their understanding of where the seven well-being goals can be applied to new processes and practices improved after the workshops. The figure below shows the comparison between participants’ understanding of the possible future implementation of the well-being goals of the Well-being of Future Generations Act in new processes and practices before and after the workshops. This chart amalgamates the responses of participants who said they ‘somewhat understood’ or fully understood the implementation.

Figure 4 Understanding of possible future implementation of well-being goals in new processes and practices

Encouragingly, post-workshop **96%** of participants said they were likely or extremely likely to inform their colleagues about their actions in terms of implementing the principles while **94%** advised they were likely to explain the concepts to their colleagues. The survey data suggests that **89%** of participants found the social learning theory informed design of the workshop enabled a deeper understanding of the concepts. Moreover, **91%** agreed that the peer discussion elements were beneficial to developing a deeper understanding of the concepts. Most participants (**97%**) were somewhat or extremely satisfied with workshop delivery, which the study suggests is a proxy for the efficacy of the workshop design and delivery. The data shows that participants were very satisfied with the workshop delivery and found that the interactive elements helped enhance their understanding of the concepts.

*Qualitative data*

*Table 2: Qualitative data overview*

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Focus Groups** | **Participant numbers** | **Semi-structured interviews** | **Participants**  **numbers** | **Visual Data artefacts** |
| 7 | 101 | 4 | 4 | 42 |

*Figure 5: Indicative visual data*

Several post-it notes on a white board

Description automatically generated A white board with many sticky notes

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The visual data collected provides evidence of the dialogical, participative pedagogical approach employed. The visual data evidences the value of using the SECI model (Nonaka and Takeuchi, 1995) as a structure for a dialogical approach to knowledge sharing and enhancement. The thematic analysis, to be included in the full paper, will evidence the enhancement of practitioner understanding which enabled higher levels of confidence to embed principles and integrate long-term thinking into participants’ respective organisations.

**Discussion**

The findings echo those of Mishra et al. (2021) who suggest interventions that support inter-organisation interaction, within a sector or a region, are most likely to accelerate the adoption of CE principles. The value obtained by participants supports the contentions of Brown et al., (2005) and Boje (2008) who highlight the importance of an ‘on-going narrative’ between practitioners to support their ability to implement concepts and understand themselves and their relationships with work practices. The social learning pedagogical processes employed enabled practitioners to share ‘good practice’ which developed their understanding via mutual account giving (Mowles, 2011). The data is consistent with the assertions of Hodgson and Reynolds (2010) that participative pedagogies that allow learners to co-construct the ‘curriculum’ enable greater impact on the challenges they face within the workplace. The study suggests the collaborative and participative approach to learning employed relies on the dialogical creation of meaning and construction of knowledge (Hodgson and Watland, 2004).  The study also presents evidence to suggest the pedagogical approach employed enabled learners to question their underlying assumptions and to restructure the way the learner sees the world and acts within it (Laros et al., 2017).

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