

Chapter 4

Engaging with the Theory and Practice of Creative PICE Work

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Abstract

This chapter explores the concept of creative public involvement and community engagement (PICE), arguing that creativity is a vital and transformative element in effective engagement and involvement practices. Rather than offering a prescriptive template, the chapter examines the productive nature of creativity and its potential to invigorate PICE activities, aligning them with socially just values. It addresses common misconceptions about creativity – its reduction to superficial decoration or its mystification as an elite talent – and offers a more grounded and inclusive understanding. Drawing on insights from philosophy, art, and social practice, the chapter identifies creativity as a process rooted in intention, sensory and embodied experience, encounters, emergence, and improvisation. The chapter situates creative PICE within the complexities of modern public services, where diverse populations, systemic inequalities, and cross-organisational challenges demand imaginative and collaborative solutions. It argues for creative PICE as an active process of becoming, co-production, and materialising change, using examples and practical approaches to engage communities meaningfully. The chapter concludes with practical guidance for developing creative PICE, emphasising the importance of relationships, openness, and curiosity.

Keywords: Creativity; philosophy; practice; inclusion; culture; innovation

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Introduction

Understanding and considering the characteristics and practicalities of creative public involvement and community engagement (PICE) is an important starting point for those developing research and those who are the recipients of it. This chapter is based on a proposition that good PICE work is creative. However, rather than presenting a manual or template for creative PICE, the chapter explores the productive nature of creativity, then talks about how our PICE activity can be creative. It is an invitation for all of us to reflect on our relationship with PICE – and how our positions, intentions, goals, and methods may be transformed through engaging with the nature of creativity. It is also an opportunity to revitalise our PICE activity and to align it with values. In the following chapter, I set out a case for creative PICE and why being ‘creative’ is an essential quality of effective involvement and engagement work. I then discuss some of the popular misconceptions about creativity, and more importantly, the characteristics that all forms of creativity tend to share. Finally, I focus on practical advice for developing creative PICE in their projects and organisations. The chapter invites you to revisit your PICE positionality in relation to creativity, policy, and practice in the light of these things.

Why Do We Need Creative PICE?

My proposition is that *good* PICE is *creative* PICE. I define creative PICE as

any activity in which people use their senses, skills and resources in a purposeful activity which is interactive, imaginative and contributes to change in health, social care, or education.

Before considering the nature of creativity or the practicalities of enhancing creativity within PICE activities, some context helps us appreciate why creativity is essential and not optional. In short, improving public services by utilising creative methods and involving communities in research to create better outcomes is complex and requires imagination. This is especially true today. The development of public services in domains such as health, education, and welfare, especially in the Global North, has been rapid since the end of World War Two (see [Lowe, 2004](#)). Not only have health, education, and social care services expanded in scope, but populations have become more diverse. Literature ([Meadows & Wright, 2017](#)) has underlined how outcomes in any one social, educational or health issue link to many different variables in the complex and dynamic system of society. Amongst other things, technological developments have enabled new methods and created demand for new interventions. In ageing populations, people are living longer, increasing, for example, the need for complex health provision. As a result, public services need a much better understanding of lived experience and local situations. They must work across organisational boundaries ([Sullivan & Skelcher, 2017](#)), including with traditional service users, whilst recognising that many solutions exist beyond the control of public services. These types of consideration

need to be recognised in the context that meaningful and authentic collaborations between local communities and other stakeholders (Cotterell & Buffel, 2023) can enhance the quality and relevance of strategies designed to both reduce inequality and promote the uptake of public services. If you are interested in exploring some of the tensions that exist between local communities and the importance of trust, you should also read Johansen et al. (Chapter 4) in this collection.

Since the 1970s, one response amongst others to this challenge has been the replacement of bureaucratic models with managerial (Pollitt & Bouckaert, 2017) ones, focussed on the establishment of markets and their associated competition, metrics, performance management, and so-called customer focus. However, treating patients, pupils, and clients as ‘customers’ has not developed health, education, or social care systems that work with the social, cultural, physical (and other) resources linked to complex issues (Martin-Kerry et al., 2023). Research evidence has highlighted the need to understand and influence, for example, the social determinants of health (Marmot & Wilkinson, 2005). All too aware of this, today, public services are keen to reference catchphrases such as ‘partnership’, ‘co-production’, or activity that is ‘asset-based’. PICE is framed by these ideas (e.g., Involve.org.uk, 2024; [NHS England](https://www.nhs.uk), 2022) and seen as an activity that will support it. The lack of consensus amongst empirical researchers/academics, funding authorities, and the public around what co-production is and what it involves is positive in relation to creating a space for ongoing ‘learning’ debates and conversations to occur and inform practice.

Having a PICE strategy or activities provides no guarantee that meaningful insights into lived experience, utilisation of wider resources in communities, or new thinking or practices will result. This activity needs nurturing, dialogue, animation, experimentation, and imagination. In other words, it needs to be creative.

About Creativity

Even if we agree that ‘creativity’ is a necessary characteristic of contemporary public services, and especially PICE, the term ‘creativity’ is ambiguous enough to be used, and misused, in many ways. Things claiming to be creative appear to us in different forms. When reduced, flattened, and commodified, creativity can appear prescriptive, decorative and dare we say tokenistic. In this mode, certain things are creative – a familiar list of activities, when added to PICE, ensure it is creative. ‘If we do (x), we are being creative’. This commodified mode of creativity reduces and formulates it, seeming to make being creative ‘easier’ and predictable. However, in this flattened form, creative PICE can take on a decorative role, where decoration is a superficial ‘dressing up’ of substance. Elements such as illustrations, performances, and documentary images all can have their place in PICE, but they can also be meaningless if used as decoration for some other ‘substance’.

In PICE, an equal danger is that creativity can appear to be vague and abstract. Like the ‘emperor’s new clothes’, it can be presented as an opaque, spiritual, mysterious thing, something that only certain people can do. We may look at completed works of art, writing or performance and either ignore or find it impossible to imagine the process that led to that final form – reinforcing the sense that it is

something deeply strange to us. I argue that working with strangeness and difference can be very productive within PICE, but strangeness and difference need not separate us. Indeed, it can be an invitation to encounter, appreciate, question, and learn.

Both approaches (i.e., decoration and mystery) avoid a serious engagement with creativity. The superficiality of decoration trivialises creativity, and creativity as something exclusive and mysterious has the same effect. Both are safe and require nothing from us other than to be a passive audience. This is what Marcuse (1964/2002) argued in his text, *One dimensional man* – that in late modern society, those with power refashion ‘creativity’ as a tool for individual consumerism and fulfilment, whilst at the same time use it to divert dissent. Creativity as consumerism or distraction, for Marcuse, has the same effect – it pacifies meaningful social change.

Before considering a more authentic and socially just presentation of ‘creativity’, it is useful to remind ourselves that the contrast between decoration and mystery is not just an abstract issue. For organisations that commission, manage, and (sometimes) implement PICE activities, it is not always clear what ‘creative’ means because it remains unexamined. It is this lack of clarity that is worth addressing should we wish to develop PICE that is creative. Otherwise, we may reduce creative PICE to decoration or mystery and miss opportunities for genuine transformational engagement. Considering a serious commitment to creative PICE starts with a sympathetic critical appraisal of ‘self’, positionality, preference, asking ‘why do we undertake PICE?’. Whilst initial responses to that question may seem predictable (e.g., to improve services), it is useful to dig deeper into the ethos, values, and purposes that have historically developed our organisations. Careful reflection on our organisational cultures will often find tensions that need resolving, so we can be clear what creative PICE is and what it can do. On the one hand, public service organisations often have been shaped by the values and ethics of patient benefit (e.g., in healthcare), empowerment and emancipation (e.g., in education), or social justice (e.g., in social work). On the other hand, those same public services have been radically re-shaped by forms of new public management (Lapsley & Miller, 2024) and neoliberalism (also see Addison et al., 2022) that have prioritised competition, efficiency, and contracts. This is the messy reality of organisations that commission, manage and implement PICE activities, and this reality needs to be reflected upon so the ‘why’ of PICE is clear for them. The role of ‘creativity’ in PICE looks different depending on whether it is decorating transactional relationships (where managerialism rules) or enabling meaningful co-production (where PICE is guided by socially just values). Before leaping into creative PICE, this is our starting point. From this point on, let us assume that creative PICE supports the latter.

Towards an Appreciation of Creativity for PICE

Once organisations choose to base PICE on a mission of social justice, other more helpful understandings of creativity can be explored. Unsurprisingly, there is no single definition of creativity, but contemporary texts emphasise the

production of something ‘novel, good or relevant’ (Sternberg & Kaufman, 2018, p. xiii). Creativity has been linked with authenticity (Gardner, 2006), risk-taking (Amabile, 2018), the ability to generate multiple ideas (Guilford, 1967), flexibility (Sternberg, 2018) and divergent thinking (Williams et al., 2016). For the sake of brevity, Fig. 4.1 re-presents the contributions of select influential philosophers and artists – Gadamer (1986), Deleuze and Guattari (1994, 2013), Joseph Beuys (Borer & Schirmer, 1997), and Louise Bourgeois (Storr, 2016), who can inspire and direct our understanding about the nature of creativity. The summaries in Fig. 4.1 draw on their actual writing, essays, and practice, which you may find helpful to read further.



Fig. 4.1. Creativity as Encounter, Improvisation-with and Becoming.

If we spend time with these and other philosophical and artistic voices, it is possible to draw out themes around the nature of creativity. Some key themes are of relevance to PICE.

- Firstly, creativity is related to *intention* (Anscombe, 1957/2000). We are present, listening, receptive, and open to stimuli. We are in a time/place and are alive to a moment, or sensation. Creativity is active. In the capitalist Global North, we are passive subjects, consuming images designed to hold our attention and reacting to prompts. In contrast, creativity starts with noticing and presence.
- When we are in this mode, something moves us. We notice something in our bodies and as we orientate to it, it opens to us – a sound, smell, sight. This second theme is that creativity is sensory and embodied (see Dewey, 1934/2005). Our bodies respond in vital ways; we notice sensations on our skin, and our heart beats faster. Whilst we use language to revise and present what we experience, creativity starts *in the body* (Barrett & Bolt, 2012).
- The fact that we are present, and our bodies are moved, is prompted by a third characteristic of creativity, which is the encounter (Gadamer, 1960/2013). The encounter is the thing that causes us to notice and respond. The encounter adds something new to our experience and is difficult to predict and control. We can be surprised by a feeling of grief, or we can experience curiosity, irritation, awe, or any number of sensations. In the encounter, different things come together, and we contribute to the patterns or momentums created. How we focus and interact changes the situation, whether that be how we frame a photograph, pose a curious question, or select what else we can bring. In being active, we do not simply react, but we bring something to the encounter – like a question.
- From this, creativity is an emergent activity, that is, new things begin to happen as we interact. Each stroke of paint on the canvas opens a further set of potential paint strokes, so to speak. We do not start at the end, as creativity requires that we trust the process and stay in it, remaining open to what is emerging (Deleuze, 1987/2013; Gibb et al., 2021).
- Finally, creativity involves improvisation. It demands that we be experimental and imaginative – to be part of something new is the opposite of slavish reproduction. When we embrace the ‘what if?’ and step outside of our habits and assumptions, we explore new things and new connections can be explored (Manning & Massumi, 2014).

Developing Creative PICE Practice

It would be dangerous to provide a single, fixed template for creative PICE as defined in this chapter. My approach has been to identify key characteristics of creativity, especially those that are relevant to the task of working with communities of place, identity, or concern to produce better educational, health, welfare, or other public goods (Geuss, 2009). I associate creativity with a sense of intention, as an embodied and sensory process, as an encounter, as an emergent phenomenon and an imaginative activity.

It would also be arrogant of me to suggest practical advice on developing creative PICE had I not worked on this project myself as participant, practitioner, strategic leader, and researcher. In addition to evidence, I draw on my lessons learnt and insights gained in over 30 years of consultation, participation and co-design work with organisations and communities. For example, my work with care-experienced and disabled people has taught me about the importance of establishing authentic and meaningful connections, and the role creativity can have in that context. My work in local authorities and NHS Trusts has taught me about the need for growing senior support for creative practice. Finally, my work with area-based initiatives in the early years, public health and regeneration has taught me about the amazing resources and skills that exist in communities of identity, interest, or place. In my practice, I have always endeavoured to begin creative PICE from a place of relationship, mutual agreement, and recognition.

Holding serious conversations about the purpose of PICE and creative PICE specifically is an ideal starting point. Senior support for the principles and characteristics of creative PICE is a prerequisite for sustainable practice. Here is an opportunity to align organisational, funder, and philosophical commitments and understandings so that a culture of creative PICE can build. It may be quicker to ‘buy some art materials’, but that would be to trivialise and prescribe the nature of creative PICE, and to ignore building strong foundations for it. This is not to say that slow creativity ‘for its own sake’ is not valuable in the context of well-being, relationship, and skill building, but that the choice to invest in creative PICE should have purpose and ownership.

Giles Deleuze (e.g., 1987/2013) draws our attention to the production of what is new, and how things are becoming, at various speeds, something new. In his work, Deleuze introduced the concept of the assemblage (see Buchanan, 2021), in which diverse elements work together to produce effects. If we take his concept, we can be inspired to build creative PICE practice in new ways. We can ask: ‘What things can work together to produce new insights and forms of practice?’. We think creatively about the sort of assemblage we need and begin to do those things that create new assemblages. We look for the flows, energy, alliances, and connections that can animate our ideas within and outside of our organisations. We can learn to spot the opportunities at the edge of our processes, practices and structures that are exciting and have momentum, and ask ‘What can these things do?’ (Robson, 2024). If we work with senior colleagues who support creative PICE, we can create new spaces for meaningful activity. To play our part, we help build an assemblage for creative PICE. This assemblage will contain people, projects, and practices who mutually inform one another’s ‘becoming’ (Deleuze, 1987/2013).

Much PICE activity is required by funder requirements or internal quality assurance processes, but creative PICE can also orientate us to a more proactive approach. If we accept (see Fig. 4.1) that creativity involves an active becoming, and an (inter) active form of dialogue, it follows that we start any process of creative PICE with questions, propositions, and encounters. Creative PICE needs a sense of curious purpose and openness, and early connection with experts by

experience, members of communities of place, identity, or issue can ensure that we share a sense of purpose and interest. Questions are shaped as we connect our purposes and the activities that make us come alive. Propositions (i.e., claims or statements that can be considered or demonstrated, see [Manning & Massumi, 2014](#)) can bring energy to creative enquiry as we work with others to explore them. Encounters or events (e.g., watching a short film together or going for a walk in a neighbourhood) can act as a catalyst and common frame of reference. Before we think about ‘methods’, creative PICE requires connection, curiosity, and openness.

Creative PICE can be almost anything, which can be both liberating and paralyzing, but there can be practical starting points. Early conversations about ‘how can we explore this?’ can progress when those involved consider what they have to hand ([Heidegger, 1927/2010](#), p. 82). This can include existing skills, hobbies, resources, and so on. There can be an assemblage of actions a creative PICE team can work with, from guided walks, knitting, collecting objects, photography, to folding paper. The diversity of activities is all the more important if we think about engaging with diverse people. Selecting initial activities and materials can be supported by considering the extent to which they are meaningful to those who will use them, to the extent they are accessible to participants, and the extent to which they support enquiry. For that latter concern, it is useful to think about the affordances ([Davis, 2020](#)) of activities and materials. A ball of string, a set of postcards, an experience diary or a neighbourhood walk each have different affordances – affordances being possibilities for action. An affordance is constituted in the relation between the properties of an object (or activity) and the capabilities of individuals ([Heras-Escribano, 2019](#)). We ask: What is it like handling (x), what can we do with (y), what is interesting about (z)? Can we use something to demonstrate or explore? We may select and order photographs, we can use string to trace a journey, we can work with digital sound recordings to elicit memories, and so much more. In creative PICE, we can see materials and activities as *agentic* ([Bolt, 2007](#); [Fox & Alldred, 2016](#)) enquiry partners, ways to materialise thinking, so we can all work on it. We are used to starting with narrative, but the nature of our embodied, sensory, and emotional being means that enquiry often starts with the body, and senses, and methods can help us start tentatively. This is an inclusive mode of practice, as ‘decorative’ creativity does not begin with that inclusive openness to ‘the other’ (see [Fig. 4.2](#)).

Creative PICE has the potential to work with memories, feelings, and bodily senses to produce a fuller, multidimensional understanding of the experience of bodies, places, and discourses. It is equally important that the embodied, sensory, diverse processes, and insights that creative PICE can create are carefully documented, and not reduced to a set of bullet points. Rich data sets that can be co-constructed in creative PICE need nuanced and diverse documentation practices, which can inform diverse audiences. Designing documentation into creative PICE is important for participants as they expand and reflect on a question, experience, or test a prototype. Photography, shared blogs, postcards, review sessions, and more can refine the direction of enquiry, expand moments of learning, and critically test speculation.

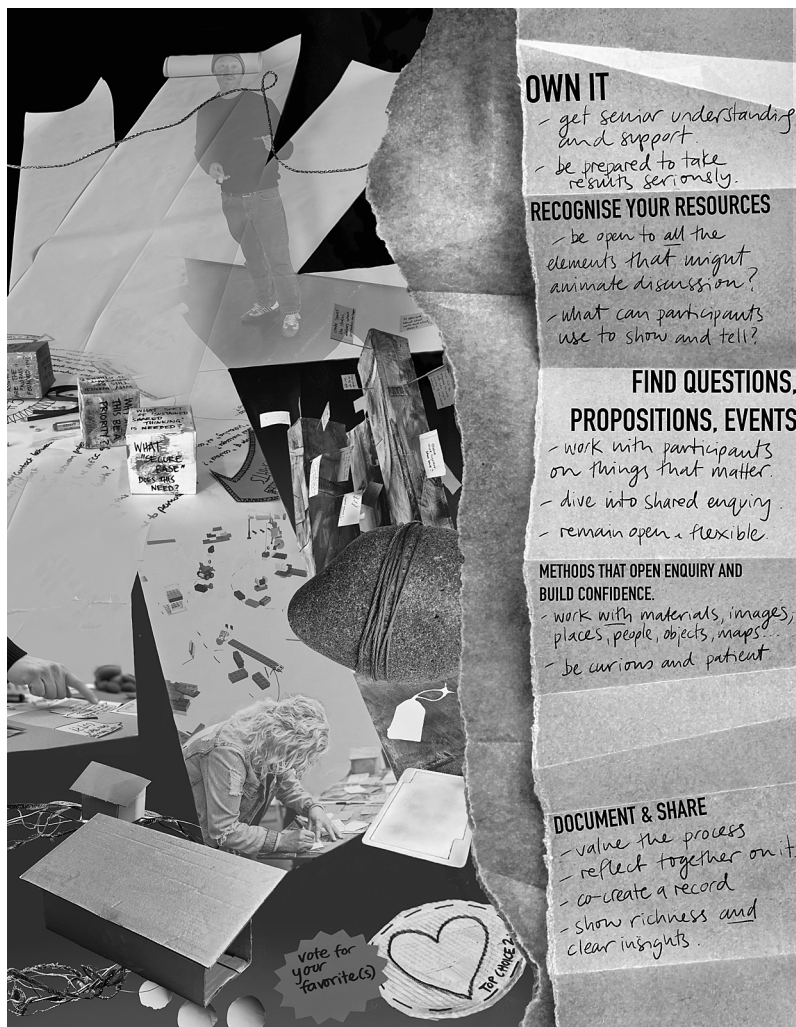


Fig. 4.2 Developing and Practising Creative PICE.

Conclusion

Intentionally building a culture of creative PICE (and creative organisations) takes boldness, time, and passion. Like other forms of research, it involves a commitment to consider positionality, preference, approach, and critical reflection on what creativity is and what will work best with groups. However, the benefits are huge – we can construct powerful agendas for change, step outside of our habits and assumptions, appreciate experiences, places, care pathways, everyday practices and community resources in new and inclusive ways. Creative PICE need not be decorative or mysterious, but it can start with what is to hand (Heidegger,

1927/2010), and a commitment to explore with people, places, materials, and experiences. Creative PICE can generate meaningful, rich data, and if carefully documented and encountered, can help us to conceive, define, describe, and co-design better futures.

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